

An undocumented immigrant's plea to pursue the American Dream

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Jacquelyn Martin / AP

Gaby Pacheco, of Miami, an immigrant rights leader and director of the Bridge Project, wipes her eyes after testifying on Capitol Hill before the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on immigration reform.

On May 13, 2010, Gaby Pacheco returned home to South Florida after completing a four-month, 1,500-mile walk from Miami to Washington, D.C. to press Congress to pass a bill that would legalize millions of undocumented immigrants, including herself.

She was one of four young people — all students or former students of Miami Dade College — who made the trek in the name of countless undocumented immigrants.

The walk was hailed as a milestone in the immigration activists' struggle for reform and legal status for the nation's undocumented immigrants.

Last Monday, the 28-year-old Pacheco was back in Washington. This time, she rode aboard an airplane. But her message was the same to lawmakers when she appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee. The panel was reviewing a Senate bill that would allow the nation's estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants, including 740,000 in Florida, to eventually become legal U.S. residents. She spoke as an immigrant rights leader and director of the Bridge Project in Miami.

Pacheco, who choked back tears toward the end of her remarks, recited to the senators her family's story of living in the shadows of American society. Her plea was straightforward: Allow her and millions of others like her to pursue the American Dream.

Below, Pacheco's testimony:

Thank you Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Grassley, and members of this committee for giving me the opportunity to testify today in support of S.744, the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013.

My name is Maria Gabriela "Gaby" Pacheco and I am an "undocumented American." I was born in 1985 in Guayaquil, Ecuador. In 1993, at the age of eight, I moved to the United States with my parents and three siblings.

Out of everyone who is here testifying today, I am the only one that comes to you as one of the 11 million undocumented people in this country.

My family reflects the diversity and beauty of America. We are part of a strong working class; a mixed-status family who are your neighbors, classmates, fellow parishioners, consumers, and part of the fabric of this nation.

My father is an ordained Southern Baptist preacher who currently works as a window washer. My mom is a licensed nurse's aide, but due to health problems she has not been able to work the last couple of years. Their hope is to continue to support their family while at the same time contributing to this country's economic growth.

My oldest sister, Erika, is eagerly counting the days when she is able to apply for citizenship later this year. She is married to a United States citizen and has two United States citizen children, Isaac and Eriana. She will be able to vote in the next national election.

Mari, my second oldest sister, currently works managing a construction company. Although a DREAMer, she did not qualify for the Department of Homeland Security's new initiative, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), because she is over the age of 30. The DREAM Act provisions under S.744 will provide her a permanent path forward.

My younger brother is a proud business owner; he has a car washing business. Last month, at the age of 27, because of DACA he was able to get a driver's license and buy his first car. However, DACA is not a permanent solution.

Last, I am the wife of a Venezuelan of Cuban descent, who has lived in the United States for 26 years.

Miraculously last year, after an 18-year wait, he was able to obtain his Legal Permanent Residency. My husband's process shows how our immigration system is broken, outdated, and desperately in need of modernization.

My family is not alone.

In 2009, my friend Felipe Souza Matos, co-director of Get Equal, asked me to join him on a journey and campaign to seek immigration reform. In my heart I knew that in order to put an end to the separation of families, heal the hurt and pain of our communities, and disprove the myths and lies that are told about immigrants, we needed to peacefully demonstrate and courageously bring to light our (lack of) immigration status. On January 1, 2010, with Felipe, Juan Rodriguez (now Juan Souza Matos), and Carlos Roa, I began the Trail of Dreams, a 1,500-mile walk from Miami to Washington, D.C.

Through this walk we wanted to show our love for this country, which we consider our home. We risked our lives, put everything on the line, walked in the cold, and felt the pain in our bodies as blisters and callouses formed on our feet. We walked in faith knowing that many before us had put their lives at risk to fight for freedom, legal reforms, and the American values that this country was founded on and aspires to.

We did not allow anything to stop us, including the fringe elements of American society. We witnessed firsthand how misinformation and fear mongering confused people about immigrants. The phrasing and images that some use to portray people like me, undocumented Americans, have created a false perception of who we are. It was also during the trail we saw firsthand how fear translated into hate. I vividly remember how robes of white, in a KKK demonstration, had colored the streets of a small town in Georgia. In fact, an event eerily similar to this demonstration just took place this past Saturday in Atlanta, Georgia. America's history, however, shows that we have been here before and we have overcome.

Since the walk I have carried the stories and dreams of thousands of people we met along the way. People working in our fields, chicken farms, day laborer centers, homes as domestic workers, newspapers as journalists, small businesses as owners, and health clinics as doctors. These people are mothers, fathers, children, and neighbors. Their dreams are held in the hands of this committee and the rest of Congress. Their dreams now lie in the Senate bipartisan bill, S.744.

Legalizing people like me, all 11 million of us, will make the United States stronger and will bring about significant economic gains in terms of growth, earnings, tax revenues, and jobs. It is time to set fear aside and deal with an issue that is affecting an entire nation, and doing nothing is no longer acceptable.

Americans deserve a modernized immigration system. Individuals who are citizens in every way except on paper ask for a roadmap to citizenship.

In the words of my good friend, journalist Jose Antonio Vargas, who testified in front of this very committee — What do you want to do with me? What do you want to do with us?

With dignity and faith I surrender my talents, passion, and life. I ask you to give me, my family, and 11 million of us an opportunity to fully integrate and achieve our American Dream.