

**ews COVER STORY**

# For Highwood man, DACA is lifeblood to American Dream

**XAVIER WARD, Editor**

When he came to the U.S., Victor Vargas, of Highwood, was only 2-years-old.

His family decided to move from the Mexican city of Pachuca in the state of Hidalgo to stay close to other relatives who had recently migrated and to seek greater opportunity.

Now 21-years-old, Vargas is an economics and finance major at DePaul University.

“I always had the notion that if I was smart enough to do this or do that, that it wouldn’t matter if I had legal status or not,” he said.

It wasn’t that simple, but through the help of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, Vargas was able to do things that a lot of undocumented immigrants were not able to do, such as get a driver’s license, get a job and enroll in a four-year university.

Vargas recently renewed his DACA papers at the Highland Park-Highwood Legal Aid Clinic, where DACA recipients or anyone seeking legal aid with immigration or domestic issues can seek free help.

Because of the President’s decision, new DACA papers cannot be sent in, but those whose DACA papers will expire between now and March 5 have to get their renewal papers to immigration authorities by Oct. 5, or they will not be able to renew.

DACA is a program born from an executive order from former President Barack Obama allowing children who arrived in the U.S. illegally before 2007 to obtain documentation

that allows them to work, go to school and get a driver’s license.

Vargas is one of the roughly 800,000 DACA recipients in the U.S., commonly referred to as “Dreamers.”

President Donald Trump recently announced he would end the program.

While Trump stated he is willing to work with Democrats to come up with a replacement to DACA, the decision to end the program left a lot of Dreamers wondering what’s next.

“DACA has just pretty much been everything for me since I was 16,” Vargas said. “It is a physical recreation of the American Dream, for me, because before I had [DACA] I didn’t know how to go about it,” he said. “Once I was given a document that said I can get a job and get a license, it was like, ‘OK, I’m a step closer to where I want to be.’”

Vargas enrolled in DACA when he was 16-years-old, the youngest age someone can enroll in DACA.

By doing this, he was able to get his driver’s license and start attending extracurricular events he wasn’t able to before.

Before enrolling in DACA, he often lived in a cocooned world because of his legal status, he said. His parents often wanted him to lay low, but he doesn’t blame them.

“It wasn’t a way for them to low ball my skills or my intelligence, but it was kind of like their way of taking precautions,” he said.

In terms of Trump ending the program, Vargas said while it’s disappoint-



**Victor Vargas, Highwood, is a DACA recipient. Through the program he has been able to get a drivers license, legally work and go to college.** XAVIER WARD/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

ing, he’s not hopeless for the future.

“At the beginning of his campaign, [Trump] was saying Mexico isn’t sending its best people, it’s sending its drug dealers, its rapists, its murderers and there has to something done about that,” Vargas said. “But, here we have 800,000 young adults that defy everything that he said, [who] are trying to better themselves and become someone in this country, and then you take that opportunity away from them? It was kind of like a shocker.”

Vargas himself hopes to go into business after he graduates from DePaul, and he’s already made some connections in stocks, he said.

Ultimately, he’d like to be able to give back to his community by opening up a nonprofit to help homeless and poor, he said.

Vargas said that it was his community that built him up, so he owes them that much to give back someday.

“We know that there are several Dreamers in our community who have been [here] — either in Highland Park or Highwood — since they were very young,” Highland Park Mayor Nancy Rotering said.

Rotering recently joined the U.S. Conference of Mayors in penning a letter to the House and the Senate asking them to address the limbo Dreamers are left in with the decision to end the program.

Rotering said immigrants have always been an important part of the community, and Vargas said similarly.

For Vargas, it was never a question of “am I American?” he said.

“I never considered my-

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self not American. A few years pass by and teenagers get to this point in their lives when they’re just going about their lives and they’re told that they’re not American because you were born on the other side of the border,” he said.

To Vargas, that isn’t a fair characterization.

“As time went by, I’ve realized what I’ve done and what my family does, it’s all part of being American,” he said.

Even though it’s uncertain what options undocumented youth will have in the coming months, Vargas said that doesn’t change his drive to better himself.

“We were labeled as Dreamers, and that doesn’t stop. A document doesn’t take away the fact that we are Dreamers. I will not stop dreaming for what I want to do, for my goals, with or without a piece of paper that says I have a permit to work.”