

Youth Education Stories
Adelante Coalition

Note: This is a compilation of student stories from immigrant and Latino youth in North Carolina, names and locations have been change to protect the identity of the youth in the stories. Some are told in their own words and other stories were provided by mentors and friends. This project was undertaken by Adelante Intern, Kristin Economo in the Fall of 2007, in order to document both the successes and resiliency of undocumented youth, as well as the seemingly insurmountable economic, political, and social barriers which lie on their long paths toward higher education. Also included are stories of documented Latino students who are realizing their dreams through education and working to become America’s future leaders.

These stories were collected from the following organizations: The Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate Program, The Scholars Latino Initiative, Student Action with Farmworkers, El Pueblo Inc, and the Adelante Education Coalition

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I. Undocumented Students: General Barriers to Higher Education

Carmen

Crossing the border from Mexico into Arizona at the age of 11, Carmen, her brother and uncle were lost in the Arizona desert for several days. She remembers the trip like it was last week, even though it has been nearly six years. Somewhere near the border of Mexico, Carmen's journey began when two old ladies pulled up in a large van and instructed all of the children to sit in the back seats. Carmen and her cousin were shoved into one car seat. If the van was stopped, all the children were instructed to act as though they were sleeping. When the van arrived in the US, they all stayed in a crowded house for nearly three days. Carmen recalls that there were only two or three rooms in the house and that many people stayed inside the packed rooms, sleeping each night on the dirty carpet. Another van stuffed 16 people into it and took them up through various states into North Carolina. Carmen insisted, "I promise it wasn't, like, that bad. I know people who had it much worse."

As a high school student, this young woman was active and well-liked. She was able to maintain her Mexican culture while still integrating successfully into the rural school. Carmen played soccer, worked on the yearbook staff, tutored, and worked nearly 30 hours per week at McDonalds. She fought often with her parents about becoming more like American girls. During the spring semester of her junior year, her parents kicked her out to live with an aunt and uncle because her parents disapproved of her relationship with her serious boyfriend. Carmen maintained her Spanish as she improved her English, and scored a 5 on the AP Spanish placement tests. She dreamed of attending a private Catholic university or a public university however, under the stress of her family situation, knowing that she couldn't get financial aid and would have to pay out-of-state tuition intimidated her from even applying. Carmen is planning to go to a local community college once she has saved some money.

Saul

At the age of 11, Saul's longing for a father who had left for *Carolina del Norte* years before became too much to bear, and Saul set off on his own to find his father. While his mother reluctantly agreed to let him travel with a cousin, Saul recalled the tears in his younger brother's eyes as he begged him not to go: "He said '*Hermanito, hermanito*, please don't go.' He said that if I left, he wouldn't have anyone to fight with." Despite his brother's pleas, Saul set out on a journey that would encompass more than 20 days to be reunited with his father.

Once Saul arrived at the border, the cousin's promise to take him across fell through, and after spending several days in a town near the border, he was able to convince a *coyote* to take him across on the promise that the *coyote* would collect half of his money once they arrived over the border via a money transfer from his father, and the other half when they arrived in North Carolina. As Saul described his journey in excruciating detail, this handsome, strong young man took breaks to wipe away tears. Saul described how he, only a boy, was forced to walk for days on end, to share one can of tuna with four other travelers for a daily meal, to withstand freezing nights in the fields of Texas farms, to carry his own gallon jug of water in his small backpack, and to drink from animal troughs which sometimes contained feces and dirt.

Saul painfully described the shame he felt about sneaking through people's yards, the fear he felt when he was almost caught by border security, and the pain he felt when hunger overtook his body; it was an experience he never wanted to re-live. Yet, Saul recalled that even though he understood, even then, that it was dangerous, the only thing he really cared about was being reunited with his father. Between praying and reminding himself of his father, he was able to withstand the difficulty of the journey. When Saul arrived in on November 4th, nearly 20 days after his departure from Mexico, he rejoiced in recognizing the familiar face of his father, a face that looked like the mirror image of the younger brother Saul had left behind.

When Saul was a high school freshman, his mother and younger siblings finally joined him and his father in NC. The pain of the journey was not forgotten but the strength and closeness of his family life was evident when I saw them together at Saul's soccer games. Saul was an outstanding soccer player and a student, who had challenged himself with Honors English, Calculus and AP Spanish. With the encouragement of several teachers in the school, Saul decided to apply to the university. However, he was not accepted. He is planning to work for a couple years to help his family pay the bills and then re-apply to college if and when the states laws change, or enroll in community college.

