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'DREAMERS' CONVENE TO CELEBRATE – AND EMBRACE PARENTS

By Miriam Jordan
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KANSAS CITY, Mo. – Emboldened by a new program that allows them to remain in the U.S., hundreds of undocumented youth at a conference Sunday decided that their next goal is to urge Washington to devise a policy that also brings their illegal-immigrant parents out of the shadows.

“As we celebrate our victory, we remember our moms and dads, uncles and aunts...who are still undocumented,” Cristina Jimenez, managing director of United We Dream, which represents young undocumented people, told about 600 members here.

A celebratory mood dominated the weekend assembly of “Dreamers,” as the youths call themselves. It was the first national gathering since their two-year campaign, which combined pressure on the White House with rallies that brought their cause before the American public, helped propel the Obama administration to offer them a reprieve from deportation and work authorization.

The program, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, DACA, targets illegal immigrants who arrived in the U.S. before the age of 16, are younger than 31 and have lived in the U.S. at least five years. To qualify, they must be in high school or the military or already have graduated or served and have no criminal record. They aren't entitled to green cards, or permanent legal status, and must renew their application every two years.

About 1.3 million people are eligible for the program, according to the Migration Policy Institute, a think tank, making DACA the largest shift in immigration policy since three million immigrants were legalized in a 1986 amnesty. The government has received more than 300,000 applications since it unveiled the program on Aug. 15.

Though members of the group have identified their next initiative – to address the similar needs of their illegal-immigrant parents – they have yet to hammer out a specific strategy that would achieve such an ambitious goal.

Moreover, despite the fact that some key Republican leaders have expressed support for taking up immigration issues, it's far from clear how open the party at large would be to such discussion.

When the Dreamer event opened Friday night, attendees danced to will.i.am's “It's a New Day” and their leaders led them in chants of “I am a Dream warrior.” Throughout the weekend, the proceedings went from powerful, when people shared their family stories, to silly, such as when they sang and acted out a popular “baby shark” camp song.

The few people older than 30 in attendance were representatives of immigrant-advocacy groups and philanthropic organizations, such as the Ford Foundation, which has supported United We Dream since its inception in 2008 as a loose network of undocumented student groups. Today, the organization has 47 affiliates in 23 states, representing thousands of immigrants.

Many Dreamers became activists during college when they realized they wouldn't secure jobs to build a career despite their education because they lacked legal status. Even though unable to vote, the youngsters were instrumental in mobilizing Latino voters to get to the polls on Nov. 6. Hispanics were vital to President Barack Obama's re-election.

"There is no question that they have grown to be the face of the immigrant movement," said Henry Der, senior program officer at the Four Freedoms Fund, a donor collaborative.

Acknowledging their rise, Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D., Ill.) promised to work in partnership with United We Dream to fix the nation's immigration system.

The young immigrants, originally from Mexico, Latin America and Asia, traveled from across the U.S. to strategize and then vote on a new agenda here, some of them having boarded an airplane for the first time.

"The fight is not over," leader Carlos Amador of Los Angeles told the crowd at the Kansas City Convention Center to rousing applause.

A bound guidebook distributed to attendees asked, "Are you ready for our next win?"

Lorella Praeli, 24, the organization's policy director who met with senior White House officials and senators before DACA materialized, told those gathered, "We're going to be setting the national direction" on immigration policy.

The choice before members was between pushing for the Dream Act, stalled legislation that would secure a path to citizenship for Dreamers, or campaigning for a broader immigration overhaul that would address the fate of all 11 million undocumented residents of the U.S.

In recent years, the young advocates found that their most effective tool was sharing personal stories, built around having been brought to the U.S. through no fault of their own, grown up like Americans, done everything right and, thus, earned the right to remain in the U.S. with access to higher education and jobs .

Over the weekend, the narrative – and strategy – moved toward one that will include their family.

"Maybe some of you have told your mother you love her through a detention center phone," said Rosa Velasquez of Arkansas whose parents were deported in 2004.

She was among several young leaders who took the stage in the main hall, dubbed the "campfire," to tell her family's story, suggesting she wouldn't feel whole until her parents also won the opportunity to stay in their adopted country.

In breakout sessions of six or seven, the young immigrants practiced telling their own stories in three minutes, often erupting in tears, and contemplated the road ahead: "Now that our movement has achieved something for me, I won't ever live in peace if I don't push for change to benefit my parents," said Adrian Reyna of Texas.

In another group, David Chung, a 22-year-old from Queens, N.Y., had no doubt: "We should go for the Dream Act, which we know we can get, rather than wait years for comprehensive immigration reform," which is harder to get Congress to pass, he said.

Back in the main hall, a representative of each United We Dream group cast an oral vote on the agenda the organization should pursue.

Tension briefly gripped the room when a representative from a Texas Dreamer group complained that they had been forced to make a crucial decision too quickly, drawing support from many in attendance. After some discussion, the vote proceeded. Mr. Chung's group, based in New York, was among a handful that favored focusing on the Dream Act. The overwhelming majority echoed Arkansas group representative Arturo Gonzalez, who said "We believe it's time to bring our parents into the movement."

On Sunday, a few parents in attendance brought the youngsters to tears and to their feet in applause. "We don't care if we have to keep cleaning toilets if it means you'll succeed," said Juan Zorrilla, whose daughter, Lizeth, is a leader in Wisconsin.