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Border Security and International Law

Hearing on Comprehensive Immigration Reform: The

Future of Undocumented Immigrant Students

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Good morning. My name is Marie Nazareth Gonzalez. I am a 21 year old junior from Jefferson City, Missouri currently attending Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. I'm majoring in Political Science and International Business with a focus on communication and leadership.

My family is originally from Costa Rica. I was born in Alajuela, Costa Rica but have been living in the United States since the age of five. My parents Marina and Marvin, brought me to the United States in November of 1991. Having come over legally, their plan was to become US citizens so we could one day all benefit from living in the land of the free. We sought to live the "American Dream"-the promise of a better education, a better life, and all together a better future- what any parent would for their child.

Strong values and good morals have been instilled in me from a very young age. As long as I can remember my parents have worked very hard for every dollar they've earned, and in the process have taught me that life is not easy and that I must work hard and honorably for what I want in life. That is exactly what they did. When they came to the US they had no intention of breaking the law, or of making an exception for themselves. Unfortunately, the law is very difficult and complex. I am not making excuses for

what happened, just trying to clear my family's name. Throughout all our years in the United States we worked very hard for what we had, thinking that one day soon we would be citizens.

On April of 2002 our family's dream of becoming citizens was halted by a phone call. My father had been working for the state as a courier for the Governor's Office. The job was not prestigious in any way, but my father was very devoted to his job and was loved and respected by his co-workers. On one occasion the governor even publicly stated his appreciation for my dad while he was making opening remarks at an event for Missouri high school sophomores that I attended.

All of that ended after an anonymous person called the governor's office requesting that our immigration status be confirmed. From that day forward, my life became a haze of meetings with attorneys, hearings, and rallies.

When they heard that we were facing deportation, the community that knew us in Jefferson City rallied behind my family and me to an overwhelming degree. They knew we were hardworking, honorable, taxpaying people, and they fought to allow us to stay in the US. Members of our Catholic Parish--where my mom worked as a volunteer Spanish teacher and after school care director--joined with other community

members to form the "The Gonzalez Group" to rally support by collecting signatures for petitions and organizing phone calls. My classmates, teachers and others also got involved because they considered me an important part of their community.

I was in high school at the time, with graduation quickly approaching. I was in my class's homecoming court. When it came out in the newspaper that I was being deported to a country I had not known since the age of five, people all across the country responded. They started a "We Are Marie" campaign, and tens of thousands called and wrote letters on my behalf. When I was a high school senior and our family's deportation date was looming very close, they brought me to Washington, DC.

I got involved in advocacy for the DREAM Act. Unlike thousands of others like me who would benefit from the DREAM Act, I had little to fear from speaking out since I was already facing deportation. When I gave the "valedictorian" speech at a mock graduation in front of the Capitol, I became a national symbol of the DREAM Act.

Eventually all of the work of so many people on my behalf began to pay off. My Representative, Ike Skelton, and both of my Senators, Jim Talent and Kit Bond, responded to the support from the community and got involved in the

effort to keep me here. Eventually, though, all of our appeals were exhausted and a final date was set for our family to leave the US for good: July 5, 2005.

I remember that the weeks before that date were surreal. I was overwhelmed by the support I received. I appeared on national television, once with Senator Richard Durbin at my side, and was contacted by the media so often that I got tired of it. I thought, "even if it is too late for me, at least it might help the DREAM Act to pass so that others like me won't have to face this ordeal." Then, on July 1, 2005, I got word that the Department of Homeland Security had relented and would allow me to defer my departure for one year.

When I got that news I cried- simultaneously with happiness and grief. Even though I would be able to stay, my parents would have to leave in just three days. The Gonzalez Group had made shirts and organized a float for the Fourth of July parade. So, the day before their departure, my parents and I rode in the parade with other members of the group that had been such a huge part of our family. Hundreds cheered us on and voiced their support and sorrow.

My life since April of 2002 can be easily compared to a roller coaster. There have been times when I have felt

like I was on top of the world, living out mine and my parent's dream of being a successful young woman in her college career, only to be brought down by the realization that at any moment it can be taken away. The deferral of my deportation has been renewed twice, each time for a year. Last month, when they gave me until June of 2008, they told me it would be the last renewal. If the DREAM Act does not pass by then, I will have to leave.

I recognize that I am lucky to have been allowed to stay as long as I have. Others in my same situation have not had nearly the support that I have. Even so, it is hard not knowing if I will be able to remain in school at Westminster long enough to graduate.

I am only one student and one story. In the course of fighting to remain here, I have been lucky to meet many other students who would benefit from the DREAM Act, and one of the reasons I wanted to come here and testify is to speak to you on their behalf. Unlike them, I can speak about this issue in public without risking deportation. I share with them in their pain, fear, and uncertainty. Their stories are heartbreaking and similar. In my experiences and my travels I have come to the realization that they would only be an asset to the country if only given the chance to prove themselves. The DREAM Act has the

potential to not only impact the thousands of students who would qualify but also this great nation by allowing these students to pursue their education and their dreams of success.

I can personally attest to how life in limbo is no way to live. Having been torn apart from my parents for almost two years and struggling to make it on my own, I know what it is like to face difficulty and how hard it is to fight for your dreams. No matter what, I will always consider the United States of America my home. I love this country. Only in America would a person like me have the opportunity to tell my story to people like you.

Many may argue that because I have a Costa Rican birth certificate I am Costa Rican and should be sent back to that country. If I am sent back there, sure I'd be with my mom and dad, but I'd be torn away from loved ones that are my family here, and from everything I have known since I was a child.

I hope one day not only to be a US citizen, but to go to law school at Mizzou, to live in DC, and to continue advocating for others who can't speak for themselves. Whether that will happen, though, is up to you- our nations leaders- and to God.