

DACA dream leads to Notre Dame for young adult

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



Catholic Charities special section

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When he was 3, Agustin Sanjuan Castellano was brought to the United States. He doesn't remember anything about his birth country, Argentina.

"All of my memories are from the United States," he said.

He grew up never knowing he was different from his classmates in one vital way: Sanjuan had overstayed his visa, unknowingly becoming one of the thousands of undocumented students in Arkansas languishing with uncertain futures.

Sanjuan first learned he was undocumented when he was 13. He remembers students talking about going to high school and learning to drive and he went home and spoke to his parents. They told him he wouldn't be able to get a driver's license because he didn't have immigration status in the U.S.

Although his parents wanted him to have the better education and opportunity the U.S. offered, Sanjuan found many doors were shut to him. Sanjuan wanted to go to college, but he knew he wouldn't qualify for in-state tuition or government grants. He knew he could only go to college if he earned academic scholarships. He was interested in math and science and in 2008 he entered the sixth grade at Lisa Academy, a charter school in Little Rock.

On June 15, 2012, Sanjuan remembers his parents calling him to watch President Barack

Obama's announcement on television about immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children. Obama described an administrative program called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA, which was intended to allow some young people to remain in the U.S. provided that they meet certain criteria. In order to qualify, applicants must be at least 15 years old when they apply but not older than 30 as of the date of the announcement; be in school, have graduated from high school or obtained a GED; came to the United States prior to age 16; have been continuously residing in the U.S. since at least June 15, 2007; and must pass a criminal background check. The announcement gave Sanjuan hope.

"I felt like this was a fresh new opportunity for me," he said. "A new world had suddenly opened up all of a sudden and there were so many possibilities for me. People don't understand how difficult it is when you can't just get a job and a driver's license like everyone else. This was an opportunity for me to be on a level playing field."

As soon as Sanjuan turned 15, he contacted Catholic Immigration Services in Little Rock. Immigration specialist Dolores Requena was assigned to his case. Sanjuan applied for the first time in October 2012.

"I was excited but also nervous," he said. "I didn't know what to expect, and I knew that I had to go to be fingerprinted by immigration and I was scared that they might deny my case even though I qualified."

On Dec. 26, 2012 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services notified Sanjuan he had been approved for DACA and for a two-year work permit.

"I was so relieved. I was happy," he said. "I went out right away and applied for a job and started working."

Sanjuan was less nervous when it came time to renew his DACA in August 2014. The renewal process was simpler and his application was approved in November. He waited for his work permit to arrive, but it never did. He contacted USCIS through its customer service line but was told that the Post Office had the card. He contacted the Post Office using the tracking number provided, but they told him the card had been returned to USCIS. Then to make matters worse, USCIS claimed it never received the returned work permit and he would have to submit another application and pay the \$465 fee again, all for an error that was not his fault.

Maricella Garcia, an attorney and director of Catholic Immigration Services Little Rock, then intervened on Sanjuan's behalf through the USCIS Ombudsman's office. Within two weeks of receiving the inquiry, USCIS mailed the work permit to Sanjuan.

When Garcia notified Sanjuan's parents that the card had been resent, his mother cried. "Thank God," she said, "I was so worried that something was wrong with his case. God bless you for the help you gave us."

With his new work permit, Sanjuan is preparing to move forward to achieve the dream he once thought out of reach: college. Graduating from Lisa Academy in May with a 3.96 grade point average, Sanjuan was accepted to the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. He received a full four-year scholarship. He plans to study mechanical engineering and return to Arkansas once he graduates.

"First I plan to come back to work and get experience," he said. "Then later on hopefully, I'll

be able to travel to other needy countries where I can help out. That's the plan ... for now."