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What's a DREAMer Supposed to Do Now?

With the executive action that protected them in peril under President-Elect Trump, undocumented teens are forced to contemplate deportation.

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BY MATTIE KAHN NOV 15, 2016 191

Since the results of last week's election, almost a million young people in the United States want to know: What is a DREAMer supposed to do now?

Thanks to one of President Obama's best-known measures on immigration, undocumented immigrants who were children when they arrived in the United States and have not committed any crimes have been able to get work permits and Social Security cards under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals initiative (better known as DACA). The program has turned well over 800,000 undocumented immigrants into so-called DREAMers, recognizing that children who moved to America when they were six months or five years or even 14 years old know no other real home than the one they've created here. The term "DREAMers" refers to the DREAM Act, proposed legislation that would have given young undocumented immigrants an eventual pathway to permanent residency in the United States. Although it's been invoked several times, it's never passed in Congress. Instead, DREAMers have DACA, an imperfect, perhaps, but critical form of temporary relief.

Since the start of his presidential bid, President-Elect Donald Trump has put his "zero-tolerance" anti-immigrant policies at the center of the race. Over the summer, he vowed to end DACA on Day One of his administration. Today, his website asserts he plans to "[i]mmediately terminate" it.

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"I know that it's not over yet," Ivy, 26, says. "I know that the sun still rises. But when I think about all the plans I've made, everything I intended for my future, it feels so insignificant now."

Ivy, who asked that we only use her first name, was born in Macau, China, but has lived in the United States since she was seven. She's the only member of her immediate family who's undocumented. She's been open about her status for months, wanting to add a human perspective to a debate over immigration that can often feel "oddly impersonal." But now that Trump's been elected, she worries she made the wrong choice. "For a sense of where my head's at," she says, "I've spent this morning doing an Internet audit of my name." She's been cited in a few stories about DREAMers and can be, she feels, too easily tracked down on social media. In the current political climate, she'd rather disappear. "I'm scared to death I'm going to be deported," she says.

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Ivy knows that compared to some of Trump's more "ambitious" anti-immigration policies, this one would be relatively simple to implement. "We're realistic," says Sheila I. Vélez Martínez, director of clinical programs and the Immigration Law Clinic at the University of Pittsburgh, School of Law. "Trump has promised to end DACA and that is not difficult to do." Because President Obama kickstarted DACA with an executive action and Congress never voted on the initiative, Trump can use the same mechanism to undo it. "It can happen slowly, if he chooses not to extend the policy," Martínez explains. "Or it can happen quickly, if flat-out eliminates it." Either way, she adds, most DACA holders will see their DACA expire by 2018. She is not optimistic that Trump will invite them to renew it.

Ivy was in the first wave of young people who applied for DACA, submitting to the program in October 2012. She was admitted in March 2013, months before she was due to graduate from City College in New York. "It was perfect timing," she says. Because her status had prevented her from getting real job experience, she'd gotten increasingly active in student activities at City. But even with a decent resume and good grades, she was worried about the kind of employment she'd be able to secure without papers. DACA meant that Ivy could be considered for high-paying jobs in competitive industries. She now works at a top-tier advertising firm. "Four years have passed, and DACA has given me so much. To know that all that could disappear in just a few months—it's crushing."

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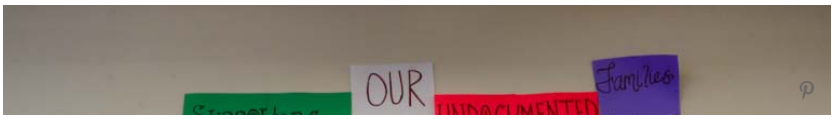

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Eliana Fernandez, 28, knew a different world from the United States. She's lived here since she was 14, following her parents to the U.S. from Ecuador. When she was still toddler, they left her in the care of her brother and sister until they could afford to send for her 11 years later. It's been over a decade since they were reunited, but when Fernandez talks about the period they spent apart, her voice breaks: "It still hurts, thinking about growing up without my parents, going to school without them, celebrating holidays without them. It was very, very difficult." Fernandez says her brother and sister did the best they could, but they weren't substitutes. "What's happening now, the way I feel now, it reminds me of those bad memories," she says. "Especially because I'm a mom, too."

Fernandez has two young kids, both of whom were born in the United States and are citizens. It was with them in mind that she applied for DACA, thinking that a better job for her could mean more prosperous lives for them. She'd been wary of the initiative at first. She worried that announcing herself to the government would cause more problems that it would solve. "It was a real mix of emotions, but at the same time, I knew it could give me some real opportunities," she says. She could get better work, a driver's license, a sense of at least provisional calm. It took her a few months to compile her application, collecting the documents that prove how deeply embedded she is in the United States. Then she waited. In 2012, she was approved. "When I look back before DACA and where I am now and what I have become, it's a huge difference." Until last week, Fernandez admits, she had hopes it would eventually give her a pathway to citizenship. Looking back, it feels naive.