Ricardo

With jet black hair and piercing dark eyes, Ricardo stared intensely at me as he described the anger at his situation. In the US since the age of seven, Ricardo had always been under the impression that he had some type of proper legal paperwork; he only found out, through a mishap during high school, that his stepfather's attempt to create a better life for him and his mother had included creating social security numbers for each of them, numbers that didn't really exist.

Ricardo recalled that, unlike many of his peers, his family had made it to the United States on their “first try.” The trip had been relatively uncomplicated: walking across the almost dry river when it was the low season, walking for many more hours through the woods somewhere in Texas, checking into a hotel where they stayed for only a night or two, then getting onto a plane with a direct flight to North Carolina. Ricardo’s stepfather’s investment in a reliable *coyote* (sometimes upwards of \$4000 per person), had been a worthwhile investment. Ricardo remembered his mother explaining to him what their new life was going to be like in North Carolina and says he didn’t feel scared about making the journey or starting a new life in the United States.

As a senior, Ricardo was an ESL tutor for the school. It was during this paid tutoring experience that a woman several counties over attempted to collect her retirement check, only to be told that she could not because the system indicated that she was working at a high school in a nearby county. Ricardo then learned that the social security number given to the school by his father was not his but a false number that actually belonged to this woman. Facing possible deportation and a criminal sentence because of his false social security number Ricardo continued to excel in his senior-level coursework, finishing in the top 11% of his class. While Ricardo was interested in attending college, he understood that, until he was able to “get papers,” he would not be able to go to college.

Berta

“Berta is probably one of the most tragic situations of any undocumented student I know.” - Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate

With a 3.7 GPA, she was an outstanding student academically—even though she had arrived in the US when she was only 7 years old. However, Berta was also a leader in amazing other capacities. The Hidden Voices Project did a theater piece about undocumented students and she was a main writer and lead actor. She hoped to be a counselor in a high school because she felt that many students in her school needed a Latina voice to help them stay in school and make good decisions.

Berta, however, faced the realization that she could not afford a four-year university. She enrolled in Durham Tech and got married, then dropped out during her second semester to work in retail.

“Berta’s story is so tragic because she had a dream—to help other Latino students succeed as their counselor and mentor. She was unable to realize that dream and it crushed her.”

Yasmina

Yasmina came to the US at age ten. She was very bright although not necessarily up to grade level. Her mastery of English was a problem because although she easily conversed with teachers, her academic English was extremely undeveloped. She entered a school program in order for her to take challenging courses with a support system in place.

Yasmina was one of those students who was excited to go to college from the day she set foot in her high school. When she sees the Director of the program in the halls of her school, she would ask non-stop questions about types of universities, about college life, about majors, and everything in between. She was curious and persistent about becoming a nurse one day.

Mid-way through high-school, her questions about college began to shift to doubts, and her optimism faded. When the Director would see her in the halls, she'd say negatively, "College is expensive, isn't it?"

Approaching senior year, Yasmina's teachers noticed a dramatic shift her behavior, disposition, and spirit. She began to skip class, failed to turn in assignments, and she eventually went to a charter school, then dropped out. Yasmina, like so many undocumented students, hit a wall—of financial burden of paying out-of-state tuition for four years with no financial aid or federal loans—with no clear strategy for success.

Yasmina was devastated by her own sense of hopelessness.

II. Undocumented Students: Success Accessing College

Gerardo

“This is my story: I was technically born in Cosamalopuan Vincilio, Mexico. I grew up in the town Tuxtepec, Oaxaca until I was almost 10. On the way here, my family and I were caught by INS twice. I walked in the desert during those failed attempts. The third time I jumped a very tall fence and have had a fear of heights since then. My family arrived at NC and I took 2 years of ESL in Middle School. My parents got work in the local plant.

My senior year arrived and I had no plans to go to college or applying anywhere. I told the librarian from my high school about my situation and she told me that I was going to apply to the one place where there was a chance that I might be accepted. Up until this point I didn't believe that I was going to go to college, historically speaking no one in my situation had gone to college. I took 3 AP classes in my junior year and was planning in taking 4 because I always thought that those classes were going to be the closest to college as I was going to get.

