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Doing it all: How a DACA recipient balances friends, family, status and the transition to college

By SERGIO MARTÍNEZ-BELTRÁN Standard-Examiner Aug 26, 2018



Carolina Rodriguez watches children on the playground at Boys & Girls Club at New Bridge School in Ogden on July 3, 2018. Rodriguez, 18, is one of nearly 9,000 DACA recipients in Utah. DACA, or the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals program, grants legal residency to some undocumented immigrants who were brought into the country as children. Rodriguez was born in Mexico and came to the United States as a preschooler.

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WEBER COUNTY — It's the day before the Ben Lomond High School graduation and the seniors are excited about their big day. Some of them are talking about what they are going to wear, others talk about their hairstyles for tomorrow. And, of course, there are those who talk about the party happening after the ceremony at the school.

Carolina Rodriguez, 18, walks into the arts classroom. She is holding a supermarket plastic bag. From afar, one can see plastic roses popping out of it.

It's Monday and she is not the only one in the classroom — it's loud and everyone is trying to figure out how to make their caps cooler. She lays the bag on the table and starts sharing with her friends what she plans to do with the flowers and the glitter.

"It's going to say 'Gracias mamá y papá'," Carolina tells her group of friends, who are also figuring out how to glue photos and other items on their caps.

The flowers are red and white with green leaves, the colors of the Mexican flag.

"I went to school, graduated, everything that I am is because of them (her parents)," Carolina says. "So, if anyone deserves a thanks, it's them."



Carolina Rodriguez greets her family before the start of her high school commencement ceremony at Weber State University's Dee Events Center on May 22, 2018. Rodriguez decorated her mortarboard to thank her parents and honor her heritage with flowers in the color of the Mexican flag.

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She is looking forward to graduation day. She says she is nervous about walking on stage. Her smile, however, is so big that saying she is excited is an understatement.

After all, she has done a lot in order to graduate: she spent countless hours as a student government officer and as a member of Latinos in Action, she had concurrent enrollment credits and also an academic endorsement.

She is aware of the importance of this event — she wants to show the community that a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipient is doing it all.

Carolina is a recipient of the program implemented during President Barack Obama's administration. The program allows young people, like Carolina, who were brought into the country illegally as children, to stay in the United States.

The Standard-Examiner followed Carolina from April to August to document how a DACA recipient prepares to go to college, the uncertainty of what will happen next, how they view the current immigration system and, at the end of the day, the many similarities they share with others who were born in the country.

Because of safety concerns, Carolina's place of residence, her parents or family members will not be identified.



Carolina Rodriguez keeps a snapshot from her fourth birthday party which was also her first day in the United States. Rodriguez was snuck across the Mexico-United State border on her birthday in 2003. Immediately after arriving in the U.S., Rodriguez and her mother briefly lived with her aunt in California before they moved to Utah.

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‘My name was Kenji’

Carolina said she remembers exactly how she came to the U.S.

“Two white ladies helped me cross the border,” Carolina said in Spanglish. “They said I was their granddaughter, they changed my name and they said my name was Kenji.”

Carolina said she remembers telling the immigration agents that her name was not Kenji, but Carolina. She also remembers telling them her mother stayed at the hotel packing up.

In reality, her mother had already made the trek from Mexico to the U.S. with another group a couple of days prior. Nonetheless, the agents let them go, and Carolina was able to celebrate her birthday with her mom — she turned four years old the day she crossed the California-Mexico border.

Carolina's dad was already in Utah, and after a couple of days in California, Carolina and her mom were able to meet her dad.

"We got there and I remember my dad was (at work) cooking and we just got there from the back door and ... we showed up and he was very excited," Carolina said. "So were we."

Besides seeing her dad, her other favorite thing of that day was the rolled wafers her dad gave her.

"That was the first food I had over there and I remember it was the greatest thing I've ever tried," Carolina said. "I was obsessed with it for years ... that's all I wanted, that's all I ate."



Carolina Rodriguez prepares students for a game at Boys & Girls Club at New Bridge School in Ogden on July 3. Rodriguez says she doesn't see herself as being passionate about kids. However, she also says she loves her job at the Boys & Girls Club, volunteers with Big Brothers, Big Sisters, hopes to be a pediatrician and is extremely close with her younger siblings.

