



# A DREAM DENIED?

## A Mississippi Dreamer Reflects on Growing up in Mississippi, DACA, and the 2016 Election

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Late in his first term President Barack Obama took action to prevent the deportation of young immigrants who had entered the U.S. as children—persons often referred to as “Dreamers.”<sup>1</sup> On June 15, 2012, the 30th anniversary of the Supreme Court decision that assured undocumented immigrant children the right to attend public schools in the United States (*Plyor v. Doe*), he announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) program. DACA allows undocumented immigrants who came to the U.S. under the age of 16 and have continuously resided in the U.S. since June 15, 2007 to receive a renewable two-year period of deferred action (temporary relief) from deportation and eligibility for a work permit if they pass a background check and meet certain educational requirements.<sup>2</sup>

Since the election of Donald Trump the future of the approximately 750,000 Dreamers who received DACA has become highly uncertain.<sup>3</sup> On the campaign trail Trump insisted that anyone in the U.S. without permission should be deported; however, during a post-election interview in November, 2016, he said that his administration would focus on deporting immigrants with criminal records.<sup>4</sup> The executive order President Trump signed in January then proceeded to put all undocumented immigrants at risk of deportation, but on April 21 he told Dreamers to “rest easy” because they were not the

targets of his ramped-up immigration enforcement efforts.<sup>5</sup> On June 16 a Department of Homeland Security official stated that no final determination has been about the DACA program.<sup>6</sup> The chart below, drawn from Migration Policy Institute data, lists the number of DACA applications received by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) as of September, 2016, per Gulf South state, as well as the estimated number of undocumented immigrants living in those states.

### DACA Eligible Population, DACA Applicants, and Total Undocumented Population by Gulf South State

	DACA Eligible* Population, 2016 <sup>7</sup>	DACA Applicants, Sept. 2016 <sup>8</sup>	Total No. Undocumented Immigrants, 2014 <sup>9</sup>
Alabama	15,000	4,724	71,000
Florida	102,000	37,943	610,000
Louisiana	8,000	2,323	66,000
Mississippi	5,000	1,659	25,000
Texas	271,000	138,439	1,470,000
<b>U.S.</b>	<b>1,932,000</b>	<b>861,192</b>	<b>11,009,000</b>

\* The DACA eligible population include youths who have not yet reached the required age for applying for DACA (age 15) and those otherwise eligible individuals who do not yet meet the educational requirements.

The majority of General Election votes in every Gulf South state except Florida were cast for Donald Trump.<sup>10</sup> The anti-immigrant sentiment that the Trump campaign relentlessly stoked is considered by many analysts to have played a major role in his surprise election.<sup>11</sup> Although Mississippi has a comparatively tiny population of undocumented immigrants, the state went heavily for Trump, with 58.7% of the popular vote. I asked a Mississippi Dreamer her thoughts on DACA, the Trump election, and what it was like to grow up in Mississippi as an undocumented immigrant. To protect her identity, I will call her Carla, not her real name.

### STORY OF DREAMER CARLA

Carla's father was only 21 years old when he first left central Mexico to find work in the U.S. to support his wife and three children, including four-year-old Carla. Soon after arriving he began work in construction, initially in Atlanta but eventually settling on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. His wife joined him in Mississippi 18 months after he left Mexico. Carla and her siblings were then cared for by her maternal grandparents in Jalisco, Mexico, until they rejoined their parents in Biloxi, Mississippi, in 2000, when Carla was eight years old.

Carla said her parents had moved to Mississippi because they found it "quieter and more family-oriented" than Atlanta and thought it would be a good place to raise their family. Her father's family was very poor and he received no schooling in Mexico, but after coming to the U.S. he taught himself to read and write. He and Carla's mother and their three youngest children—who were born in the U.S.—now live in a three bedroom home in a "family friendly" neighborhood near the beach. Their three oldest children have all graduated from high school and work full-time jobs. The family has been active in their local Catholic church since arriving in Biloxi: the children have been altar servers and ushers; Carla coordinated a youth group; her parents sing in the choir and help prepare a monthly meal; and her mother is a catechist.

Carla and her brother were the first Spanish-speaking students at their school in Biloxi. She thinks this is why she was able to learn English so quickly—in just three months. Then she had to translate "everything" for her parents. Today she is employed as an interpreter at a non-profit organization on the Gulf Coast and speaks flawless English.

This is how Carla remembers her early school days:

"It was just really nice. I never felt different. We fit in right away... We were never bullied. I never felt like I was treated differently because of my race or ethnicity."

