

SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE TESTIMONY: Jose Antonio Vargas

Thank you Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Grassley, and distinguished members of this Committee.

I come to you as one of our country's 11 million undocumented immigrants, many of us Americans at heart, but without the right papers to show for it. Too often, we're treated as abstractions, faceless and nameless, visibly invisible, mere subjects of debate rather than as individuals with families, hopes, fears, and dreams.

Like countless Americans before me, I am in America because of the sacrifices of my family. My grandparents legally emigrated from the Philippines to the heart of Silicon Valley in the mid-1980s. A few years later, Grandpa Teofilo became a U.S. citizen and legally changed his name to Ted--after Ted Danson in "Cheers." Because grandparents cannot petition for their grandkids--and because my mother could not come to the United States--Grandpa Ted saved up money to get his only grandson, me, a passport and green card to come to America. My mother, in turn, gave me up to give me a better life.

I arrived in Mountain View, Calif., on August 3, 1993. My introductions to American culture were Boyz II Men, Nancy Kerrigan and "Seinfeld." I loved America the moment I got here. One of my earliest memories was singing the National Anthem as a 6th grader at Crittenden Middle School, believing the song had somehow something to do with me. I thought the first lines were, "Jose, can you see?"

Four years later, I went to the D.M.V. to apply for a driver's permit like any 16 year old. I didn't tell anyone--I just went. That was when I discovered that the green card that Grandpa Ted gave me was fake.

Soon after that, my grandpa's lies became my lies. I wanted to work. I wanted freedom. I wanted to contribute to a country that is now my home. At age 17 I decided to be a journalist for a seemingly naive reason: if I am not suppose to be in America because I don't have the right kind of papers, what if my name--my byline--was on the paper? I thought I could write my way into America. How can they say I don't exist if my name is in newspapers and magazines?

As I built a successful career as a journalist, paying Social Security and state and federal taxes along the way, words became my salvation. I cannot tell you how many times I found peace and solace in the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King, quoting St. Augustine: "An unjust law is no law at all."

Finally, after 12 years of fear and denial, shame and pain, I had to face my own life and tell my own story. I was largely inspired by undocumented people, in particular young DREAMers, who have been coming out and telling their stories online. But we're not really coming out--we're just letting you in.

In our America, parents of DREAMers--not to mention uncles, aunts, and older siblings--have dreams too. We all dream to live with dignity, provide for our families, and contribute to society. We dream not to be separated from our loved ones--more than 1.6 million undocumented immigrants, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters have been deported by this government in the past four years. We dream of a path to citizenship so we can actively and fully participate in American democracy.

In our America, there is no distinction between the human value of so-called "low-skilled" workers and "high-skilled" workers, between the rights due to heterosexual couples and same-sex binational couples. Just as we need workers of all skill levels to do the jobs that keep our economy going, we need to protect and honor relationships that keep families together.

In our America, diversity is destiny, diversity is strength. That I speak Tagalog, my first language, or Spanish, which I am trying to learn, doesn't threaten my speaking English.

In our America, millions of households are mixed-status immigrant households. Like mine.

Sitting behind me today is my Filipino-American family--my grandma Leonila, whom I love very much; my Aunt Aida Rivera, who helped raised me; and my Uncle Conrad Salinas, who served in the U.S. Navy for 20 years. They're all naturalized American citizens.

I am the only one in my extended family of 25 Americans who is undocumented. When you inaccurately call me "illegal"--no human being is illegal--you're not only dehumanizing me, you're offending them.

And sitting alongside my biological family is my Mountain View High School family--my support network of allies who encouraged and protected me since I was an undocumented teenager, wrapped in fear and uncertain about my future. After I told my high school principal and school superintendent, Pat Hyland and Rich Fischer, that I was not planning to go to college because I could not apply for financial aid, Pat and Rich secured a private college scholarship for me funded by a man named Jim Strand. I am honored and humbled that Pat, Rich and Jim are all here today. Across the country, there are countless other Jim

Strands, Pat Hylands, and Rich Fischers of all backgrounds, who stand alongside their undocumented neighbors and friends. They don't need to see pieces of paper--a passport or a green card--to treat us as human beings, co-workers, neighbors, friends.

The reality is, our America is actually *your* America. My future is tied to your future. My equality is tied to your equality. Our America is part of the continuing and evolving story of the immigrant nation that is our country.

As this Committee, as this Congress, as this government decides on fair, humane, common-sense reform, let us remember that immigration is about all of us.

Thank you.