I turned in my application on November. The librarian helped me every step of the way because I had no idea of how to answer the questions. Eventually I met a university representative who gave me hope for the best even though nothing was guaranteed. He was starting a mentoring program with my high school and took an interest in getting to know me. I was basically a walking nervous wreck during the months of waiting for my application to come back. Then I got the news, I had been accepted and later the even better news came, I was going to get a scholarship from the university covering everything.

The biggest challenges of college have been the following: classes are a lot harder now than they were in high school, dealing with issues of solitude in the sense that as far as I know, I am one of two illegal immigrants at this university, the issues with trusting people and friends, the question being who gets to know my legal situation; dealing with the fact that my cell phone service might be cancelled; not being able to have a job, even on campus; not being able to travel home anymore because of fear of police, fear of being found out. I've been dealing with clinical depression because of legal situation and other problems.

I still have hopes for the future, to be able to continue my life in the US. All and all though, I am still adapting, this year better than last.”

Jisela

Jisela was born in Guanajuato, Mexico. Jisela's father died when she was three in an automobile accident, so the economic burden weighed heavily on her mother. Jisela lived in Mexico until she was eight years old. Her mother decided to head "pa' el norte—up north" and join her six brothers who were working and living in North Carolina.

She went through public school system and was an excellent student. Her mom always encouraged her to think about college and do well in school so that she could be financially secure without having to depend on a husband. After she graduated high school, she enrolled at the local community college. Her boyfriend, who was also undocumented, helped her figure out how to enroll and provided support as another undocumented student in her situation. Jisela worked two jobs to afford her out-of-state tuition.

A few years after Jisela and her mother arrived in North Carolina, her mother remarried to another man. He had been in the US many years and came on a work visa. He secured permanent legal status and eventually—during Jisela's freshman year in college—he got his citizenship. His status allowed Jisela to apply for legal status in the US, which was an amazing and life-changing opportunity.

Having gotten straight A's at the community college, Jisela applied and was accepted with aid to the university. However, the commute between home and college was too difficult while working. Luckily, she had done well enough to be able to transfer to a university closer to home for her Junior and Senior years.

Jisela graduated from the university in May 2007. She was the first person in her family to graduate from a four-year university, and a true inspiration to all of her younger cousins and family members. She plans to be a lawyer.

Federico

Federico was brought to the US illegally when he was five years old. His sister was seven. In fourth grade, he applied for a mentor through the school's mentor program. He was able to maintain a strong relationship with his mentor throughout his educational career in NC. In 11th grade, with a 2.5 GPA, he was not an extremely competitive college applicant. However, he was at the top of his auto-mechanics class—his passion. Federico was also very interested in pursuing architecture in college. However, he began to get discouraged when looking into his options with his mentor as an undocumented student over the summer before his senior year. The university was too competitive, and the out of state schools that were willing to take him, like Iowa and Indiana, were too far away. He chose to pursue auto-mechanics school, which would be easier to gain admissions to and finance than 4-year college.

With the help of his the mentor program, he set up a meeting with Auto Diesel School , a Proprietary Trade School, thinking that the foreign market for diesel mechanics could be valuable if he were ever forced to leave the US. The school admissions officer at first seemed very enthusiastic about Federico, however, when the question of status arose, it threw the school for a loop. The admissions officer didn't know how to address the question of what "undocumented" even entailed—but the mention of no federal or financial aid sent him into a flurry of concerns and when the situation was explained, the man was visibly appalled by the policies.

Federico and his mentors returned home and the Auto Diesel School never called them back, after promising to look into the situation. Likewise, another local tech school rejected Federico.

Finally, the local Community College actually contacted Federico's Auto-mechanics teacher asking for talented students. They offered Federico a full scholarship with no mention of his status. The mentor program was able to pick up the tab for his books and he was off to school! When asked about what kept him focused on college and having a successful future, Federico responded that if he failed out he knew he'd be failing his mentor—not only himself—and that was not something he could let himself do.