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Carolina started going to school, and she said her parents always made sure she knew what she could tell others and what she couldn't. When people asked if she was from another country, she would tell them she was born in the U.S.

Carolina's immigration is not unique.

As of September 2017, there were 689,800 DACA recipients in the U.S. In Utah, there are about 8,900, according to numbers made public by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Carolina has dealt with being an outcast multiple times in her life, especially during her years in elementary, junior high and part of high school.

She said she grew up being the only brown student in many of the schools she attended.

During her sophomore year, things turned ugly when some of her classmates started gossiping that she was undocumented.

They also made jokes about other immigrants.

"They would say jokes like 'What color did the Mexican not have in UNO? A green card!'," Carolina said. "They would say 's---' like that and I didn't even say anything about it. My cousin pointed that out and I was like, 'you know, that's messed up' ... I don't know how I just sat there."

Carolina moved from Weber High School to Ben Lomond High School in her junior year, and that's when she became more comfortable speaking out.

"I've never in my life have gone to a school with people who spoke Spanish," Carolina said. "I came to Ben Lomond and I was me, I started being really proud from where I came from."



Carolina Rodriguez chats with classmates on one of her last days at Ben Lomond High School on May 21, 2018. Rodriguez struggled for two years at Weber High School before transferring to Ben Lomond where she excelled and took on school leadership roles. Rodriguez attributes much of the change to the fact that she was welcomed and supported by the large Latino community at Ben Lomond.

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Latina and educated

The day of her graduation arrives and hundreds of graduates are starting to find their way into the Dee Events Center for the ceremony. It's a little past 6:30 p.m., about 30 minutes before the ceremony is scheduled to start.

Carolina's family is already sitting down. They have a Mexican flag and they — cousins, parents, aunts and uncles, siblings — are all smiles. They are ready to see her graduate.

Her mom is the one making sure there's enough seats saved for the rest of the family. Some of them are running a little bit late.

Down in the arena, in one of the tunnels, Carolina is discussing with her friend Juan Espinoza what they'll do when they get on stage to get their diploma. They make some dance moves and laugh.

"I'm so proud," her mom says. "I think all the sacrifices have been worth it and we hope she'll continue and graduate from the university. We are going to work hard so she can become a pediatrician."

After about 15 minutes, the duo hasn't decided yet, but they start walking to their seats. Carolina will be seated on the stage, along with her peers from the student government.

"Kenji!" a family member shouts.

"Caro!" another family member screams.

Carolina looks around and waves to her family with the same big smile as when she was decorating her graduation cap. At the end of the night, she will be a high school graduate ready to go to Weber State University with the goal to become a doctor.



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Carolina Rodriguez laughs with classmates as they prepare to enter Weber State University's Dee Events Center during high school graduation on May 22. "I came to Ben Lomond and I was me," said Rodriguez. "I started being really proud from where I came from." Rodriguez is the first person in her family to graduate from high school.

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Eventually Carolina walks across the stage and gets her diploma and becomes the first one in her family to graduate from high school. Her family is waiting for her outside of the building and it starts raining. They stay put — they are waiting for Carolina to come out.

Carolina wants to be a doctor, but that might not happen. She wants it to happen, but she sometimes doubts she'll be able to make it.

Carolina had some family members that had conditions when they were little kids, and she said seeing the parents suffer has motivated her to help these young folks get better.

She has heard from advisors at the university that she might not be able to get licensed as a doctor in the U.S. That might not be completely true — there have been DACA recipients who have started their residencies in medicine in the country. According to an article published in May on Yahoo, Diana Andino became the first and only DACA recipient to start a residence in neurology.

But that's also part of her story — the confusion of being a DACA recipient.

When President Donald Trump was a candidate, he campaigned on rescinding DACA. In September 2017, 10 months after being elected, he fulfilled that campaign promise.

Dorany Rodriguez-Baltazar is an immigration lawyer based in Salt Lake City. She has met with Carolina and her mom to talk about her case. Rodriguez-Baltazar said immigration lawyers across the country were waiting for a judge to rule on whether Homeland Security needed to process new DACA applications.



