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## Vice President Joe Biden hails need for immigration reform at Miami Dade College graduation

By Patrick Riley

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JAVIER GALEANO / AP

Vice President Joe Biden greets to Natalia Elias and her brother Guido at the new campaign office of Rep. Joe Garcia, D-Fla., in Miami, Saturday, May 3, 2014. During a college graduation ceremony earlier in the day, Biden said a "constant, substantial stream of immigrants" is important to the American economy, urging citizenship for immigrants living in the U.S. illegally.

Loud cheers filled the gymnasium of Miami Dade College's Kendall campus Saturday morning as a stream of graduates marched across the hardwood floor donning their black gowns and caps, many decorated with glitter and stickers.

An even louder applause rocked the packed house when the Cuban flag — along with 38 other flags representing the nationalities of all 2,000 graduates — was presented.

But the most raucous roar of the morning was reserved for the commencement speaker, Vice President Joe Biden.

Biden, who introduced himself as "Jill Biden's husband" in reference to his wife's teaching gig at Northern Virginia

Community College, apologized for being late. He explained to the graduates from the school's Homestead and InterAmerican campuses that headwinds had slowed down Air Force Two.

But before he could get to one of his major talking points — immigration reform — Biden's speech was interrupted by a woman in the crowd screaming: "Stop deportations!" The vice president's response came in familiar nonchalant fashion: "We'll do that, too, kid, but let me finish my speech."

The Obama administration has been criticized by immigrant rights advocates for a record number of deportations.

Biden emphasized the importance of immigrants to the future success of the country, telling the audience that "a lack of reverence for the unorthodox" and a "constant stream of new immigrants" has served the nation well in the past.

He also highlighted the cultural and ethnic diversity of the graduating class. "Many of you are children of immigrants, and many of you are the grandchildren of immigrants," Biden

said. "More than half of you speak a language other than English at home. But all of you speak the language of America — the language of courage."

Biden, who was introduced as having "served the nation for a very long time," a remark that drew laughs from the crowd, told the graduates that there will be more change in the next 20 years than in the past 100. "And you'll be a part of it," Biden said.

Aside from immigration, the vice president also stressed the need for innovation, highlighting cancer and Alzheimer's research, real-time speech translation, and renewable energy, among other examples. "This is not hyperbole," Biden said. "This is going to happen."

Before concluding his speech, Biden returned to the hot-button topic of immigration, once again stressing the importance of reform. "And that's why we have to act to take 11 million people out of the shadows," Biden said, amid loud approval from the crowd.

"Things are changing for the better," Biden then told the audience, referring to the DREAM Act legislation that was approved by the Florida Legislature just hours earlier on the final day of the 2014 election-year session. The new law will allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition at Florida colleges and universities.

Biden's speech resonated with many in the audience: Andy Alfonso was awarded a \$5,000 scholarship from the school's Board of Trustees prior to Biden's remarks. The 20-year-old from Cuba arrived in the United States three and a half years ago; after a year of high school, he attended Miami Dade College to study biology. Friday, he received his diploma, graduating with a perfect 4.0 GPA.

"It was very emotional for me because he touched a lot of points that I believed in and that I continue to believe in," Alfonso said. The newly minted graduate has been accepted to Harvard University and is waiting for confirmation from Johns Hopkins University.

He plans to attend medical school to become a neurosurgeon and practice medicine in a developing country. Alfonso's father was cheering for him in the crowd. His mother, in Cuba, is waiting to see a video of the ceremony.

"This day is, I mean, it's such a success not only for me, but for my family because they're so supportive of me — and not only this family here, my family back in Cuba," Alfonso said. "I hope they're seeing the video. They're always rooting for me, and they're always giving me that final push to go succeed and do whatever it is I want to pursue."

Amanda Brown, another graduate and recipient of the prestigious scholarship, was equally touched by Biden's speech.

"I thought the vice president gave an inspiring speech," Brown said. "I thought it was very heartfelt, and I thought it was great for this audience because Miami is such a diverse area. There are so many immigrants here who can take his speech and truly understand what he's saying."

Brown, a Miami native who is only 18 years old and on her way to attend Franklin University Switzerland in Lugano, Switzerland, had an opportunity to take a picture with the vice president when he congratulated her on stage.

When asked if that picture will end up on Instagram, Brown joked: "Yeah, if I can come up with an appropriate hashtag. I'm not sure. That's a difficult one."

After receiving an honorary degree from the school, Biden and his entourage left campus to visit a Jamaican cafe called Island Restaurant in West Kendall. From there, the vice president headed to another shopping center in Kendall to visit the new campaign office of U.S. Rep. Joe Garcia, a Cuban-American Democrat from Miami.

He told the more than 200 volunteers in attendance that they should back Garcia in his reelection bid: "This guy is very special."

El Nuevo Herald staff writer Alfonso Chardy contributed to this story.

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