Valentin

“My name is Valentin, and I am glad that someone has taken the chance to speak out for some of us that can't or don't know how. Here is my story: I was born in Mexico and I have been in the U.S. as an undocumented person for the last 7 years. I am currently attending my local community college working towards my Associate Degree in Advertising and Graphic Design. When I first got here my first problem, like most of us, was the language; however, with the help of teachers, friends, and self-effort, I was able to overcome that obstacle. When it comes to college, the financial aspect keeps being a struggle every today. Teachers, friends, family, but mostly myself and my dedication help me to succeed. I never had a mentor that helped me every step of the way. However I had friends that gave me good advice, which I tried to follow. Thanks for this opportunity to share what I have gone through to get where I am today”

III. Undocumented Students: Community College Rejections

Mariela

I followed up about a request for help from a farm-worker mother in NC, who was looking for help enrolling her daughter, Mariela, in the local community college. I have never heard a story as frustrating as this one. According to the official list showing which community colleges accept and do not accept undocumented students, this particular community college was one of the colleges that DOES accept undocumented students and has a written policy. She reported that her daughter applied and was enrolled in the 2 year nursing assistant associate degree offered at the college. All looked promising to fulfill her goal to work as a nurse one day.

Then, when trying to registrar, the college admissions counselor denied Mariela acceptance unless her mother gave either a legitimate SS# or paid close to \$3000 on the spot. Aside from this, the college counselor treated the daughter rudely and was very hostile saying that illegal immigrants had no right to apply or be enrolled in the classes at the community college. While the mother was not able to get the name of the counselor she was described as a Latina/Puerto Rican woman (according to her accent).

They requested help from SAF. However, due to fears of deportation all the mother wanted was a copy of the policy at the community college and materials for alternatives her daughter could look into. This is another example of how inconsistent the current CC admissions policy is in relation to undocumented students like Mariela.

Juan

A young student named Juan in 8th grade was selected by his teachers and the early college selection committee to attend early college classes at our local community college throughout high school. Juan is stellar in grades, articulate and respectful. His family has been transparent with their information and has been treated shamefully.

Two weeks after classes began, the Dean of the college called the family into his office to ask them for a copy of the social security information for their son to see if he qualified for the community college coursework. They informed the dean they only had w-7 papers for the entire family. They have begun the green card process but it could be a very long time before anything happens. Then the Dean informed the family their son could no longer attend early college. They came to my office to state how embarrassed and annoyed they were because they told the school all along the process that they did not have a social security number. The school kept saying "that's not a problem." I spoke with the Dean that morning and he stated he is just following the policy of the legislature that states community college students must all be eligible for in-state tuition. I stated

clearly that the college owes this family the very least a letter of apology for the misinformation and misunderstanding.

IV. Undocumented High-School Seniors: Hopes and Fears

Felipe

My name is Felipe and I am eighteen years old, was born in Oaxaca, Mexico, and came illegally to the United States when I was eleven years old. Living in Mexico was hard and my parents wanted to provide a better quality of life and education for me in North Carolina. My parents immediately found jobs, and I was enrolled in elementary school in NC, where I was the only Hispanic in the whole school. At first it was hard to deal with racism and the language barrier that existed in my community, but I eventually learned how to speak English the following year, when I was promoted to the sixth grade. In the sixth grade, I began to thrive and was included on the A/B honor roll list many times. The language barrier was no longer an issue, and I began to advocate for my family and myself better than before. I got a certificate of improvement signed by President Clinton. During high school I was in a Boy Scouts of America troop. There I learned about citizenship, volunteering, and community involvement.

I continued to do well in high school, and I was involved in the French and International Clubs to enrich my interest in both culture and languages. During my sophomore year I developed a brain tumor that caused me to become legally blind. I had to have surgery twice. Although I was terrified and sad, I returned to school as soon as possible, so I wouldn't miss too many days. I was determined to continue learning, and with special accommodations and extra effort on my part, I managed to keep my grades up, making A's and B's frequently. My determination and resiliency was awarded by my counselors and with a local television station's Young Hero Award. I was interviewed and given a one thousand dollar savings bond.

By the end of tenth grade, I transferred to a school for the blind where I started my junior year by becoming the Vice President of the Student Council. I was introduced to technology that would help me continue learning, and I also had time to become a member of wrestling, cheerleading, and track.

I am currently in my senior year and now the Student Council President and a member of a local NC council. I was appointed by the Governor of North Carolina for showing interest and dedication to working with the Latino population. During the summer of 2004 I volunteered at a Museum. There I helped plan and present educational classes for underprivileged children. I also volunteer at the hospital after-school.

I hope to go to college and become an English/Spanish interpreter either in the health or social services field. I want to serve my community through volunteering for organizations that help minorities and handicapped individuals in the United States. I will graduate from high school in May, and I am very determined to achieve my goals and hope to someday inspire others to do the same.

