DREAMS, DEFERRED

by

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PHOTOS BY TRICIA COYNE

WHILE LAWMAKERS AND POLITICIANS WRANGLE OVER IMMIGRATION POLICY, A GIFTED STUDENT FACES AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE IN THE ONLY LAND HE KNOWS AS HOME.

Sitting at a high-top table inside the campus coffee shop, José Ramon Contreras Rangel '18 looks the part of the typical college student. He's dressed casually. He's got a bit of scruffy facial hair and a calm demeanor. He's studious, rarely missing a class. Since he's active in many student organizations, students, staff and faculty say hello while waiting for their lattes and cappuccinos.

To the world, to his peers, to the people he encounters on a daily basis as a resident assistant or math tutor, Contreras is a success. To his mother, it's a similar story. He is the first person in his extended family to graduate from high school, let alone attend a university. He works two jobs. He's a double major, studying finance and mathematics. He volunteers, he tutors, he studies, he works, he (barely) sleeps.

Although Contreras looks the part, the 21-year-old junior is very different from his fellow students at Queens. His soft-spoken manner and easy confidence almost hide the anxious energy that bubbles just beneath the surface—but not quite.

Contreras has been keeping a secret, one he's only recently been sharing: he's not a legal resident of the United States, although he received Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status several years ago. Revealing his undocumented status is not without some risk, but he hopes by telling his story and sharing the weight of the uncertainty that lies ahead of him, he will inspire others to push even harder to follow their dreams.

"Adversity is what motivates me," he says.

THE PATH TO QUEENS

Contreras was born in Oaxaca, Mexico, and lived in Veracruz as a young child. "Our house was in a ditch," he says. "It flooded in the rain, so we'd have to sleep on the roof. We didn't have a bathroom or anything." He describes these childhood experiences with a detached tone, because he doesn't have many memories from his time in Mexico; he knows about his life there only from the stories he's heard. He also doesn't remember walking across the border into the United States to join his mother, who had been living in Siler City, NC, for a year.

He was just five years old.

When Contreras started kindergarten, he didn't speak a word of English; he spoke only Spanish at home. And as he learned the language of his adopted country, he fell into the role of many first-generation children: he became his mother's interpreter, reading her mail, translating when necessary, helping her navigate life in the US. Although he recognized his home life wasn't typical, he didn't fully understand just how different he was from most of his peers until his freshman year of high school, when it started to become clear that his undocumented status could definitely hold him back—and he didn't know how to overcome it.

"I am the oldest of three children, and both of my parents have less than a middle school education," he explains. To him, graduating from high school felt like a major achievement. Why aim higher?

"SHE NOTICED SOMETHING IN ME"

The turning point came when an algebra teacher who saw his aptitude asked why he hadn't registered for a more challenging class. "She noticed something in me," Contreras says. That was it: suddenly, he saw something in himself, too. He doubled his math classes to catch up with his college-bound peers. He connected with a mentor through the Scholars of Latino America Initiative. His grades improved.

That's not to say Contreras didn't have to overcome some hefty setbacks. Navigating the college application process can be challenging for any student, but for a student whose undocumented status makes him ineligible for federal aid and most scholarships, it felt almost impossible.

PERSISTENCE

Contreras doesn't let his circumstances define his life. He graduated from high school with a 4.75 GPA. And when he heard about Golden Door Scholars, a program launched in 2013—his senior year—that offers full scholarships to a small number of DACA students, he couldn't believe his luck. "I thought, 'This is a sign.'"

He applied for the Golden Door scholarship and made it all the way through three grueling rounds of essays, phone interviews and in-person interviews—only to be cut simply because there were so many worthy applicants. "I first met José in 2012," recalls Kacey Grantham, Golden Door Scholars' executive director. "He was bright, energetic, and left an impression. In fact, I can still picture sitting in the interview room with him and hearing his story."

Contreras was devastated, but not discouraged. He grew more determined. He applied for and received his DACA status, which enables him to work legally, get a driver's license and have a Social Security number. He decided to take a gap year, move to Washington, DC, live with his uncle and work in the service industry.

The next fall, he was back, applying for a Golden Door scholarship for the second time. He knew the stakes were high but he was ready to prove that he deserved a scholarship. This time it worked.

"We did not select him for a Golden Door scholarship that first year, but we were wrong," Grantham says. "He came back the next year and has proved to be an amazing representative of our organization."

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF AN UNDOCUMENTED STUDENT

The Pew Research Center estimates there were 11.1 million unauthorized immigrants in the US in 2014, accounting for 3.5 percent of the nation's population. Of those undocumented immigrants, the ones who make it to college face a host of financial and logistical barriers. And according to a 2015 study from the Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education, they also report higher levels of anxiety than the "norm" population. Lack of access to in-state tuition and financial aid contributes to that anxiety: the same study reveals that 90.3 percent of respondents had a household annual income below $50,000.

José Contreras is one of the lucky ones. He's thriving. He's succeeding at school. And with all that he has overcome so far, it's easy to label him as a success story.

Yet he doesn't see himself that way. Every day is an exercise in patience, in determination, in time

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management, in discipline. He has to be vigilant to avoid any situation that could get him in trouble and put his DACA status, his family and his future, at risk.

He sleeps fewer than six hours most nights because he doesn't think he's working hard enough. He feels a sense of obligation to his family—his mother, stepfather and two siblings, both US citizens—to make the absolute most of his education. Every time he gets a paycheck, he sends money home to his family, sometimes all of it. "I want to help my family," he says. "But it's more than just that. It's because I have to."

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

One thing that is certain for DACA students like Contreras is that the future is uncertain. Undocumented residents may not be able to hold a state-issued license, which would eliminate many career paths in the medical field, for example. But since DACA is still so new, there's also a lot of uncertainty in how the laws will be interpreted.

For Contreras, this is a real issue: he's concerned that if he chooses to pursue a career in finance, he'll have trouble getting a job with a bank because of his status. If he makes a different choice, to become a CPA, will he be able to get a license?

"It's definitely challenging," he says. "That's why I work 10 times harder than the next person."

Contreras is a planner; he likes to have a goal to work toward. It's hard for him to dream big when he knows there are very real limitations on his dreams that are beyond his control. As America prepares to inaugurate our next president, students like Contreras are watching, waiting to see how much of their fate will be decided by politicians for whom they cannot vote, in the only country they have ever called home.

"We just want the best for what our families have done for us," he says. "I have the responsibility to carry my family with me. I am the one representative of all these other people at all times."

Will Contreras ever feel as though he's worked hard enough? "It's never enough. Will it ever be enough? I hope. I only have hope."

Editor's note: Contreras also holds Queens' Karl and Anna Ginter Fellowship, awarded to immigrant and first-generation students based on academic merit and financial need.