



Redefining American

Professor *William Perez* hopes to shed light on what it means to grow up undocumented in the United States.

BY KIKI BOCHI

William Perez was doing volunteer work, speaking before a group of high school students in hopes of inspiring them to apply to college and continue their education. The challenges these kids faced were not unfamiliar. As an immigrant whose parents never had a chance to even go to elementary school, Perez had achieved admirably. He had gone to college, earned a doctorate at Stanford University, and was now a college professor himself.

Perez must have hit a chord with his audience, because a number of the students

stayed after his presentation to talk to him. "I don't have papers," some confessed. "What about me? Can I go to college too?" Each time he made the presentation, there were kids, afterwards, who asked the same questions. And it broke his heart.

An estimated 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school in the U.S. each year and find the road to college blocked. These are the students who would benefit from the stalled DREAM Act, which would make higher education and service in the military accessible to undocumented children schooled in the U.S. Today, these undocumented students participate in protest marches, carrying signs and wearing T-shirts that clearly identify them. But four years ago, when Perez was making his rounds speaking to high school seniors, we was surprised at how little, statistically, was known about these kids.

Perez, who specializes in education and immigrants, set out to do some research by interviewing some 200 Latino students throughout the country. The result is his recently published book, *We ARE Americans: Undocumented Youth Pursuing the American Dream* (Stylus, \$22.50). The timing of book's publication adds new dimension to the debate on comprehensive immigration reform, which is heating up again in Washington, DC.

“There are more than 3 million undocumented children and young adults in this country who not only face obstacles to get to college, but who live in constant fear of deportation,” says Perez, who is on the faculty at Claremont Graduate University in California. “For most, the U.S. is the only country they know. They were brought here by their parents, some when they were just a few months old. They have grown up American and their dominant language is English. Yet they face major obstacles in their pursuit of higher education even [when they have] remarkable academic qualifications.”

Perez’s goal was to put faces on the statistics he calls “a social tragedy.” Faces like that of Sasha, one of the students featured in his book, who was told by a teacher in third grade that she would never get an A because she was “a dirty Mexican.” Instead of deterring her, it increased Sasha’s determination to succeed.

Each chapter of the book examines the personal story of a different student—16 in all. But there is one story not in the book: Perez’s own. He, too, arrived in the U.S. as an undocumented child, smuggled past the San Ysidro checkpoint stuffed in the trunk of a car with his sister and grandfather. They were coming to join his parents, who fled the civil war in El Salvador years earlier and settled illegally near San Diego in hopes of building a future for their children. His parents struggled for years, but eventually the family gained legal residency, and both he and his sister were able to go to college and earn degrees.

“My life would have been very different if we had not had a path to legal documentation,” he says. “I am a testament to how life-changing gaining legal status can be.”

Perez says he did not include his own story because he took a more academic approach to the research. In fact, a second book that looks primarily at statistical breakdowns from his interviews is slated for publication later this year by Harvard University Press, he says.

Already, *We ARE Americans* has been favorably received in academic circles. It was selected as a starred pick of the week by *Publishers Weekly*. And for his work, Perez has received the Mildred García Award for Exemplary Scholarship from the Association for the Study of Higher Education. Meanwhile, he is seeking to publish a Spanish edition of *We ARE Americans*, in hopes of inspiring others.

Perez says even he was surprised and awed by the students he met. Despite having to deal with difficult financial and family situations, the undocumented students exhibited patterns of academic achievement, leadership and civic engagement that were often above those of their U.S.-citizen peers. More than 90 percent reported volunteering in addition to holding down part-time jobs while pursuing their studies. Perez says they were passionate about contributing to their communities as a response to feeling marginalized. “It gives them a sense of belonging,” he explains. “It helps create that connection to American society that they can’t get officially.”

Perez points out that denying the students an education does not just punish



them for their parents’ action. By limiting their future, it also robs the country of the potential contributions of fresh, energetic and dedicated members of society. Everybody loses.

“Whereas the United States has sought to be a champion of human rights throughout the world, when it comes to undocumented youth living among us, we have forsaken this policy of humanity,” Perez concludes.

“Undocumented immigrants take care of our children, our elderly, and our sick. They grow and harvest crops and staff the meatpacking and poultry-processing industries,” Perez writes. “They build our roads, our schools, and our hospitals. It is time to reform immigration laws and give dignity to the millions of hardworking Americans-in-waiting and their children, recognizing that they are, in many respects, already good citizens of the United States.”

Voices of Youth

THE UNDOCUMENTED HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS PROFILED BY PEREZ CANDIDLY SHARE THEIR PERSPECTIVES:

“Where I live, most of the kids give up. They give up on their education. I don’t want to think that is something that is impossible for me.” —Penelope

“It’s almost like I am tied down to the ground with a ball and chain because I don’t have citizenship.” —Jaime

“It’s like someone giving you a car, but not putting any gas in it.” —Jerónimo

“I want a chance to work in an office with air conditioning rather than in the fields under the hot sun.” —Lilia