Carla and her husband, who is also a construction worker like his father-in-law, are the parents of two U.S. citizen children, a five-year-old son and a three-year-old daughter. Carla has visited other southern cities, but she very much wants to remain in Mississippi to live and raise her family. She finds Mississippi "really calm and peaceful... You can go outside and take long walks in the neighborhood and no one will bother you." Her neighbors, who are Anglo-Americans, African-Americans, and Hispanics, "watch out for each other."

Another reason that Carla is so fond of Mississippi is that she is close to her childhood friends, most of whom are native Mississippians. Although they all know she is a Dreamer, several voted for Donald Trump. They told her, "We're not racist. We're not anti-immigrant." Carla, however, feels they do not really pay attention to immigration policies. Like a good friend, she remains loyal to her friends. Even though the Trump presidency could lead to the deportation of her parents, two siblings, and herself, she told me, "At the end of day, everyone has the right to vote for who they want." She did not lose any friends over the election. After "feeling different" for a few days, their friendships "went back to normal."

DACA has been very important in Carla's life and for many other Dreamers as well.<sup>12</sup> Not only did DACA allow Carla to get a state I.D. card, buy a car, and start her first job at age 19 after graduating from high school, she was finally free—after living in the U.S. for 11 years—from the fear and anxiety of deportation.

This is what Carla wants all Mississippians to know about her and other Dreamers:

"Dreamers are young, hardworking people trying to better themselves by achieving their goals. We like to exceed expectations to prove that we can make a difference. We are good people that like to help each other and our communities."

Dreamers like Carla embody the promise and potential of the American Dream. To lose them to deportation would be a nightmare, not only for these aspiring young Americans, but for the countless American families and communities.

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### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The word Dreamer is derived from the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act (S. 1291) legislation introduced in 2001 as a bipartisan bill in the Senate that failed to pass.
- <sup>2</sup> Other requirements for DACA applicants include the following: must be under age 31 on June 15, 2012; entered the U.S. without inspection or fell out of lawful status before June 15, 2012; are currently in high school, have graduated from high school, have obtained a GED, or have been honorably discharged from the armed forces; have not been convicted of a felony offense, a significant misdemeanor, or more than three misdemeanors of any kind; and do not pose a threat to public safety. See <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/consideration-deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca#guidelines>
- <sup>3</sup> Jens Manuel Krogstad, "Unauthorized immigrants covered by DACA face uncertain future," Pew Research Center, January 5, 2017, at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/05/unauthorized-immigrants-covered-by-daca-face-uncertain-future/>
- <sup>4</sup> See script of *60 Minutes* interview of Donald Trump by Leslie Stahl, November 13, 2016, at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-donald-trump-family-melania-ivanka-lesley-stahl/>
- <sup>5</sup> Noah Weiland, "'Dreamers' are not target of immigrant crackdown, cabinet officials say," *New York Times*, April 23, 2017 at [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/us/politics/cabinet-officials-seem-to-back-off-trump-vow-to-end-order-on-dreamers.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/us/politics/cabinet-officials-seem-to-back-off-trump-vow-to-end-order-on-dreamers.html?_r=0)
- <sup>6</sup> Michael Shear and Vivian Yee, "Dreamers to stay in U.S. for now, but long-term fate is unclear," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2017.
- <sup>7</sup> From Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Data Tools, Migration Policy Institute, at <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca-profiles>
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Profile of the Unauthorized Population, Migration Policy Institute, at <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/US>
- <sup>10</sup> The percentage of total General Election votes that went to Trump in the Gulf South States are as follows: Alabama, 63.1; Mississippi, 58.7; Louisiana, 58.1; Texas, 52.4; and Florida, 49. From Leada Gore, "Alabama didn't lead country in percentage of Trump votes—but it was close," November 15, 2016, at [http://www.al.com/news/index.ssf/2016/11/alabama\\_didnt\\_lead\\_the\\_country.html](http://www.al.com/news/index.ssf/2016/11/alabama_didnt_lead_the_country.html)
- <sup>11</sup> Thomas Wood, "Racism motivated Trump voters more than authoritarianism," *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2017, at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/04/17/racism-motivated-trump-voters-more-than-authoritarianism-or-income-inequality/?utm\\_term=.f590ac964663](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/04/17/racism-motivated-trump-voters-more-than-authoritarianism-or-income-inequality/?utm_term=.f590ac964663)
- <sup>12</sup> According to a study conducted by the Center for American Progress, DACA increased average recipients' hourly wages by 42%, more than 90% received a state I.D. driver's license for the first time, and 54 percent bought their first car. See Walter Ewing, "DACA beneficiaries pay billions in taxes," American Immigration Council, April 28, 2017, at <http://immigrationimpact.com/2017/04/28/daca-beneficiaries-pay-billions-taxes/>

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