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SEEING THE INVISIBLE | A yearlong look at NC poverty

Full of courage, smarts, yet facing empty future

By Gene Nichol

April 27, 2013

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Marco Cervantes 19, an undocumented Mexican immigrant who has lived in North Carolina since he was 2 years old, drives a moped in Chapel Hill. Cervantes drives a scooter because it does not require a drivers license.

TRAVIS LONG — tlong@newsobserver.com [Buy Photo](#)

- THE SERIES

On the last Sunday of each month this year, UNC Professor Gene Nichol will examine the faces and issues behind the rising poverty numbers in North Carolina. Read the other installments at newsobserver.com/ncpoverty

Each year, thousands of undocumented North Carolina immigrants are effectively excluded from our higher education system. In the process, they're relegated to a regime of low-wage jobs and an expanding circle of poverty. As a result, colleges and universities abandon a central, empowering core of their missions. And the state forgoes much-needed potential economic contribution. We lose all the way round. What follows is one example.

Marco Cervantes is 19. His family came to the United States when he was a baby. He has lived in and around Carrboro since he was 2. He has five siblings. His youngest brother, born at UNC Hospitals, is a U.S. citizen. Marco and the rest of his family are undocumented.

Marco attended pre-K in Carrboro and then elementary and middle schools in Chapel Hill – moving from apartment to apartment. Through middle school he felt like a normal kid, he said. "I had a lot of friends."

He tried soccer, football. He developed an attachment to youth boxing through an on-campus program at UNC-CH. But he liked science and mathematics more. "I knew even when I was young I wanted to be an engineer," he said. "I love to build things."

Not only did he like math and science, he was good at them. Teachers asked him to join the AVID program: Advancement Via Individual Determination. AVID is a school-supported national effort aimed at “closing the achievement gap by preparing all students for college readiness.”

“Since I did well in math,” Marco explained, “I was put in the same level as the better students. I was the only Hispanic in the class. That was true in many of my classes. It motivated me to do my best. I had a few bumps in the road. But I made good grades and my parents were real supportive.”

A heartbreaking loss of friends

Freshman year at Chapel Hill High School was more of the same – a broadened circle of friends, heavy participation in AVID. But sophomore year, when hoping to sign up for driver’s education with his friends, Marco learned his parents were undocumented.

When he couldn’t apply for driver’s ed, everybody knew, he said. “Since I was the only one who couldn’t drive, I no longer got invited places.” His group of friends changed dramatically, which Marcos found “heartbreaking.”

The next fall, the chasm widened. At Chapel Hill High, everyone around him was obsessed with college – including many who hadn’t taken their classes as seriously, or performed as successfully, as Marco. His counselor explained, though, that because he wasn’t documented, he would be forced to pay out-of-state tuition and be ineligible for financial aid. Marco’s youngest brother could qualify for resident rates, as could a senior he met who had just moved to Chapel Hill from Virginia, but Marco, who had lived here his whole life, could not.

Unwilling to give up, Marco applied and was accepted at Elon and N.C. A&T. Elon’s tuition, though, was through the roof. A&T informed him that without documentation, he would be required to pay nonresident rates – over \$27,000 a year for room and board. So, despite his dreams, hard work and years of AVID training, Marco Cervantes began busing tables in a local restaurant as his friends went off to college.

There he remains.

‘Sacrificed everything for us’

Marco didn’t accept his cascade of exclusions as a passive observer. Late in high school, he joined the Immigrant Youth Forum, seeking change.

“At first we just supported each other, but eventually we started coming out and speaking for ourselves,” he said. He realized he’d been expected to feel ashamed of himself and his family.

“The place where I lived my whole life, and had given everything, and tried to be a good kid, said it wanted to kick me out,” he said, adding that his parents are heroes, not someone to blame. “They sacrificed everything for us. Everything.”

When Marco began speaking out, in front of the Post Office on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill, it was really scary, he said. Larger rallies in Raleigh were worse. Being detained and deported would be devastating. In any meaningful sense, he has never even been to Mexico. It has been too dangerous to visit his aunts and grandparents.

Marco has applied for the president’s deferred-action program, but he knows there are risks. Still, he decided he wasn’t willing to live in fear, wanting to give encouragement to others in the same situation, which is why he insisted on using his real name in this piece.

Such courage shouldn’t be demanded of one so young.

Sadly, Marco has learned to face other realities as well. Along with his colleagues of the N.C. Dream Team, he advocates tuition equity – which has been achieved in about a dozen states under local Dream Acts. The bills would treat him like the kids he grew up with. To that end, he attended his first committee hearing at the General Assembly last year. It was replete with castigations against Latino immigrants.

Pull down the Statue of Liberty

lthough Marco didn't speak, as the session ended, several anti-immigration activists approached him. They spewed: "Get out. Can't you see we don't want you here? Go back home. Now."

"I got scared," he remembered. "I thought they were going to throw us out. They were extremely hateful and threatening. I was just sitting there. I thought older people would at least have some manners."

Apparently not.

I have three daughters. They also grew up in Orange County. They, and their mother, are to me the four most precious and perfect beings on the planet. But they are no more deserving of the full opportunities and promise of American life than Marco Cervantes.

My daughters' parents are no more admirable or worthy, and we certainly aren't as heroic as Marco's parents. If we won't give these "Dreamers" a chance, we ought to pull down the Statue of Liberty – and repeal the equal protection clause.

A quarter century ago, the Supreme Court ruled that we can't accept "the specter of a permanent caste of undocumented resident aliens, encouraged by some to stay here as a source of cheap labor, but denied the benefits our society makes available to legal residents."

But accept it we do. Every day.

Gene Nichol is Boyd Tinsley distinguished professor at the UNC School of Law and director of the school's Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity

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