

BY DIANE DIETZ

DREAM CHASER

Hugo Nicolas could find his life derailed if DACA fails

Meet Hugo Nicolas. He wants you to know him. He needs you to know him.

The Eugene man will meet you in a coffee shop, look you in the eyes and tell you all about his life, his attitudes, his hopes and his fears.

Whenever newspaper reporters call, he answers.

Nicolas has been in *The Register-Guard*, the *News-Register*, *The Oregonian*, *The Statesman Journal*, *The Daily Emerald*, the *Keizertimes*, *The Catholic Sentinel* — and on most TV stations in the state.

In September, Democratic Sen. Jeff Merkley told the 25-year-old's story from the floor of the U.S. Senate. Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum placed Nicolas' story in a court file, *State Of New York v. Donald Trump*, a case trying to uphold protection against deportation for about 800,000 young people.

Nicolas tells his story as if his life depends on it, and in some way it does.

If he cannot win over the U.S. body politic, if Congress does not preserve the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, come September Nicolas will lose his job at Key Bank, his ability for future work for on-the-table wages, his apartment in the Whiteaker neighborhood, his driver's license, his bank account, his ability to start a business or take out a loan — in short, to participate overall in the economic life of the country he calls home.

"Every day Trump wakes up and says, 'Oh I love the (DACA) Dreamers,' and the next day he says, 'We're going to send them all back' — and then 'I do love them,'" Nicolas said.

"I don't know what to believe anymore."

Nicolas learned to tell his story as a boy growing up in Veracruz, a Gulf Coast state in Mexico.

He joined in. He became a police cadet and a fire explorer. He joined the Junior ROTC and wore a uniform once a week. He participated in the American Legion's Boys State and was elected mayor. He became the youth representative on the Keizer City Council. He was McNary High School graduation speaker in 2011.

Surely, anyone could see: "I could be as American as anyone else," he says. "I believed at that time — if I did really good in school and got involved in my community — that they would make an exception for me."

The first time Nicolas exposed himself as an undocumented immigrant, it was a rash teenage act born of frustration.

The high school student was at the Oregon Capitol trying to explain to a panel of lawmakers how the requirement — then in force — of paying out-of-state tuition at state universities killed college plans for undocumented youth brought to the U.S. as children.

Nicolas knew from previous turns at the microphone that he wouldn't get through to lawmakers.



HUGO NICOLAS

Nicolas tried to make his case for remaining.

"I remember somebody saying that they didn't want to allow people to dream something that could never be," Nicolas remembers.

Two days later the city of Salem made Nicolas its "youth of the year" in recognition of his contributions to the community.

"He has a strong desire to make something of himself and create a better environment for everybody," former Salem Mayor Anna Peterson said recently.

Nicolas is used to whiplash.

While Keizer rejects him, Salem applauds him. While the Trump administration throws DACA protections in doubt, Oregon lawmakers introduce Senate Bill 1563, which would allow Nicolas and other DACA recipients to continue paying in-state tuition at the state's public colleges and universities — even if DACA is moot — if passed in the current legislative session.

Nicolas applied for DACA in August 2012 on the first day it was available; his family sold its car to pay the associated fees. With the new status he got a work permit and the ability to live without fear of deportation.

Oregon's 2013 tuition equity law meant he could pay in-state tuition, which put attendance at the UO within reach. An anonymous benefactor, a prominent Republican, helped pay for his first years in school.

Nicolas soon became one of 25 undergraduate students named each year as Wayne Morse Scholars, who meet regularly, do service projects, attend presentations, do internships, take field trips and attend special classes, says Dan Tichenor, director of the Program for Democratic Engagement and Governance. "He loved it. He dove right in."

Nicolas helped pay for college with bank jobs. He wears a short, sharp haircut with suit and tie. He has erased the traces of his Spanish accent because, he said, that's better in the world of finance.

He'd like to go to law school and become a corporate attorney.

He's not unlike the 120 DACA-qualified students at the UO, the estimated 15,000 in Oregon and the 1.5 million in the country. They have to have kept their noses clean because a criminal conviction would disqualify them. They have to be working or going to school to qualify.

Where will he go if he gets deported? Not Veracruz, a Mexican state with a high murder rate. Drug cartels there dismember their victims. In January, five heads were left on a taxi hood. Canada, maybe, would be the place?

Nicolas isn't sure.

But he doesn't seem angry.

Nicolas does sound tired when he says: "Honestly, I'd just like to have a normal life. ■"

'I thought someone would be waiting there to arrest me. I gave it a week before someone would come knock on the door and be, like, "We're immigration and we're looking for Hugo and his parents."'

— HUGO NICOLAS

He had the kind of grandparents who would sit and listen to all he had to say.

When Nicolas was 11, his mother told the boy and his two younger siblings that they would travel to the U.S. to join their father, who was a migrant farmworker. The sugar cane harvest in Veracruz could not support them anymore.

His grandmother gave him a rosary to keep him safe. He didn't understand why the adults were sad and worried. He saw the journey as an adventure and fodder for his stories.

"I wanted to come back and tell my grandparents everything that I learn and everything I see," he said.

He would never see his grandfather again.

Nicolas soon found himself in a fifth-grade classroom in Keizer. "The teacher said something and everyone waved at me, but I don't know what she said," he remembers.

In school, Nicolas kept his undocumented status secret. For one thing, being public felt like a terrible risk. Anybody could be deported. For another, "I felt like people would have different expectations of me or see me differently — or wouldn't want to be my friends."

He knew he was giving lawmakers the wrong impression: that his remarks were theoretical.

So, finally, he had to say it: I am undocumented; tuition at the University of Oregon would be three times the norm for me. "This cost is the only thing keeping me from chasing my dream," he said that day.

He left the hearing room, crossed the marble floor beneath the soaring rotunda, through the leaden spinning doors, out to the Capitol steps, where he panicked.

"I thought someone would be waiting there to arrest me," he remembers. "I gave it a week before someone would come knock on the door and be, like, 'We're immigration and we're looking for Hugo and his parents.' My parents were extremely concerned."

The city newspaper carried his remarks in a front-page story.

That tipped off the Keizer City Council that Nicolas was undocumented and the council reacted by passing a law to, in effect, require citizenship as a qualification for the youth councilor position.