

Young illegal immigrants fly kites and dream of freedom

By [Tara Bahrapour](#), Published: December 7

Marybeth Onyeukwu was nervous.

“Okay!” she said, standing in the frigid air in front of the Washington Monument, holding a spool of string. “So when I feel it, I let go?”

The wind tugged at the string, and, at just the right moment, Onyeukwu, 26, of Temple Hills, started to jog backward. A large white diamond emblazoned with her image lifted jerkily into the air. She giggled excitedly and kept running, as her friends cheered.

Onyeukwu, who was born in Nigeria and moved to the United States when she was 2, is part of a wave of [Dream activists](#) — young undocumented immigrants who have recently been stepping forward and [identifying themselves](#) in a push for more rights.

On Friday afternoon, she joined a dozen other undocumented youth and their supporters to fly kites bearing their images on the Mall, in conjunction with [“The Ripple Effect: Currents of Socially Engaged Art,”](#) an exhibition at the Art Museum of the Americas.

Each kite bore a life-size photograph of the flier. On one kite, the person was praying. On another, the person was shouting. A few raised their fists. The participants, from the Washington area, Oakland, Calif., and New York City, ranged in age from 10 to mid-20s.

Sending personalized kites into the sky is a way of traversing boundaries that are otherwise hard to cross, said Miguel Luciano, 40, a Puerto Rican artist from Brooklyn, who conceived the project.

Funding and support came from the museum, the Washington Project for the Arts and CultureStrike, an Oakland-based arts organization that focuses on immigrant rights.

Luciano has done similar projects for other causes in Vieques, Puerto Rico, and Nairobi. In Puerto Rico, the kites flew above a U.S. military base closed to the public; the kite fliers, who were protesting test-bombing on the island, would have been arrested if they had tried to enter the base.

The Dream Act, which would provide a path toward legal status for eligible immigrants brought to the United States as children, failed to pass in the Senate in 2010 but has gained political momentum recently as Latino voters are playing an increasingly important role in elections.

The Obama administration in June announced [a policy](#) to allow some undocumented youth to get work permits and stays of deportation, and Maryland voters in November passed a version of the Dream Act that would allow them to pay in-state tuition.

For those here illegally, the nation's physical borders have already been crossed. But other restrictions remain — on work permits, on college funding — and many live with the looming threat of deportation.

“Undocumented young people today in the United States are also about transcending borders,” Luciano said. “It’s all sort of a symbolic act, but I think there’s something important, especially for young people, in being able to fly freely wherever you want to go and doing whatever you want to do.”

The kite idea took off from a discussion he had with a group of young people years ago, who all had had actual dreams of flying. The kite project, he said, is a sort of enactment of that dream.

“You’re literally uplifting your own image into the sky,” Luciano said. “You’re enabling your own image to fly.”

Launching a large paper-and-wood object into the sky, however, is not simple, especially when winds are light. Sometimes the kites took off. Sometimes they crashed. All required cooperation between at least two people.

A cheer rose up as 10-year-old Andy Guinansaca briefly launched his kite before it plummeted to the grass with a loud thud. A fifth-grader from New York, he was there to support his sister, Sonia, 23, the only one among his siblings not born in the United States.

Andy said he has been an activist since he was 6, “because I was sad for my sister. . . . She couldn’t travel without worrying.” For the kite photo, he wore a New York Knicks T-shirt and flexed his biceps like a superhero.

His sister said she has been bringing him to rallies for years. “He’s been supporting me since he’s been little,” she said, adding that she was eager to take him to the kite event because, unlike most activist events, “this was not for a march or a rally, but something fun that he can enjoy.”

For his kite, Francisco Gutierrez, 21, a marketing major at Georgetown University, posed with his hands around his mouth as if he were shouting.

“With the Dream movement, we’re always trying to get people to listen,” said Gutierrez, who moved to the United States from Mexico when he was 2 and had no idea of his immigration status until he was a high school sophomore. (When he found out, he said, “I used to cry every night and was so confused about what to do.”)

His message now? “I’m here, I’m not a criminal, I’m not a threat to national security, so listen to me.”

As the wind picked up, more kites took flight and, one by one, the participants saw their likenesses soar into the cloudy sky. A few passersby offered to help. By about 3:30, every kite had been launched.

“It felt great!” Onyeukwu said, grinning widely. “I’m able to fly, do what I want, essentially. I guess that’s what freedom is — no limits.”

http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/young-illegal-immigrants-fly-kites-and-dream-of-freedom/2012/12/07/b15b59ce-408d-11e2-ae43-cf491b837f7b_story_1.html