Marta

I, like many other Hispanic students, was brought to North Carolina from Mexico without knowing a single word in English, except maybe “Hello.” In Mexico, I was a straight A student, and a leader among my friends; a semi-spoiled girl who loved her childhood. It all changed, however, when I arrived to North Carolina, USA. I started attending 4th grade almost as soon as I got here and the first couple of months were completely horrible because I couldn’t communicate with any of my peers, which meant that I could only make friends with the two other Hispanic students. I also couldn’t understand my teachers and I couldn’t learn what they were trying to tell me, except in math because numbers are like a universal language. And so I was making 60s in English and literature, and in social studies and science. This from a former straight A student was depressing and for nights, I would cry myself to sleep. I was also mad at my parents for having changed my life so drastically and at my aunt for having convinced my parents to move to the United States, the so-called land of opportunities. I hated English and I hated the United States.

As the weeks passed, I began to learn the language and my grades began to improve and I began to make new friends. I got out of the 5th grade with many awards and realized that life was slowly changing for the better. In middle school, I was again a straight A student but being Mexican was beginning to make me feel uncomfortable because it made me different from most other students and in middle school being “different” is the last thing one wants to be. I hardly spoke Spanish in front of the other students but when I was with the Hispanic students, I tried not to speak English because, since I don’t have an accent when I speak English, they said I tried to act like a white girl, which I wasn’t trying to do. As the years have passed, I’ve learned that being Hispanic isn’t something to be ashamed of, rather it’s something to be proud of. I’ve learned to assimilate to a new culture without losing my Hispanic heritage: I love Hispanic culture-rich traditions, Mexican food, and most importantly, being part of a hard-working Hispanic community.

Getting to the point where I am now, a senior in high school who is happy with herself and doing well, has proved to be the longest personal challenge I have ever faced. Now I’m only thankful toward my parents for having given me the chance of learning a new language, meeting a new culture, and supporting me every step of the way. I only hope my future will continue to be so bright.

Ana

My biggest dream is attending college, and all throughout my life I've worked hard in order to get a college education. Unfortunately, there are many roadblocks trying to keep me from achieving my dream. First there is the economic factor. My family doesn't have the economic means to send me to college, but it's through grants and scholarships or the DREAM Act that I hope to raise enough money to get educated. My father, now a pallet builder, used to be a school teacher in Mexico and my mother was a social worker. Both went to college, but unfortunately the pay in Mexico was too low to raise a family and so we moved to the US.

The second roadblock is that I am an illegal immigrant. There have been a great number of colleges that have denied me the opportunity to attend their college. At the same time, however, there have been colleges that have looked further than whether or not I had a social security number and have realized that I have what it takes to be a successful student.

I am involved in a number of extra curricular activities, including Beta Club, Foreign Language Club, Media Club, Quiz Bowl, and the Science Club, of which I'm president. I enjoy taking on a leadership role but I also like being part of a team and working as a team member. Right now, I'm coordinating our first ever High School Fashion show with the help of other students. This has proven to be a difficult task, but I'm sure that our hard work will pay off, as hard work always does. The profits of this show will go toward journalism activities because our journalism class has a very low budget.

I believe that the future of this country, and of the world, is in the hands of today's youth, especially of the ever-growing Hispanic youth. I want to get educated so that I can be an influential person who can help the Hispanic community. The Hispanics are underrepresented in most, if not all, fields of life and for now, I'm doing all I can to help by translating papers and getting Hispanics involved in school activities. I want, however, to be able to show my Hispanic pride by helping the community in bigger ways, and I believe that being an educated person and having a diploma to prove it is the best way to start.

V. Documented Students: Success Accessing College

Miguel

Miguel came to the US at age ten as a political refugee from El Salvador. Flying to the ground, he was unable to stop looking out the window—amazed by how different everything looked, how green!

He grew up in NC and in high school he worked extremely, extremely hard. Miguel worked nearly 40 hours a week at a grocery store, directly after school until late each evening, in order to contribute money for his family's financial stability. At the same time, Miguel maintained a 3.0 grade point average by doing his homework late at night after his shift. As part of the local mentor program, he had the opportunity to attend a Student Leadership Conference and he "ate up every minute of it." Being surrounded by other Latino students who were academically motivated and excited about college was a truly invaluable experience.

Miguel wanted to be a journalist, and even had a local news story written about him. He met the reporter and had the chance to talk to him about his job, which drove him even further to want to go to college and pursue his dreams.