Carolina Rodriguez meets with Apollo Burgamy from Big Brothers, Big Sisters at Weber State University on July 16, 2018. As part of the Weber State University Student Association, Rodriguez will be the on-campus organizer for Big Brothers, Big Sisters. The volunteer position is time-intensive, but comes with \$550 in assistance to cover costs at Weber State. It is part of a collection of grants and scholarships that Rodriguez is relying on to pay for school.

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On Aug. 17, U.S. District Judge John Bates ruled the government doesn't need to accept new DACA applications, but asked the government to keep processing the renewals.

As a DACA recipient, Carolina can do pretty much everything except qualify for federal financial aid or travel outside the country.

Rodriguez-Baltazar said that DACA recipients are supposed to renew their applications every two years. According to USCIS, requests for renewal need to be submitted between 150 days and 120 days before the expiration date.

"Many people, because they don't know what's going to happen next, have opted to submit their application before the 150 days," Rodriguez-Baltazar said.

She has advised Carolina and other young folks like her to be proactive and renew their DACA. She also wants them to speak out.

“Share your successes, and share with others how DACA has helped,” Rodriguez-Baltazar said in Spanish. “And they need to stay in school.”

Besides that, what can Carolina do to fix her legal status?

The easy answer? She can either get married or join the military.

“When they tell me things like that, I know that those are the only two options but, I still kind of got my hopes up a little bit because I really haven’t done anything wrong,” Carolina said. “I could possibly get married and then everything changes (but) I don’t want to get married. I’m too young, I have too much to do to waste my time on that.”

The Standard-Examiner talked to Carolina multiple times about the risks of her sharing her story. Although she sometimes hesitated, she said she is not ashamed of being undocumented.

She wants others to feel confidence and be hopeful that things for them will get better.

“I’m doing literally the things DACA was made for. I’m doing good and I’m going to school,” Carolina said. “No one can tell me that I’m not working hard, that I’m not doing my best because at the end of the day, when I’m successful and rich, those people will be miserable.”



Carolina Rodriguez makes shaved ice at Detours, a rental shop and snack bar in Huntsville, on July 13, 2018. Rodriguez regularly worked more than 12 hours a day at two jobs throughout the summer in order to save up for college. As an undocumented immigrant, Rodriguez is ineligible for federal financial aid.

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Doing it all

In March, at a Utah County Republican Women event, U.S. Senate candidate Mitt Romney spoke about his stance on immigration, and the future of DACA recipients.

According to a story published in the Daily Herald, Romney said that DACA recipients “need to do more” to justify permanent residency. His campaign tweeted later that day the candidate’s certification paperwork that clarifies his stance.

“The Party Platform appears, to some extent, to conflict with the immigration provisions proposed by the Trump administration and with which I agree. Specifically, I believe the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) individuals should be given legal status. I do not believe, however, that they should have a special pathway to citizenship,” the document

reads. “I support the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and believe the best way to fix birthright citizenship abuses, and retain the Constitution’s provision, is to end chain migration.”

But his words are not that different from what some think about these young people.

Carolina said she has seen people on social media saying that people like her should go back to their countries, and they claim that immigrants — including DACA recipients — are taking jobs.

“They are just lazy, finding a job is not that hard,” Carolina said of those criticizing DACA recipients.

In order to qualify for DACA, candidates needed to be under 31 years old as of June 15, 2012, and they had to come to the U.S. before they turned 16 years old, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Additionally, those who request DACA need to be enrolled in school, or graduate from high school or have obtained a GED certificate, and they can’t be convicted of a felony.

Carolina meets all of those criteria — she hasn’t committed a crime, has already attained her high school diploma and will start college in mid-August. She is also working.

During the summer, Carolina worked six days a week because of her two part-time jobs.



Carolina Rodriguez helps students with a science project at Boys & Girls Club at New Bridge School in Ogden on July 3, 2018. Rodriguez wants to continue working with the Boys & Girls Club after she starts at Weber State University in the fall.

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One of her jobs was with the Boys and Girls Club in Ogden School District where she served as a student leader.

For that job, she had to be at work at 7:30 a.m. to greet the students. She played with them in the mornings before taking them to STEM courses and other activities.

