

Speech at the U.S. Capitol

Mandeep Chahal, 2011

<http://weareamericastories.org/videos/mandeep-chahal-dreamer-calls-on-president-obama-and-congress-to-bring-relief-to-undocumented-youth/>

My name is Mandeep Chahal, I am a college student, a sister, a daughter, a friend, and an activist, and for the first time in my life, I am standing before you as a proud dreamer.

I came to this country at age six knowing nothing but the alphabet and phrases like “thank you” and “please” that my mom had taught me. Today, I stand before you as an honors college student on her way to med school. It's been 14 years since I walked into my first grade classroom, and I've come a long way since then.

Like Jose Antonio Vargas, I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area: headquarters of tech giants like Google and Facebook, and also home to the SF Giants, who I might mention are World Series champions. It's a place of opportunity and innovation, and a place that's full of immigrant families like my own.

As a kid in California, I was obsessed first with Arthur, then Harry Potter, and eventually human rights. In high school, I helped found One Dollar For Life, a 501-c3 that has since become a national poverty relief organization. I was also president of my high school's Amnesty International chapter and have continued to volunteer with Amnesty in college.

I went to Los Altos High School, which just so happens to be the rival school of Mountain View High School, where Jose went. Jose and I actually grew up in the same town—I just went to the school with the better football team.

It was during high school that my parents sat me down, and told me about my illegal status. The knowledge that I was undocumented rocked my teenage reality of soccer practice and Spanish homework. It scared me, and so I told almost no one. I focused on my grades and devoted my free time to human rights activism. I graduated high school with honors, and was voted “Most Likely to Save the World” by my class. I thought that, if I ignored my secret problem, it would go away. That is not what happened.

Last summer, the summer after my freshman year at UC Davis, Immigration and Customs Enforcement found me. They

took me in and fitted my ankle with an electronic tracking device. They told me I was lucky I wasn't in prison instead. They treated me like a criminal, and to be honest there were moments when I felt like one.

This past school year, I tried to keep my life at school somewhat normal. I declared my major: Neurology, Physiology and Behavior. I expanded campus outreach for STAND, UC Davis's anti-genocide coalition and was elected co-president. I even managed to pass Chemistry 2C.

Three weeks ago, I finished all of my finals and came home excited to relax and enjoy summer vacation with my family and friends. Little did I know that my life was about to be turned upside down.

On June 16th, I was summoned to the ICE office. My case officer told me that within a week, my mom and I would be deported. He ordered me to purchase a one-way plane ticket to India. The nightmare that I had warded off for years was coming true, and fast.

I walked out of my meeting with ICE knowing I had to stop this. I could not be sent to a country I no longer know, ripped away from my family, my friends, and the beautiful place that I had called home for almost as long as I could remember.

I went to the few people I had trusted with the truth about my status. We sat down and decided that with deportation just five days away, the only way to stop this was to "go public."

To an undocumented immigrant, that's a scary, scary term. The fear of being discovered is one that's constantly on our minds. You learn to avoid bringing attention to yourself, to live below the radar of authority at all times, to stay hidden in the shadows.

Having kept my status a secret from even my closest friends for so long, going to my community for help was not easy. To expose my secret to everyone I've ever known, and put my future in their hands, was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do.

When the Facebook group went up, and the message was sent out to hundreds of my friends, classmates, and community members, I was scared. I didn't know what to expect. I had no idea how people would respond.

What happened next was bigger than anyone had expected.

The news spread across Facebook like wildfire. The overwhelming support I received knocked me off my feet. Once the news was out, my friends sent the petition to their friends, who sent it to their friends, who in turn invited more and more people.

In the end, nearly 20,000 faxes were sent to senators, ICE and the Department of Homeland Security. Thousands of people signed a letter on my behalf, hundreds of people called senators.

And it worked.

My mom and I went to ICE last Tuesday, and as ordered we reported to be taken into custody. For a fleeting moment, I thought I might never see my friends again. But we were there less than two hours before ICE changed their minds and let us go.

And so I'm here. We've been granted a stay for one year. But that doesn't change the fact that last week I was just hours away from being deported from my home.

As a student, I work hard. I'm in the honors program at one of the country's top public universities, and I'm on track to go to medical school. I plan to spend my life working for the public good in the United States of America.

If it took this, for me, to stay in my country, then something is wrong. It shouldn't be this hard.

President Obama has made it clear that he fully supports the DREAM Act. He has even said that its failure to pass has been one his biggest disappointments as President.

And yet, he hasn't acted. He has the power to stop the deportations of people like me. He can bring relief so that no family has to go through what mine has. He can end our pain, but he is still deporting DREAMers.

I am standing here today, in my country's capital, because of you. Had it not been for the support of my community and the activism of DREAMers from all across America, I would be gone.

I cannot describe what it means to have all of you. After hiding for so long, to be completely embraced by other dreamers and allies has been incredible. It gives me hope for our future, and the future of our country.

My story is your story; yours is mine. We are a community held together by our common dream.

Such hai vi meh kali nai. La verdad es que no soy la unica.