During his senior year, he went on a recruitment trip to a university with the director of the mentoring program and another high-school student. On the way up, Miguel and the other girl discussed how many Latino students they'd need to feel comfortable at the school—they tossed out the number 200, laughing because they felt the estimate was far too high. When they met the admissions officer, who was also Latino, they first asked how many other Latino students attend the school. His answer was "around 200." Their jaws dropped in amazement and from that point forward, they began to really *listen* to what he had to say.

Miguel enjoyed his trip immensely, although he was highly unsure of his chances at getting in. The director of the mentoring program advocated strongly on his behalf: making the case to the Dean of Admissions that Miguel was one of the hardest workers he'd ever met.

In the spring, his acceptance letter came in the mail. Miguel was excited, although doubts still lingered in his family—they couldn't figure out the FAFSA form for federal aid. The mentoring program director came over one night after Miguel's shift and helped the family to fill it out. Luckily by this point, Miguel had a green card and was eligible for aid. His father came home around 11:30 and his son explained what they were doing—filling out a form that would help them get free money and loans for college. The estimate in the financial aid package said that his family would only have to pay \$1000 a

year. Miguel's father began to weep and repeat over and over, "What an amazing country America is."

Isabel

Like many Latinos, Isabel believes that her parents emigrated from Guatemala before she was born with hopes that she would grow up safely in the US with opportunities to advance herself through education. Isabel was the first child born of her four siblings. She lived in California until she was seven years old. At that point, she says that her parents were tired of living in a big city and they worried about safety and schools. Isabel's family decided to follow her Uncle to North Carolina, where he promised her parents would find work. In a town in rural North Carolina, the family found tranquility, jobs in a local plant, and also, schools which had a much smaller Latino population than her nearly all-Latino school in LA. Isabel said that she hated North Carolina at first, especially because they left most of their family in LA, but now many of their relatives have relocated to North Carolina to find work and keep their family together. In school, Isabel excelled. She always had some trouble with English and writing, but overall she maintained a solid A/B average and truly stepped up as a leader among her peers. When asked about what activity—out of her many—that has been the most motivating and fulfilling, she immediately said, "translating!" When she was in middle school, a mother came into school who could not speak English. Isabel happened to be in the main office and the principle pulled her aside to help translate what the mother was saying. Soon she would informally help the administrators translate after-school when they were desperate to understand a parent and no translators were available. As she entered high school, the public school system hired her to work three days a week translating documents and sitting in on conferences and meetings as a translator. At first, she says, it was scary having adults staring at her, hanging on her every word, but now she says, it's a part of her life that she would never trade. She says the biggest challenge about translating is balancing her demanding and often very difficult work with all of her other extra-curricular activities and her classes.

Isabel is now a senior in high school, and with the advantage of being documented her opportunities are great. She is applying to public university and hopes to be considered for a prestigious scholarship. This unique scholarship would allow her to graduate college debt-free. This will be absolutely crucial considering that she has four, also equally talented, younger brothers and sisters coming up behind her. In the future, she wants to be a pediatrician and work with children and parents in North Carolina, and to set an example for all the younger students in her community.

Bernardo

“My greatest hero has always been my brother Diego. Four years older than me, naturally everything he had I wanted, everything he did, I wanted to do. I had to compete to be as good as he was. You can imagine my jealousy when he was accepted to his dream school, Rice. And you can imagine my shock when he told me he couldn’t go. My brother, born in Venezuela, raised in Miami for 17 years, was not a U.S. resident. My mother, divorced, with two children, and making under \$20,000 a year, could not even come close to affording college. Without financial aid, scholarships, or grants, we were stuck footing the bill for any kind of future my brother hoped to have. As I watched Diego sit at home for a semester and watch his hard work slip away, I realized the injustice of his situation, and even the greater injustice that I was powerless to help him. Eventually my brother would enroll in the University of Florida and struggle to make tuition. I have since constantly looked for ways to help those like Diego who share similar situations, and who have no one to help them. Many groups in this country are overlooked and turned away. I have lived as a member of one of these groups and just happen to have the fortune of citizenship and the power to vote. I am in a position to help people like my brother and me.”

As Bernardo was born in Florida, he was eligible for a scholars program to graduate debt-free from college. He is currently a sophomore at his university and hopes to work in government to one day help students like his brother have equal access to higher education.