

# **Prepared Testimony of Yazmin Irazoqui Ruiz**

**House Committee on the Judiciary**

**March 6, 2019**

**Washington, DC**

Good morning.

Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Collins and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee - my name is Yazmin Irazoqui Ruiz.

I am a third year medical student at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine. This past Friday, I completed my surgery clerkship. I intend to specialize in women's health and become an OBGYN to do what I can to ensure that all women and girls receive the excellent healthcare that they deserve.

It is my honor to be here to share my story and the stories of young people who benefit from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program and what it is like to live in fear of ICE & CBP.

I want to thank you for holding this necessary hearing.

I will share my story with you as well as my belief that Congress should pass legislation to create permanent protections for immigrants without adding to the pain we face with more detention camps and deportations

Like hundreds of thousands of other immigrant youth, I am a beneficiary of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.

And like most immigrant youth, I come from a mixed-status family. My younger brothers are U.S. citizens, I am a DACA recipient, and my sister is a legal permanent resident.

I moved to the U.S. with my mom and twin sister when my sister and I were three years old. My mom was a doctor in her home country of Mexico, but as a single mother trying to raise two girls she wasn't able to make ends meet and decided to come north to the U.S.

We moved to Phoenix, Arizona where my mother built a loving home for our family. Although we didn't have much in the way of money, my mother made sure that my sister, my brothers and I had what we needed.

In my eyes, my mother, and all immigrant parents who have made great sacrifices and taken risks so that they and their children can thrive, are heroes. They are the original dreamers.

When I was sixteen years old, my world was shaken.

My mother - my hero - suffered a stroke and we feared that she wouldn't make it. I remember the overwhelming fear I felt at the thought of losing my mom. I remember worrying and wondering how we could keep a roof over our heads in addition to paying the medical bills which were beginning to pile up.

It was this experience that led me to pursue a career in medicine. I dreamt of providing dignified, culturally competent medical care to women like my mother. Medical care that wasn't dependent on where you came from or your immigration status or the accent you had, but that was based on the basic human right to lead and live a healthy life.

I am so happy to say that my mother recovered and is at home right now watching me testify before you today. Te quiero, mama.

I have shared my mother's experience with you because it was during this time that my twin sister and I learned of our immigration status.

In what felt like the blink of an eye, our biggest concerns went from student government and grades to living the burden of wondering whether our mother would survive and whether ICE agents would tear our family apart.

My mother's distrust of Maricopa Police under then Sheriff Joe Arpaio and his tent cities right in the middle of the city all made sense now. It seemed as if everyone we knew, knew someone who was taken by either Arpaio or ICE.

During this time, my mother, my sister and I approached an attorney for legal advice and I will never forget his words that day. He said: "In this country, you are no one and in this country you do not exist. You will never be able to attend college."

I remember my throat tightening as I choked back tears while trying to process his words. My young mind could not wrap itself around them. I had done everything right, everything I was supposed to do. My grades, my extracurricular achievements, all of the hard work, my mother's sacrifices didn't matter because this man was telling me that individuals without documentation simply did not matter and couldn't attend college.

We didn't know how we would survive but we did.

Immigrant families are strong, resilient and dig deep to persevere. We made the decision to leave Arpaio's Arizona and move to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where my mom could concentrate on recovering and not have to worry about Joe Arpaio anymore.

This was before DACA and while we knew that ICE still posed a threat we went about making friends at our new school and trying our best to get good grades.

College was coming and even though we did well in school and won scholarships, we couldn't take advantage of them.

The New Mexico State University or anywhere south of the Border Patrol checkpoints was out because it was too dangerous - and any out-of-state scholarships were out because we were undocumented.

I eventually attended and earned my Bachelor's degree from the University of New Mexico and because immigrant youth fought to be protected, the DACA program was created in 2012 and I qualified.

After that, life changed for me and many immigrant youth. I had access to different jobs, I could move freely in the U.S. and I could breathe a sigh of relief.

And unlike Dream Act legislation of years past - academic achievement was not a qualification for DACA.

Because even though I sit here today as a medical student and as someone who is proud of her accomplishments; I come from a community of resilient and strong mechanics, construction workers, teachers, home care workers, cosmetologists, moms, dads and people from all walks of life who call this nation our home.

And core to DACA is the idea that immigrant youth should be protected without hurting other immigrants. Without building more detention camps, hiring more deportation agents or ripping apart any more families.

So when Donald Trump moved into the White House, I was once again terrified.

Like Arpaio, he had been very vocal about his plans to go after families like mine. His plans to kill DACA and in his words, create a “deportation force” to deport us.

Then he actually killed DACA and my mental health was shot. Everywhere around me, I saw people confused and scared about what would happen next.

Here I was once again, having worked hard and made it to medical school and was facing the reality of having the opportunity to become a physician being pulled out from under me.

I took a leave of absence from medical school to join together with other immigrant young people of the New Mexico Dream Team and United We Dream to see what I could do to help.

We brought counseling into schools because children were terrified, fearful that their parents would be taken away by Trump and CBP and ICE.

We did research on the mental health of immigrant youth who we knew were encountering tremendous pressure at this time. With the support of the University of New Mexico’s Transdisciplinary Research, Equity and Engagement Center for Advancing Behavioral Health (TREE Center), we found that the trauma of migrating and of life with the constant fear of deportation, as well as the lack of access to healthcare have seriously impacted the wellbeing of undocumented youth and their families. I remember one young woman telling me that she went to go see a counselor and the counselor started crying because her story was so traumatic.

We went to the Cibola ICE Detention Center - which is run by the Core Civic Corporation - to uncover the mistreatment of trans women and queer men who reported being abused by the guards.

And the tents and cages where immigrant children are being held in detention along the border bring back memories of Arpaio’s tent cities that had us shaken to our core.

We brought attention to the ICE agents who camped out at the courthouse waiting for undocumented people to come pay tickets.

And everywhere, employers forcing their workers to labor without pay or women unable to report their abusers because of the looming threat to call ICE.

I know what life would be like without DACA because I see it every day.

I am well on my way to becoming a physician and I know that young people with DACA have started careers, have bought homes, have started families and here we were facing all of that being taken away.

Young people with DACA have lived here our entire lives, immigrants with TPS have lived here for ten, twenty years and this is our home.

I know that some policymakers believe that young people with DACA should be protected for a price. They call for more immigration enforcement which would put my mother in danger in exchange for my safety.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I come before you today as the product of my community. So protecting me in exchange for increased danger for my community is not a protection at all.

I come to ask that you pass legislation to provide for permanent protection and a pathway to citizenship.

And I ask that you not use my plight as a DACA recipient who could become vulnerable to ICE and CBP as leverage to increase the power of those enforcement agencies.

I ask you to draw strength from your own immigrant ancestors to lead the nation today as others are working so hard to divide us.

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