

**Statement of former DREAMER and U.S. Army Veteran
Oscar Vazquez**

**Hearing before the
Senate Committee on the Judiciary**

On

“Attorney General Nomination”

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9:30 a.m.

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Feinstein thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee. My name is Oscar Vazquez and I am proud to be an American.

I was born in a small town in the State of Chihuahua in Mexico. I was 12 years old when my mother and I boarded a bus from our town to the U.S.-Mexico border. Although I was not old enough to make the choice to come to the United States, it was a decision my parents made to pursue a better future and this country quickly became my home.

As soon as we were settled in the United States my parents made sure that I was enrolled in school because they wanted me to understand the value of education. Those first days of school were a shock as I did not know enough English to understand what my teachers were telling me. It was at this point that I started to develop a passion for math and science since the formulas and equations transcended the language barrier. I was able to excel in those courses.

Before I knew it, it was time for me to attend high school and soon I found myself in wonder at the many opportunities that I was able to choose from. At Carl Hayden High School I joined the JROTC program where my two instructors were Vietnam Veterans. They always made it a point of teaching us the value of selfless service, whether you were able to provide that in the military or not. They truly wanted us to be better Americans.

I loved the order and discipline and was eventually awarded the JROTC Officer of the Year. During my sophomore year, soon after 9/11, I saw the "Band of Brothers" miniseries, and I knew then I wanted to join the Army. But when I met with a recruiter, I was told that I couldn't enlist because I was undocumented. I left that meeting not knowing what to do or what was next. I was devastated.

I knew I had to figure out what else I could do with my life. At the beginning of my senior year I joined the robotics club, which opened new doors for me. Working with three of my fellow classmates and under the supervision of two dedicated teachers, we entered the Marine Advanced Technology Education Center's Remotely Operated Vehicle Competition. Even though we were high school students, we decided to enter the college level competition because if we lost, at least it would be against universities and not against other high schools.

I spent my senior year working with my team to design and build our underwater robot, which we named Stinky. That summer, we traveled to Santa Barbara, California for the competition. It was incredible to see other underwater robots and teams from some of the best universities in the world, including MIT. Beyond our wildest dreams, four undocumented kids from Arizona won the awards for Design Elegance, Technical Report, and the grand prize for Overall Winner of the competition.

Winning the underwater robotics competition was proof that we as Dreamers had something to offer the country we always considered to be our home. Although I could not contribute to my country by joining the military, I decided I could contribute by becoming an

engineer. I fell in love with Arizona State University during a middle school field trip, but attending ASU came with its own challenges. In 2006—when I was already enrolled at ASU—the Arizona Legislature passed a law prohibiting undocumented students from receiving in-state financial aid. Even though Arizona had been my home for many years, I also wasn't allowed to pay in-state tuition. When this new law came into effect my tuition tripled. Through private scholarships and working construction, I scraped the money together to pay for college and support my family. Despite how difficult it was, I never gave up on the idea of getting a degree, and at graduation it paid off.

In 2009, I was one of three students introduced as an outstanding graduate during graduation, sitting only a few feet away from President Obama. But afterwards, I didn't know what the future held. This was three years before President Obama established the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. So even though I had a degree in mechanical engineering, no one would hire me in this field without legal status. I didn't want to be stuck in a low-end job and not be able to apply my degree to its full potential to contribute to my country and support my family.

By then, I had met and married my wife, Karla. In the end, she and I decided that I should go back to Mexico – a country I left as a child – and apply to re-enter the United States legally. Even though Karla and our daughter, Samantha, are U.S. citizens, the law said that once I left I would be barred from coming back to the United States for ten years unless I qualified for a waiver under the law. My wife and I knew it wouldn't be easy to be apart, but we wanted to do this while my daughter was still young.

It was frustrating to be away from my family and not be able to see my daughter grow up. Every few weeks, when my wife had a few days off, Karla would bring Samantha and make the three-hour drive to visit me. When they first started visiting, my daughter didn't recognize me after not seeing me for so long. It is heartbreaking as a parent for your child not know who you are or recognize your face.

