

DAILY NEWS

New York Daily News

Be Our Guest | 10 Jan 2018

Saving Dreamers: A moral imperative

BY MARY PEARL

Sixteen years ago, 8-year old Cesar Andrade came to New York City from Ecuador. Neither he nor his parents spoke English, but within months, Cesar and his older sister attained fluency, and he soon began assuming grownup roles like navigating health care for his family.

His parents encouraged Cesar to pursue education as something that could never be taken away. Cesar earned good grades and excelled at sports in high school. He also developed an abiding love for his community, and a commitment to reduce the suffering he witnessed growing up. He decided to become a doctor.

His character, stellar academic record and test scores landed him at the Macaulay Honors College at the City University of New York, New York's public honors college, where I serve as dean.

Cesar started to make his goals come true through hard work, sheer grit and the support of his family, community and advisers. He mastered tough science courses while working to help his family. After graduation, he was employed at the New York State Health Foundation, and then as a clinical research coordinator in diabetes prevention at Mount Sinai Hospital.

Today he is a medical student faithful to his original goal: helping to provide quality health care for his community.

Cesar is like many students I've met at my college: the vibrant science major who literally walked from Honduras to the U.S. at age 10; the triple physics-political science-philosophy summa cum laude graduate whose parents brought her from a Caribbean farm to the Bronx at age 6.

Resilient, driven and service-minded, our students tell me how grateful they are for the opportunity to study and prepare for their careers, and how much they want to honor the courage and moral example set by their parents, many of whom sacrificed everything for the family.

Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. Senate are close to an agreement that will protect the Dreamers, young people brought to the U.S. as minors, coupled with increased border security measures. This potential bipartisan legislation reflects the fact that fully 85% of Americans support protection for childhood arrivals, including 75% of Republicans polled.

Passage of such a bill, however, is uncertain.

The Dreamers, and indeed all the immigrant students at my college, improve education for everybody. Immigrant students are more likely to report having family responsibilities as an obstacle to their academic success compared with nonimmigrant students. Yet they still do better in school – in both academic achievement and school engagement – than U.S.-born students.

This result is all the more remarkable given that compared with native-born Latino and Asian college students, immigrant college students are disproportionately from deprived socioeconomic backgrounds.

Immigrant students bring passionate engagement with ideas and issues to enliven classroom discussions. They provide different perspectives on what constitutes beauty in a class in art history, or on people's relationship to land in a course on demography. Our immigrant students have created and enlivened myriad student organizations, from a chamber music society to an entrepreneurial innovation club.

American liberal arts colleges are admired globally for producing graduates with skills in critical thinking and a drive for innovation. Increasingly, this optimal college culture is driven by immigrant students.

To help defray costs, City University of New York awards scholarships to its best graduates who have been accepted into medical schools. The scholarships are named for Jonas Salk, the son of a Russian immigrant, a member of the Class of 1934 at City College, and among the first to discover a successful polio vaccine.

At this year's ceremony, seven of the eight winners were immigrants or children of immigrants. They came from Bangladesh, Kuwait, Mexico, Myanmar, Nigeria and Russia. Even before starting medical school this fall, these young people have researched neurodegenerative diseases, epilepsy, Type II diabetes and mental disorders.

Like so many others who are immigrants, these students have raised the quality of their colleges as they prepare for careers that will make contributions to American society.

We should protect rather than exclude immigrant students.

Pearl is dean of the Macaulay Honors College at the City University of New York.

CONTACT
Geoffrey Glick
VP, External Relations
(212) 729 2939