“I’m strict, obviously,” Carolina said. “Like that Mexican mom is coming out.”

Yes, she is strict, but her students seemed to adore her because she would meet them at their level and play with them. They seemed to trust her.

And then there’s her second job at a canoe and kayak rental store in the Ogden Valley where she worked from 2:30 to 8:30 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday.

She did it all during the summer: worked in the mornings at the elementary school and in the afternoon at the rentals store.

She said she loves to be involved in the community and she needs the money, so she is taking advantage of every opportunity she can in order to pay for her degree — that's why she joined the student association at Weber State University and is involved with the university's chapter of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America.

"I've been a little nervous about it because I haven't had a lot of time to catch up and being up to date with all the stuff I'm supposed to be doing 'cause I've been working literally all day," Carolina said one day while at Weber State University. "It's been really hard and I've been getting a little nervous now because it's a lot."

When the semester starts at Weber State University on Tuesday, Aug. 27, she will also be a mentor and an organizer for Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. That is also a commitment — she has two weekly meetings plus classes.

This mentorship program will pay her \$550 per semester. The rest of the gains will be in the form of skills.

She is considering keeping the job at the Boys and Girls Club and the one with Big Brothers Big Sisters of America.

Thanks to advisers at Weber State University and the Mexican Embassy, Carolina now has about \$6,000 in scholarships to pay for her education.

Monica Rodriguez is a multicultural retention counselor at Weber State University. Her role is to help undocumented students navigate the complexities of college.

"A lot of DACA students come with a lot of questions about higher education, wanting to know if they have an opportunity in higher education," Monica Rodriguez said. "They want to confirm they are college-bound material."

She acknowledged that many of these students have been neglected by classmates who have made them believe they do not have a future in the U.S.

"Can someone undocumented attend higher education?" Monica Rodriguez asked. "The answer is 'Yes!'"



Carolina Rodriguez, left, hangs out around the bonfire with friends from high school, including Catherine Sanchez, right, at her rural Weber County home on Aug. 7. While she was busy with work and preparations for Weber State, Rodriguez spent most of her free time over the summer with friends on camping trips, attending concerts and getting together for weekly bonfires.

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S'mores, friends

and a boy

On a Tuesday morning a couple of weeks before the semester starts in August at Weber State University, Carolina is talking about her plans for the day.

She is looking forward to hosting her friends for a bonfire at her home in rural Weber County. There is another important thing happening that night: a boy — she never says his name — is also coming to her house and meeting her parents.

Carolina is like any other 18-year-old girl: she has hopes, dreams and sometimes an occasional curse word slips. She likes to take photos, and she used to like drawing. Now, she is into concerts.

...

It's about 8:30 p.m. and Carolina's friends start to show up.

They are making s'mores and drinking juice. They chat about TV shows and laugh. Her siblings are also part of this bonfire.

Her dad is at work and her mom is inside the house making chicken, potatoes and vegetables. There, her mom shares her thoughts about Carolina's future, their immigration status and the rhetoric in the U.S. that many times is unwelcoming to immigrants, especially Latinos.



Carolina Rodriguez leaves Weber State University after meeting with advisors on July 16. Rodriguez has always dreamed of being a doctor and plans to start on that track with her first class at Weber State on Aug. 28. However, her future remains uncertain as the status of the DACA program is debated by politicians and challenged in the courts.

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“Everyone in this world has the right to travel to wherever is necessary — if it was not to the U.S., it would have been China, or England, or Panama — to survive,” she says in Spanish. “We came to find food, to do what’s best for the family. We emigrate to the U.S. just like everyone else.”

She sometimes worries for Carolina, but she is also aware that as a family, they want to support her as she vocalizes her journey, experience and her hopes and dreams on a larger scale.

“She is decent, studious, a good girl that deserves to study, that deserves to fulfill her dreams,” she says. “We as parents, and as a society and as a government, need to support Carolina and others like her.”

Outside, Carolina is not thinking about the government. She is talking to her friends, about six of them, and having a good time.

Music is playing in the background and they seem happy. Some of them are talking about moving away for college. Carolina is staying at her home and commuting to Weber State University.

One of her friends is moving south.

It’s getting late and a bit chilly.

The night will end soon and Carolina will soon start college.

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