

Testimony of Yatta Kiazolu
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Ph.D. Candidate 2019

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House Judiciary Committee Hearing on Protecting Dreamers and TPS Recipients

My name is Yatta Kiazolu. I am a twenty-eight-year-old sixth year Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at the University of California, Los Angeles with plans to graduate by Fall 2019. I arrived in the United States at JFK airport from Botswana as a six-year-old in September of 1997, almost twenty-two years ago.

The termination of Deferred Enforced Departure, or DED, for Liberians in 25 days means that I will soon be asked to self-deport to Liberia--a country that I have only visited once as a toddler, and in which I have never lived.

I am here today because of the love and labor of my mother, grandmother, and aunties who are all working class Black immigrant women who have protected me and offered me space to imagine, dream and to be the woman that I am today.

I am inspired by these women to build power in my community. I am here for all the working class immigrants on DED, TPS, and are DREAM eligible, whose dreams are no different from any of us. From the Nepalese salon workers to the Haitian hospitality workers and to Liberian nurse aides around the country. I am here for all young people like me who want an opportunity to thrive and live their fullest lives.

MY STORY

I was born in December 1990 and raised in Botswana by Liberian national parents. While I have always maintained Liberian nationality, obtaining documentation from the Liberian government at the time of my birth to reflect my nationality was incredibly difficult because the country was engulfed in the first half of the civil war.

At the time of my birth, my father worked as a professor of agriculture at the University of Botswana for the United Nations. My mother was a stay-at-home parent and would later work as a teacher at a local school. We had no other family in the country.

At the height of the first half of Liberia's civil war, in the early 1990s, my mother and I came briefly to Georgia, in the United States. In addition to the danger she would have faced if she returned to Liberia, my father was physically abusive to her. She wanted to escape both the intimate violence she was facing in her marriage as well as escape the horrors of the war. Ultimately my father manipulated my mother into returning to Botswana so that they could reconcile and keep the family together.

We rejoined my father in Botswana where he did not keep his promise, and the abuse continued. By 1997, there was a second civil war in Liberia. My father got a job in Liberia, and my mother was determined to protect me from the turmoil there. She feared for my physical safety, and so she sent me to the United States to be with my grandmother in Georgia.

My mother followed shortly after me on what was supposed to be a temporary visit. The plan was for my father to make arrangements for us to settle in Liberia when it was safe at the end of the school year, but no such arrangements were ever made, and conditions in Liberia only got worse.

Most of my mother's siblings and my grandmother had relocated to the United States because of the civil war. Together, my mother and I lived with my aunt, uncle, three cousins and grandmother in a crowded three bedroom apartment in Decatur, Georgia. The love and support of our family members made an incredible impact on our ability to transition, heal, and begin our new lives in the U.S.

Slowly, life began to take a turn for the better. My mother met and fell in love with my amazing stepfather who has helped raise me since I was eight years old.

They were both beneficiaries of Temporary Protected Status (TPS). I remained undocumented until I started high school and then also became a recipient of TPS in 2002. When TPS for Liberia ended in 2007, President George W. Bush immediately granted Deferred Enforced Departure (DED). I was able to attain this DED status and until recently DED has continuously been renewed. These immigration relief programs allowed me to obtain a driver's license when I turned 16, just like my peers and, later, allowed me to get my first job.

However, the inability to obtain permanent residency meant that I could not access financial aid to attend college nor pay in-state tuition despite graduating at an in-state school high school with honors; a reality I was completely unaware of until my senior year. Through the kindness, generosity, and sacrifice of my U.S. citizen aunt, I obtained private student loans that helped me transition from Delaware Technical Community College to Delaware State University, where I graduated magna cum laude in 2012.

Since gaining TPS, I have not been eligible to apply for permanent residency, despite many attempts made by my parents including applying for the Diversity Lottery and family sponsorship. Though my grandmother became a U.S. citizen and applied for my mother, she passed away as we waited for over 10 years for a visa number to become available. I also aged out as a derivative beneficiary when I turned 21. My stepfather, who has also since become a U.S. citizen, applied for me in 2016; however, there is a 7 plus year waiting period. It is also noteworthy that I am unable to obtain an F-1 international student visa because I lack the strong ties to my home country necessary under current U.S. visa policy.

As the March 31, 2019 termination of DED approaches, my life remains in limbo. I have ahead of me opportunities that are unmatched and the termination has already begun to negatively impact my academic and professional development. Recently, there was an extensive delay on the part of USCIS to renew my work authorization for the final six

months and I received my work authorization only in February 2019, a month before it expires.

If DED ends in 25 days, it will certainly interrupt my education by making it difficult to finish the research and writing necessary to graduate in 2019. The termination will stunt my professional development by separating me from my academic and professional network and resources. Additionally, my finances, particularly student loans (and U.S. citizen co-signer), will be negatively impacted because I will be unable to continue repayment due to my inability to work. I need stability. This lack of a secure future has taken a tremendous toll on my mental and emotional well-being such that I have had to seek professional support from a therapist due to increased anxiety, panic attacks, and acute stress about my future.

For the last 22 years in the United States, with some immigration relief in place, though challenging, I have been able to maintain a somewhat stable and healthy life. However, throughout my early adolescent to adult years, I have met social milestones along with my peers. The ability to attend college and complete a Bachelor's degree allowed space for me to discover my passion for history and higher education. I have always been an active participant in campus life by creating and leading student organizations. I joined the public service sorority, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and completed college internships at the offices of (now) Governor John Carney and U.S. Senator Christopher Coons.

DED made it possible for me to leave the United States in 2012, through Advanced Parole, for the first time since my arrival, to travel to South Africa in order to participate in the University of California's Office of the President and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) initiative. This program exposed me to graduate education and is the reason I decided to pursue my doctorate in history at UCLA. On campus, I have been a strong advocate of student support, led numerous diversity and inclusion initiatives, and worked as a teaching assistant for undergraduate courses. In my local community, I work to support student access to higher education through tutoring and working as an adjunct instructor.

It is my greatest appeal that Congress create a permanent path to citizenship for us. I have worked so hard to get here, and my family and community have supported me throughout my educational career. My dream is to complete my Ph.D this year and begin my career in higher education as a university professor. I am incredibly passionate about teaching history, public history programming, and student mentorship. Through various roles in the classroom over the last five years, I have been invested in the academic and personal achievement of 200+ students, especially those who are historically underrepresented in higher education. As a product of dedicated advocates and mentors, I want to be able to give back, especially to students who have access resources kept away from them.

On behalf of other TPS and DED holders from Nepal to Haiti to Liberia, I appeal to Congress to create a permanent path to citizenship for us.