

# STUDENT ROUNDS

## Dreaming for Change

UPSTATE DACA STUDENT JESSICA ASTUDILLO '21 HOPES TO COMPLETE HER RESIDENCY TRAINING IN THE UNITED STATES

While many view the November election as the most important of their lifetime, the stakes are higher for some than others, including the estimated 699,350 “Dreamers” whose status in the United States is dependent on protection from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

One of those is fourth-year medical student Jessica Astudillo '21, who came to the United States from Ecuador at age two. She is currently applying for residencies in pediatrics and would love to someday deliver unbiased care for patients in her home community in Queens, where she was raised. For now, the ability to achieve that goal is a gamble. Astudillo's current work permit, which is what allows her to work as resident in the United States, will expire at the end of her second year of residency. Whether she is allowed to renew her DACA status, whether she is deported, or whether there is a path to citizenship in place by then is in the hand of politicians.

Astudillo is one of approximately 200 undocumented students and residents who are receiving their education and training at U.S. medical schools and hospitals. The last four years have been particularly tumultuous with repeated legal assaults to the status of non-citizens in the United States.

Growing up, Astudillo says she was oblivious of her tenuous status in the United States until, as a middle school student, she gained admission to the prestigious Townsend Harris High School. “My guidance counselor asked for my social security number,” she recalls. “I asked my mom for it and she got very nervous. I didn't understand why I didn't have one.”

By age 16, when Astudillo couldn't apply for a driver's license or working

papers, she had a better understanding of what being undocumented meant. To her friends, she feigned disinterest. At the same time, with no memories of Ecuador, she viewed herself as a typical American teenager, one who dreamed of becoming a doctor some day.

She got one step closer when she was granted a full-merit scholarship to the Macaulay Honors College at the City University of New York. A year later, the DACA program was introduced to protect young adults brought to the United States illegally as children.

Astudillo says she was initially nervous about applying for the program, fearful that perhaps “outing” herself as undocumented could cause more harm than good. She consulted an immigration attorney who assisted with her initial application. Despite her trepidation, Astudillo says receiving her DACA paperwork was “life changing.”

“I could start volunteering at the hospital to get medical exposure. I got my first job. I got my driver's permit, opened up my first bank account,” she says. “It was all these little things that were really, really meaningful.”

Astudillo became involved with an organization called Pre-Health Dreamers,



Fourth-year medical student Jessica Astudillo wants to train as a pediatrician and hopes to return to her home community in Queens to treat immigrant patients.

which provided information for attending medical school undocumented and with DACA status, and hosted conferences where students interested in health professions could connect with each other and receive mentorship.

She was halfway through her first year of medical school at Upstate when President Donald Trump took office and began issuing a series of executive orders related to immigration enforcement. While many of her classmates were outraged, Astudillo was terrified. “I had worked so hard and gone through so many loopholes to get here,” she says. “It was just very frustrating to think



**“My guidance counselor asked for my social security number. I asked my mom for it and she got very nervous. I didn’t understand why I didn’t have one.”**

— Jessica Astudillo '21

that I might not be able to finish.”

But she wasn’t alone. Shortly after President Trump’s initial immigration orders, Dean Julie White reached out to Astudillo to offer support and reassurance. Although she didn’t know who they were, Astudillo became aware there were other students at Upstate with DACA status.

In September 2017, the Trump Administration announced it was

ending the DACA program and rescinding the status of people enrolled in it, meaning thousands of young people across the country could face deportation. Concerned about how the policy change might impact affected students, Upstate created a faculty task force led by Robert Roger Lebel, MD, to advise students on financial aid sources (since they are ineligible for federal student aid) and legal resources.

“Because Syracuse is within 100 miles of the border, there’s more of a border patrol and ICE presence here than in other areas,” she says. “Dr. Lebel offered us a phone number and told us, ‘If you

ever find yourself in a situation where you don’t know what to do, we’re ready to jump in for you.’ It was great having that kind of reassurance.”

Emboldened, Astudillo got involved with FWD.Us, an immigration advocacy organization, traveling to Washington, DC, twice to meet with representatives of Congress. “For the first time, I told the truth about my story,” she says. “Years of self-doubt and hiding were cast aside to give a voice to advocacy. This experience taught me the importance of enacting change at a much broader policy level.”

On the Upstate campus, Astudillo was active with the Center for Community Engagement’s Medical Education for Diverse Students (MEDS) Program, which gives underserved students from local high schools exposure to medical education. “It was something I would have loved to have done when I was in high school,” she says.

After volunteering as a mentor each session as a first-year student, Astudillo became a Service Learning Leader and helped run the program in her second year, attracting nearly 50 students from Henninger and Fowler high schools. “We tried to make it as interactive as possible,” she says. Topics included anatomy (brain, cardiovascular and gastrointestinal), CPR, suturing, tourniquet usage, public health, and vital signs. The program culminated with a graduation. “It was a great experience, both for the students and for me,” she says.

Astudillo is also a member of the Latino Medical Student Association, which hosted a regional conference in February 2019. She led a session on human anatomy, guiding interested pre-medical students through a case in the Upstate anatomy lab.

In June, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of DACA, blocking the Trump administration’s plan to dismantle the program. At present, no new applications are accepted and renewals have been shortened to one year.

Now confident that she will complete her medical education and achieve her goal of becoming a doctor, Astudillo has no choice but to be hopeful that she’ll have the opportunity to complete her residency as well. “If I’m unable to renew my DACA status, my options will be limited,” she says. Not every hospital has the ability to sponsor a visa. If deported, she faces a 10-year ban before she can legally re-enter the United States.

Regardless of her professional status, there is no current path for Astudillo to become a United States citizen, other than through marriage. Like others in her position, she’s hoping a change in leadership may bring about permanent legislation, such as the DREAM Act.

“We can be your classmates, your friends, your teachers, your doctors,” Astudillo says of those that share her limbo status. “There’s so many of us all over the country working in different roles and most of us have never considered the U.S. anything but our home.” ■