I applied for a waiver of the ten-year bar so I could come back home, but the government initially denied the request. They said that we hadn't documented enough extreme hardship for my wife due to my absence. The thought of being separated from my family for 10 years was too much to bear. I asked the Department of Homeland Security to reconsider my application and this time my waiver was granted. Three-hundred and sixty one days after I left the United States, I was able to return as legal resident.

Having legal resident status changed my life. I was now able to get a driver's license, travel freely within the United States, and pursue my career in Engineering. The biggest change I noticed was the fear – I was no longer afraid of being deported and being forcibly separated from my family.

Soon after I came back to the United States it dawned on me that I could now pursue my dream of joining the military and become a paratrooper like the soldiers I saw on “Band of Brothers”. I decided to enlist in the United States Army. I started basic training in February 2011. I wanted to fight for the country that raised me. Saying I love this country wasn’t enough, I would let my actions speak for themselves. In May, shortly before I finished basic training, I became a U.S. citizen. A couple of weeks later, I found myself staring out the door of a C-130 flying over Fort Benning, GA, and I got to jump out of military airplanes like I had dreamed since high school. A few months later I was deployed to Afghanistan.

I looked forward to going to Afghanistan because I wanted to go into combat and protect the United States. Serving in the Army allowed me to contribute more fully to this country and make it safer. I was following in the footsteps of countless other immigrants who have proudly served in the U.S. Armed Forces since the American Revolution. In Afghanistan, I fought side by side with my Army brothers. We wore the same uniform with the U.S. flag on the same shoulder. It mattered more that we were willing to die for each other and for our country than where we came from.

To this day I remember the feelings I felt after our first firefight in Afghanistan. I had put my life on the line for my brothers, for my country and I felt really proud to be an American. I personally felt then for the first time that no one could again question whether I am American. I sometimes wonder why I, as an immigrant, felt like I had to go to that extreme in order to get that feeling. It has been a great honor to serve my country.

Today, our son, Oskar Maximus, is four years old and is in pre-school. Samantha is now 8 years old and in third grade. We live outside of Fort Worth, Texas, where I volunteer at two different high schools in their respective robotics programs. I can say now that we are living the American dream. I still want to continue serving my country and I want to join the Army reserve soon.

My three other team members from the robotics competition many years ago have also continued to pursue their dreams and thanks to DACA, two of them have started their own catering business and one is currently pursuing a computer science degree in Michigan. I think now about all of the doors that were unlocked for me when I gained lawful permanent residence – the ability to get the job of my dreams, provide for my family, and live without fear. I can’t imagine what it would be like to have that taken away from me today and I can’t imagine what it is like today for my three former teammates – and for hundreds of thousands of other DACA recipients – who are afraid that could happen to them in a matter of days. Like me, DACA recipients grew up pledging allegiance to the American flag every day, and they have so much to contribute to the country they love. Of course, DACA is only a temporary solution, and now even that is at risk. Many DACA recipients do not have a path to legal status or a way to become U.S. citizens. DACA is all that’s available to them at this time.

Over the years I have met many great Americans, my parents, my teachers, my JROTC instructors, my wife, my Army brothers all of whom have seen potential in me. Whenever I talk to the students I mentor I always tell them that I have made it this far not because I am exceptional or because I am special. Rather I am where I am today because of the many great people that have believed in me and have given me a chance. That includes the people who reviewed my waiver application, and allowed me to return to the country and rejoin my family. Since becoming a permanent resident, I have worked hard to make the most of that opportunity every day.

I wanted to come here today because we need our country's top law enforcement officer to understand that immigrants make our country stronger and that it's not right to deport someone who was brought here as a child to a country where they may not know the language and may not even remember. It's not right to separate hard-working families. We need an Attorney General who will protect the American people from those who would do us harm, but who also will show mercy to those who deserve it.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.