

### Undocumented Students Seek Helping Hand for College

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By Suzanne Hanney

Streetwise

Marta was fourth in her class of 295 students at a North Side public high school, secretary of the National Honor Society and president of Latinos Unidos, but her entire financial aid package and acceptance at a private university was pulled back when her green card failed to come through on time.

Likewise, Claudia was unable to get admitted to local universities without a Social Security Number.

"I felt my activities-including National Honor Society-had been futile because they didn't look at that," she said.

Unable to fill in a Social Security number, northwest side high school senior Stephanie was told "I'm sorry, we can't accept your application," and was escorted to the door.

"I was very sad. I want to be a nurse, I want to help older people. I have the energy, I have the love to do it," said Stephanie, who has been in this country since she was 11.

"I just need a helping hand. I'm not the only one with a dream," Stephanie told 200 people at a forum intended to increase access of undocumented students of higher education.

A collaboration of Organization of the Northeast (ONE) and the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR), the Oct. 15 forum featured not only the students' stories but also local university officials and legislators who pledged to work on state and national bills related to student documentation and financial aid.

Nationwide, Oct. 15, or "New American Action Day" was an occasion for rallies and meetings with 100 members of Congress regarding the revived debate on immigration reform. House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo) introduced an "Earned Legalization and Family Unification Act" on Oct. 10 and President George W. Bush will meet with Mexican president Vicente Fox later this month in Baja California, Mexico.

"I know parents tell their children how important education is," said U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, who introduced herself as the daughter of immigrants in a mixture of English and Spanish ("comprendo mucho, no hablo") to the audience's delight. Schakowsky told those assembled at St. Jerome Catholic Church, 1709 W. Lunt St., that they were her constituents, not Luis Gutierrez.' Her district is north of Gutierrez and extends west to Niles.

"I see the future lawyers, doctors and teachers in this country," Schakowsky said. "It's crucial that all immigrants have the chance to go to college. Si, se puede. (Yes, we can.)"

Along with Gutierrez, Schakowsky is one of 29 original cosponsors of the Gephardt bill, which was immediately referred to the House Judiciary committee.

Gephardt's bill would allow undocumented immigrants who have been in the U.S. for at least five years, who have worked here two years and who have not been convicted of a felony or hate crime, to apply for legal permanent resident status, along with their spouses and children. The bill would also allow children up to age 25 without eligible parents who have been in the U.S. for at least five years and who are in at least seventh grade, or who are applying for

college, to apply for status adjustment. It would also ensure visa availability to qualified family members and remove immediate relatives from the worldwide cap, which would free 250,000 to 300,000 visas.

A Capitol Hill source said Democrats want recognition as the party that helped millions of immigrants, many of whom work in food service and other low-paid jobs. If the bill fails to move out of the Republican-controlled House before the November election, Democrats will revive it in the next session of Congress, whether or not they become the majority party.

Those seeking permanent residency-which does not involve citizenship or voting rights-would also have to prove they had paid all their federal and state income taxes under the Gephardt bill. Because the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Internal Revenue Service cannot share information, immigrants can now get an individual tax identification number (ITIN). The bill would allow those who did not get an ITIN to either prove they did not earn enough or to retroactively pay toward their Medicare and Social Security.

Congressional sources believe that immigration groups back the bill, although the groups would like it to be more comprehensive. The groups reportedly hope for a reform proposal next year that would deal with future immigration.

The AFL-CIO is said to back the bill as "an important first step."

Schakowsky is also one of 55 congressional supporters of the Student Adjustment Act, which would legalize students who have lived in the United States for at least five years, who are in at least seventh grade and under age 21. The bill would allow students to apply for student aid as residents. Introduced in May 2001, it has remained in the Judiciary and the Education and Workforce Committees.

State Reps. Harry Osterman and Larry McKeon also said they would work with the interest groups to raise private scholarship funds for undocumented students. Both also back a bill that would allow undocumented students who graduated from Illinois high schools to pay instate tuition at state universities. Introduced by Majority Conference Chair Edward Acevedo, (D-Chicago), the Committee since April.

McKeon added that he favors driver's licenses for undocumented people, "so they can get to school, to work."

The new president of St. Augustine College, Dr. Clara Brennan, said she spoke "as a Hispanic leader, an immigrant and an economist.

"High education for children of undocumented immigrants is an investment in the brains of all these children," Brennan said. "We will all be better off by sharing the fruits of these brains."

Representatives of Northeastern Illinois University and DePaul both agreed to meet with ONE before Christmas and Schakowsky agreed to arrange a similar meeting with Northwestern University. Loyola University officials said they both supported the undocumented students' accessibility to Pell grants and other federal loans.

"None of our merit or talent scholarships are denied because of classification," said Edward R. Moore, scholarship director/student financial assistance at Loyola.

"We don't ask for a Social Security number and students with a Social Security number don't have to divulge it," said April E. Hansen, Loyola director of undergraduate admissions.

ONE estimates that there are 10,000 high school students in Cook County without documentation, which means they cannot receive federal financial aid for college.

Some manage to go to college, but many cannot afford it.

Marta, now a sophomore at Northeastern Illinois University, said she wants to be a lawyer but is taking business courses because she does not know how she can afford law school at

DePaul, Loyola, or Northwestern. She came to Chicago with her parents at age 9 and has a Social Security number. Her parents applied for her legal residency four years ago and expected it a year later but it has been delayed again by the events of 9/11.

Claudia's former babysitting boss helps with her tuition at Northeastern, but Stephanie said she still does not know what she will do.