If Trump makes good on his promise to end DACA, Fernandez will not only lose access to a legal work permit, but she'll be newly vulnerable to deportation. "When I was growing up, I always said that if I ever have kids, I will never leave them for any reason," she says. "I want to keep that promise. I don't want them to have to relive what happened to me because of an immigration system that doesn't work."

"Particularly among young people, there's this uncertainty that now looms over their futures in a way that they might not have expected," Martínez says. "And I think in many ways that might be the worst part of it, not knowing where to turn and what the next steps are and really living in the dark about what this means for them." On top of whatever else is happening, this is a further level of stress.

Outside the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, dozens of young people lined up to register on the first day of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) on August 15, 2012.

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Yaslin, 17, still hasn't recovered from the news. "Honestly, I cried when the results came in," she says. She was born in Belize and now lives in Baltimore, where she goes to school and works. It's always been a tough balance. But it's even harder to stay focused now. "I feel like what's the point of trying to go to college, if he's going to take away DACA? What's the point in struggling to save money," she wonders, "if I'm just going to be deported or my parents are going to be deported?" Were it not for activist circles in Baltimore, Yaslin isn't sure she'd have made it even as far as she has. Latinos make up more than 40 percent of the not native-born population in Baltimore. And they've started to organize, realizing that their voices are louder together. Yaslin is a member of Somos, a Latino student group launched at Baltimore City College. And this week, she's realized how much she depends on it: "We can support each other because we understand, because we all know that we're valuable."

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Unlike Yaslin, Claudia, 14, wasn't at all surprised to see Trump win. She realized months ago that his claims appealed to people who "just don't get immigrants." She's too young to be eligible for DACA. She'd planned to apply next year but, a realist, doubts she'll have the chance. Claudia was born in Honduras, but she and her mother moved to the U.S. when she was four. By the time they arrived, her father had been working, without papers, for two years to support them. "They see us as pests," she says of Trump supporters. "They think, 'Our lives are difficult.' They don't know what difficult means."

Since the election, Ivy's gone to several rallies to protest a man who is, as she says, "not my president." On Thursday, her brother urged her not to go to a particularly large public demonstration. It seemed dangerous, given her status. "I just explained that I can't not go. I have to be there. I have nothing to lose. I told him I'd be as careful as I could be, but sitting at home and hiding in the corner—that's not going to keep me safe now. I don't feel safe now."

Camille Mackler, the director of legal initiatives at the New York Immigration Coalition, has taken this week to remind undocumented immigrants that their fates have not yet been sealed. Even if Trump ends DACA, she's not sure he'll make hundreds of thousands of young people his first order of business. "You have to remember it's not that simple to send someone away," she says. If someone is undocumented and has never been targeted for deportation before, it takes quite a while to remove them, she says. Moreover, some DREAMers could discover that they're eligible for other forms of legal immigration—political asylum, certain kinds of visas, family connects that could help. But Mackler concedes that not everyone will be able to explore those avenues. Undocumented immigrants and DREAMers who have already been involved in a deportation process, she says, will be at "a more urgent risk."

Over the past week, Martínez has fielded queries from several undocumented young people who don't have DACA about whether they should file for it now. "From my perspective, that's a risky proposition," she says. "Because, first, it's unlikely that any application filed now will be approved [before Trump takes office]. And second, it would expose that person who has not otherwise been exposed to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services to USCIS." She doesn't want to think that the lists of DACA holders and applicants will be in any way weaponized, as Fernandez feared. Martínez will only say that "it might be counterproductive to do it right now."

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"We have a message to get across to anyone who is scared," Martínez says. "We are going to accompany you. And there are more people than you might have expected who are willing to participate and to protect you." She encourages citizens who want to get involved to "act locally." It's a cliche, she says, but while the national-based organizations do comprehensive work, it's the local organizations, "the local legal aid clinic, the local charities, the local churches" that need the most assistance: "This is the time to reach out to your local organization and say, 'I'm here.'"

Fernandez, who volunteered to help mobilize the Latino vote in the election, has given herself a few days to wallow. But she's already had to put on a braver face for her kids. And now, she's recommitted to getting involved in the effort to protest whatever anti-immigration policies Trump has in mind. "We are committed to resistance," Fernandez says. "We won't allow his hate just to grow. To the communities that are scared, to Muslims and to minorities, we will stand with them. As a collective, we are better, we are more powerful. We hope for the best—and we fight back."

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