

Testimony of Tam Tran

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I hate filling out forms, especially the ones that limit me to checking off boxes for categories I don't even identify with. Place of birth? Germany. But I'm not German. Ethnicity? I'm Vietnamese, but I've never been to Vietnam. However, these forms never ask me where I was raised or educated. I was born in Germany, my parents are Vietnamese, but I have been American raised and educated for the past 18 years.

My parents escaped the Vietnam War as boat people and were rescued by the German Navy. In Vietnam, my mother had to drop out of middle school to help support her family as a street vendor. My father was a bit luckier; he was college educated, but the value of his education has diminished in this country due to his inability to speak English fluently.

They lived in Germany as refugees and during that time, I was born. My family came to the United States when I was six to reunite with relatives who fled to California, because, after all, this was America. It is extremely difficult to win a political asylum case, but my parents took that chance because they truly believed they were asylees of a country they no longer considered home and which also posed a threat to their livelihood. Despite this, they lost the case. The immigration court ordered us deported to Germany. However, when we spoke to the German consulate, they told us, "We don't want you. You're not German." Germany does not grant birthright citizenship, so on application forms when I come across the question that asks for my citizenship, I rebelliously mark "other" and write in "the world." But the truth is, I am culturally an American, and more specifically, I consider myself a Southern Californian. I grew up watching Speed Racer and Mighty Mouse every Saturday morning. But as of right now, my national identity is not American and even though I can't be removed from American soil, I cannot become an American unless legislation changes.

In December, I graduated with a bachelor's degree in American Literature and Culture with Latin, Departmental and College honors from UCLA. I thought, finally, after all these years of working multiple jobs and applying to countless scholarships all while taking more than 15 units every quarter, were going to pay off. And it did seem to be paying off. I found a job right away in my field as a full-time film editor and videographer with a documentary project at UCLA. I also applied to graduate school and was accepted to a Ph.D. program in Cultural Studies. I was awarded a department fellowship and the minority fellowship, but the challenges I faced as an undocumented college student began to surface once again.

Except the difference this time is I am 24 years old. I suppose this means I'm an adult. I also have a college degree. I guess this also means I'm an educated adult. But for a fact, I know that this means I do have responsibilities to the society I live in. I have the desire and also the ability and skills to help my community by being an academic researcher and socially conscious video documentarian, but I'll have to wait before I can become an accountable member of society. I recently declined the offer to the Ph.D. program because even with these two fellowships, I don't have the money to cover the \$50,000 tuition and living expenses. I'll have to wait before I can really grow up. But that's okay, because when you're in my situation you have to, or learn to, or are forced to make compromises.

With my adult job, I can save up for graduate school next year. Or at least that's what I thought. Three days ago, the day before I boarded my flight to DC, I was informed that it would be my last day at work. My work permit has expired and I won't be able to continue working until I receive a new one. Every year, I must apply for a renewal but never have I received it on time. This means every year around this month, I lose the job that I have. But that's okay.

Because I've been used to this—to losing things I have worked hard for. Not just this job but also the value of my college degree and the American identity I once possessed as a child.

This is my first time in Washington DC, and the privilege of being able to speak today truly exemplifies the liminal state I always feel like I'm in. I am lucky because I do have a government ID that allowed me to board the plane here to share my story and give voice to thousands of other undocumented students who cannot. But I know that when I return home tonight, I'll become marginalized once again. At the moment, I can't work legally even though I do have some legal status. I also know that the job I'm going to look for when I get back isn't the one I'll want to have. The job I'll want because it makes use of my college degree will be out of my hands. Without the D.R.E.A.M. Act, I have no prospect of overcoming my state of immigration limbo; I'll forever be a perpetual foreigner in a country where I've always considered myself an American.

But for some of my friends who could only be here today through a blurred face in a video, they have other fears too. They can't be here because they are afraid of being deported from the country they grew up in and call home. There is also the fear of the unknown after graduation that is uniquely different from other students. Graduation for many of my friends isn't a rite of passage to becoming a responsible adult. Rather, it is the last phase in which they can feel a sense of belonging as an American. As an American university student, my friends feel a part of an American community—that they are living out the American dream among their peers. But after graduation, they will be left behind by their American friends as my friends are without the prospect of obtaining a job that will utilize the degree they've earned; my friends will become just another undocumented immigrant.