

Future dim for immigrant college grads

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D'Aliza Rodriguez has excelled in college, but her future is shadowed by her immigration status.

By VANESSA LYNN

D'Aliza Rodriguez has made her mark at Brooklyn College, where she is president of the Sociology Club and eagerly looking forward to applying to graduate school.

An elegant young woman who has wavy dark hair and wears a Vichy shirt, she laughs and then adopts a serious tone when discussing how her life changed when she moved to New York from the Dominican Republic eight years ago. "I was depressed when I had to come to this country. I was just a child," Rodriguez said. "As first generation, we have no choice when we come here."

Rodriguez, 21, has seen her immigration status changed from tourist to undocumented, with serious consequences. "There is not one day I don't worry about what's going to happen," Rodriguez said.

Undocumented immigrant college student are not entitled to financial aid, loans, scholarships, state jobs, and jobs in general. "They are on their own. Nobody will work

with them,” said Shirma Cunningham, administrative assistant at Brooklyn College’s International Student Services office. “They have no benefits at all.”

Legislation aimed at changing that, the Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, or DREAM, was reintroduced in the House on March 27 by Reps. Howard Berman (D-Calif.) and Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-Fla.). An earlier version got 52 votes in the Senate in January, 2008, eight short of the 60 needed to move it forward.

The legislation would allow those who arrived in the United States as children, have been in the country at least five years, graduated from high school and are of good moral character the opportunity to earn permanent resident status.

“Over the years, I’ve been more pessimistic about it,” Rodriguez said. “It’s great legislation but I don’t see it happening any time soon and people might not enforce it right away. It’s really a dream if it happens.”

However, it is hard to move forward when not knowing what to do. Rodriguez is one semester away from graduating from college. “It’s scary. I’m going to graduate and as great as it is,” Rodriguez said, pausing. “Now what?’ I ask myself everyday.”

As a result the options are limited: a low-skilled and low-pay job that would not require Rodriguez to prove her status. Graduate school or finding a job in sociology are almost impossible. “I’ve been rejected so many times because of my status,” Rodriguez said. She recalls her junior year in high school when she was interning at Smith Barney. At the end of the internship, Smith Barney offered Rodriguez a part-time position as a teller. She could not accept because she did not have a Social Security card.

“I have goals; I want to go to grad school and get a good job but I can’t pay,” she said. Rodriguez could qualify for scholarships but her lack of a Social Security number and residential status takes the opportunity away. Hartwick College offered Rodriguez full tuition when she applied as high school student, but she declined the offer when she was asked for a Social Security number.

“I’m not a criminal,” Rodriguez said. “I’m just trapped in a glass ceiling, visible and yet living in the shadow of a system that ignores the complexity of immigration.”

Life in the Dominican Republic was ordinary for Rodriguez’s family until her father lost his job. They had a good living and they considered themselves as part of the middle-class; they were comfortable enough to obtain a tourist visa to spend vacation in New York for two months.

With Rodriguez’s father staying behind in the native land, he was able to prove that his financial situation was stable and that the family would go back to the Dominican Republic. Then, Rodriguez’s father lost his position of manager of a company and tried to renew the tourist visa for the family while they were in New York. He was denied because he was not working. And that is how Rodriguez became undocumented in 1998.

As she grew up in New York, Rodriguez attended Brooklyn International High School in Brooklyn Heights. It is part of a network of school that only accepts immigrant students who have been in the country for five years or less. The curriculum is the same but the system helps students adapt to the American culture. Teachers support and pay close attention to the students. A friend of Rodriguez's history teacher donated money to pay her college tuition and books for three years.

"The students and the teachers were like my family. If it wasn't for them I wouldn't be where I am right now," Rodriguez said.