

**Testimony of Jin Park**  
**House Committee on the Judiciary - Protecting Dreamers and TPS Recipients**  
**March 6, 2019**

Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Collins, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify before the committee today.

My name is Jin Park. I am 23 years old and the son of two loving and hardworking parents—my father, a line cook at a restaurant, and my mother, a beauty salon worker. I am a recent graduate of Harvard University where I majored in biology and minored in migration studies. I loved Cambridge, but I am a New Yorker at heart.

I am also a DACA recipient. In 1997, the year after I was born in South Korea, a financial crisis hit east Asia and the economy cratered. My parents eventually made the wrenching decision to leave behind the only home they had ever known in search of a better life for our family. That is how, at the age of 7, I ended up on a plane bound for a strange land called Flushing, Queens.

My first day of school went poorly, mainly because I spoke essentially no English and nobody recognized that. The only words I knew were “Where is the bathroom?” and “I don’t speak English,” both of which my mother had taught me, as well as “Home Alone,” which I had picked up from the subtitled movie I watched on the plane ride over. When my teacher directed a question to me, she might as well have been speaking gibberish. Scared and unable to remember my mother’s lessons, I grasped for the only other English words at my disposal and not-too-helpfully responded: “Home Alone.” Fortunately, after I repeated that a few times, my teacher realized the problem and quickly got me into an English as a Second Language course.

After several months, I learned enough English to join regular classes and quickly slipped into the life of a normal, New York City public school kid. I spent most of my time after school with friends and playing pickup basketball at courts in my neighborhood. When my dad learned that baseball was an all-American pastime, he started taking me out to play on the sidewalk in front of our apartment complex. He was a little fuzzy on the rules and his pitching left something to be desired, but he was determined that his son would not miss out on this American rite of passage.

Our life felt normal to me, even though I was always aware on some level that I was different. My parents always warned me not to talk about where I was born and to be careful never to misbehave, particularly around police. I knew I should avoid busy streets, where immigrations raids often took place. But, like any kid, I was more preoccupied by things like the latest NBA standings and not able to grasp such a weighty concept as citizenship and what it meant not to have it.

I would learn eventually. Years later, when I was about 15, I went to a hospital to sign up as a volunteer. After a few minutes, the administrator who interviewed me came back and said she was sorry, but they did not allow “illegal aliens.” Embarrassed and confused about how to respond, I just mumbled an apology, walked outside, and cried. What did she mean I was an alien? I felt dehumanized, hurt, and ashamed, as if I had done something wrong, even though I

had only tried to volunteer at a hospital. This is what my parents had tried to warn me about, but there is simply no way to prepare a kid for something like that.

The hurt of that experience stayed with me until one afternoon in the summer of 2012, when President Obama stood in the Rose Garden and announced a new policy that would allow undocumented immigrants brought here as children to obtain a temporary reprieve from deportation. I remember clearly the mixture of relief and growing excitement as I listened to his speech and realized he was talking about kids like me.

For five years after that moment, the gnawing, ever-present uncertainty that comes from being undocumented faded. For five years, I could experience some things that teenagers born here take for granted – picturing my long-term future and having the assurance that I would be able to go to college, to work, and to support my family.

I began studying at Harvard in 2014. Before I left for school, I had many conversations with friends who are also undocumented and were unsure about how to apply to college or whether they even could. In 2015, I launched a nonprofit called Higher Dreams dedicated to educating teachers and guidance counselors about how to advise undocumented students about applying for college. We also provide a forum for undocumented students to network with one another and share advice about navigating the world of higher education, a place where we often feel that we do not belong. During my time at Harvard, I also participated in a program that helps prepare immigrants for their naturalization exam.

In 2017, at the start of my senior year, DACA's future was thrown into question. That was a scary moment for me – I was forced to grapple anew with the fact that there was a very real possibility that I might be forced to pack up and leave my home. But, I determined that would not derail my goals. I applied for a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford even though, as a DACA recipient, I was technically ineligible. The course of study I proposed would merge my two academic paths—biology and migration—to understand immigrants' lives through an ethnographic approach to design effective policy interventions to improve immigrant health, starting in my own community in Flushing.

My goal in applying was also to start a conversation – to try to get the Rhodes Trust to rethink what it means to belong to a country and to show the contributions people can make regardless of their citizenship status. As expected, I did not initially receive the scholarship, but the conversation I started had an impact – the Rhodes Trust changed its policy the following year and allowed DACA beneficiaries to apply. So I tried again. This time I was accepted, becoming the first DACA recipient to win the Rhodes Scholarship.

It took a while for the news to sink in. Once it did, I was overwhelmed with unspeakable gratitude to my parents, my community, and my country – the United States of America. The honor felt as much a recognition and validation of my parents' sacrifices as it was of my own achievements. Although a Rhodes Scholarship is awarded to a specific person, behind every recipient is a sea of people who supported that person along the way – my parents chief among them in my case. I know that I will spend the rest of my life trying to live up to this opportunity and make good on the faith they have shown in me.

But as of this moment, there is a major obstacle between me and the Rhodes Scholarship. When DACA was halted in 2017, the guidance that allowed DACA recipients to get advance permission to leave the country to study, work, or visit elderly family members was also terminated. That permission is called Advance Parole. No court ruling has reinstated that guidance. This means that if I leave the country to pursue my studies at Oxford, I will forfeit my DACA and there will be no guarantee that I can return home to the United States. I first learned about this only after receiving the Rhodes Scholarship. That fact drove home for me the perpetual reality of being undocumented: no matter how hard I work or what I achieve, I never know if I have a place in America, my home.

I am supposed to leave for Oxford in October – roughly 7 months from now – but I feel caught in an impossible position. How can I leave knowing I might not be able to come back to my home, my family, my friends, and the life I have built here for the past 16 years? How can I conduct my fieldwork at home in Flushing and use the knowledge I will gain through this scholarship to improve healthcare in the United States if I cannot even return?

How many others have found themselves at a similar crossroads, faced with an impossibly difficult choice? We know some of their stories. I ask each member of this Committee to consider the following – if you had to choose between leaving your home, knowing that you likely could never return, and visiting your dying father abroad, what would you choose? That was the situation that Mayra Garibo, a DACA recipient studying at California State University, faced. She was unable to visit her father in Mexico before he died. Or imagine being faced with your own imminent mortality and being forced to choose between receiving palliative hospice care in your home, the U.S., and the opportunity to say goodbye to your parents before you passed. That was the choice that Angel Martinez, a DACA recipient diagnosed with terminal leukemia, had to make, as his parents had been deported to Mexico. Leaving DACA in limbo is inflicting unnecessary pain and suffering and hardship right now. It will only get worse if Congress does not act to provide permanent protection for DACA recipients.

No matter what I decide to do, being named a Rhodes Scholar is an honor I will spend the rest of my life trying to live up to. The scholarship offers me an extraordinary opportunity, but it does not make me any more extraordinary or deserving than other Dreamers. Like many Dreamers, and like the generations of immigrants who preceded us, my family came to this country seeking a better life, and because my parents desperately wanted to give me opportunities for a life they never had. Like all Dreamers, the United States is my home. For many of us, it is the only one we can really remember. Like all Dreamers, I am an American in every way that matters – except for a piece of paper.

I am overwhelmed by the responsibility I have been given today to address the very people who have the power to ensure that Dreamers truly have a place in America. I hope my testimony helps show the need for quick action to permit Dreamers to fulfill their potential and contribute to American society.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer the committee's questions.