

## **SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE TESTIMONY: Jose Antonio Vargas**

Thank you Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Grassley, and distinguished members of this Committee.

I come to you as one of our country's 11 million undocumented immigrants, many of us Americans at heart, but without the right papers to show for it. Too often, we're treated as abstractions, faceless and nameless, subjects of debate rather than individuals with families, hopes, fears, and dreams.

I am in America because of the sacrifices of my family. My grandparents legally emigrated from the Philippines to Silicon Valley in the mid-1980s. A few years later, Grandpa Teofilo became a U.S. citizen and legally changed his name to Ted--after Ted Danson in "Cheers." Because grandparents cannot petition for their grandkids--and because my mother could not come to the United States--grandpa saved up money to get his only grandson, me, a passport and green card to come to America. My mother gave me up to give me a better life.

I arrived in Mountain View, Calif. on August 3, 1993. One of my earliest memories was singing the National Anthem as a 6th grader at Crittenden Middle School, believing the song had somehow something to do with me. I thought the first lines were, "Jose, can you see?"

Four years later, I applied for a driver's permit like any 16 year old. That was when I discovered that the green card that my grandpa gave me was fake.

But I wanted to work. I wanted to contribute to a country that is now my home. At age 17, I decided to be a journalist for a seemingly naive reason: if I am not supposed to be in America because I don't have the right kind of papers, what if my name--my byline--was on the paper? How can they say I don't exist if my name is in newspapers and magazines? I thought I could write my way into America.

As I built a successful career as a journalist--paying Social Security and state and federal taxes along the way--as fear and shame, as denial and pain, enveloped me--words became my salvation. I found solace in the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King, quoting St. Augustine: "An unjust law is no law at all."

Ultimately, it took me 12 years to come out as an undocumented American--because that is what I am, an American. But I am grateful to have been able to tell the truth. And in the past few years, more undocumented people, particularly young DREAMers, are coming out. Telling the truth about the America we experience.

We dream of a path to citizenship so we can actively participate in our American democracy.

We dream of not being separated from our families and our loved ones, regardless of sexual orientation, no matter our skill set. This government has deported more than 1.6 million people--fathers and mothers, sons and daughters--in the past four years.

We dream of contributing to the country we call our home.

In 21st century America, diversity is destiny. That I happen to be gay; that I speak Tagalog, my first language, and want to learn Spanish--that does not threaten my love for this country. How interconnected and integrated we are as Americans makes us stronger.

Sitting behind me today is my Filipino-American family--my grandma Leonila, whom I love very much; my Aunt Aida Rivera, who helped raised me; and my Uncle Conrad Salinas, who served, proudly, in the U.S. Navy for 20 years. They're all naturalized American citizens.

I belong in what is called a mixed-status family. I am the only one in my extended family of 25 Americans who is undocumented. When you inaccurately call me "illegal," you're not only dehumanizing me, you're offending them. No human being is illegal.

Also here is my Mountain View High School family--my support network of allies who encouraged and protected me since I was a teenager. After I told my high school principal and school superintendent that I was not planning to go to college because I could not apply for financial aid, Pat Hyland and Rich Fischer secured a private scholarship for me. The scholarship was funded by a man named Jim Strand. I am honored that Pat, Rich and Jim are all here today. Across the country, there are countless other Jim Strands, Pat Hylands, and Rich Fischers of all backgrounds who stand alongside their undocumented neighbors. They don't need to see pieces of paper--a passport or a green card--to treat us as human beings.

This is the truth about immigration in our America.

As this Congress decides on fair, humane reform, let us remember that immigration is not merely about borders. "Immigration is in our blood...part of our founding story," writes Sen. Ted Kennedy, former chairman of this very Committee, in the introduction to President Kennedy's book, "A Nation of Immigrants." Immigration is about our future. Immigration is about all of us.

And before I take your questions, I have a few of my own:  
What do you want to do with me?

What do you want to do with us?

How do you define "American"?

Thank you.