

DAILY NEWS

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American dream may be just that for S.I. student

A SHY KID WITH a big smile and even bigger dreams, Christian, 15, does not dare reveal his last name.

Born in the beautiful but very poor city of Oaxaca, Mexico, Christian, who is about to enter the ninth grade, is undocumented.

Recently he told his story to WNYC, New York Public Radio (93.9 FM and 820 AM). It can also be heard at WNYC.org.

As part of Radio Rookies, WNYC's youth journalism program, the teen gives a first-person account fittingly titled, "What About Me, Uncle Sam?"

It is a poignant look at what choices exist — if any — for undocumented kids who came here early in life and don't know any home other than the U.S.

"I feel 100% Mexican and all-American at the same time," Christian said.

In his radio piece, he recalls how his mother carried him in her arms through the Arizona desert when he was

4. It was a grueling, five-hour journey.

"All I remember is helicopters, dogs barking," said Christian, who lives on Staten Island with his parents and a younger brother. "I felt I couldn't breathe be-



cause I had dirt in my nose."

He is a good student who dreams of college, loves sports and talks excitedly about his half-Korean, half-Russian girlfriend. About to begin high school, he has come to realize how limited his options are.

"I would like the Dream Act to pass," he said. "And I would like for comprehensive immigration reform to pass too for all the other immigrants out there."

The Dream Act addresses the tragedy of young people who, like Christian, grew up in this country but whose future is, to say the least, uncertain. It was part of the immigration bill defeated in the Senate June 28.

If the Dream Act is ever enacted, it would allow immigrant students with no papers to apply for legal status as long as they are attending college. It would give them the same opportunity if they join the Army.

"I would join the Army despite the war," Christian said with a serious expression. "It is the only way to get the American citizenship and money for college."

Eleven years after his mother brought him to New York, the only clear memory he has from his native Oaxaca is that of his grandmother. The rest, he says, are just "flashbacks."

"I was 4 when she died, but I have never forgotten my grandma," he said. "I was her favorite grandson, and when she passed I cried for two weeks."

His childhood on Staten Island, he says, was pretty much the same as that of any other child. He went to school, watched Pokémon on TV and played with his Hot Wheels in the driveway. In the process, he learned English.

But he is also acutely aware of a huge difference between him and most of his friends.

"Four years from now, they will be getting ready to go to college," he said. "But I will have to go back to Mexico and start over or hide for the rest of my life."

He does not want to return to Mexico, even though he doesn't have an easy life. His "summer job" entails spending 17 hours a day, four days a week, as a busboy in a restaurant for \$200 per week; or about \$2.94 an hour.

"I'll quit in September and go back to school," he said. "But I need the money."

Asked what he thinks will happen if all undocumented immigrants are deported, he doesn't hesitate: "They would have to bring in other immigrants to do those jobs," he said.

And when asked what has he learned with his radio piece, he pauses briefly: "I learned that it is a cruel world and that I don't have many choices."

For the sake of the kids and for our own sake, let's hope that all that energy and talent are not allowed to go to waste.

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