

Statement of Sergeant Oscar Vazquez
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“Immigrant Enlistment: A Force Multiplier for the U.S.
Armed Forces”
United States Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Defense

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Phoenix Military Academy
145 S. Campbell Ave.
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Chairman Durbin, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee. My name is Sergeant Oscar Vazquez. I was 12 years old when my mother and I boarded a bus from our village in Mexico to the border. Although I did not make the choice to come to America, this country quickly became my home.

Ever since I saw the “Band of Brothers” miniseries, I knew I wanted to join the Army. At Carl Hayden High School, I joined JROTC. I loved the order and discipline and was eventually awarded the JROTC Officer of the Year. I thought this would be the beginning of a career in the military. But when I met with a recruiter, I was told that I couldn’t enlist because I was undocumented. I left that meeting not knowing what to do or what was next. Knowing you can’t do something because of a piece of paper or lack thereof is devastating.

I knew I had to figure out what else I could do with my life. Joining the robotics club opened new doors for me. Working with three of my fellow classmates and under the supervision of two dedicated teachers, we entered the Marine Advanced Technology Education Center's Remotely Operated Vehicle Competition. Even though we were high school students, we decided to enter the college level competition because if we lost, at least it would be against a university and not another high school.

I spent my senior year working with my team to design and build our underwater robot, Stinky. That summer, we traveled to Santa Barbara, California for the competition. It was incredible to see other underwater robots and teams from MIT and some of the best universities in the world. Beyond our wildest dreams, four undocumented kids from Arizona won the awards for Design Elegance, Technical Report, and the grand prize for Overall Winner of the competition.

Winning the underwater robotics competition was proof that we as Dreamers had something to offer the country we always considered to be our home. Although I could not contribute to my country by joining the military, I decided I could contribute by becoming an engineer. I fell in love with Arizona State University during a middle school field trip, but attending ASU came with its own challenges. In 2006, the Arizona Legislature passed a law prohibiting undocumented students from receiving in-state financial aid. Even though Arizona had been my home for many years, I wasn’t allowed to pay in-state tuition. When this new law went into effect, my tuition tripled. Through private scholarships and working construction, I scraped the money together to pay for college and support my family. Despite how difficult it was, I never gave up on the idea of getting a degree, and at graduation it paid off.

In 2009, I was one of three students introduced as an outstanding graduate during graduation, sitting only feet away from President Obama. But afterwards, I didn’t know what the future held. I had a degree in mechanical engineering, but no one would hire me in this field without legal status. I didn’t want to be stuck in a low-end job and not be able to apply my degree to its full potential to contribute to my country and support my family.

In the end, my wife and I decided that I should go back to Mexico – a country I left as a child – and apply to re-enter the United States legally. Even though my wife, Karla, and daughter, Samantha, are U.S. citizens, the law said that I was barred from coming back to the United States for ten years. My wife and I knew it wouldn't be easy, but we wanted to do this while my daughter was still young.

It was frustrating to be away from my family and not be able to see my daughter grow up. Every few weeks, when my wife had a few days off, Karla would bring Samantha and make the three-hour drive to visit me. When they first started visiting, my daughter didn't recognize me after not seeing me for so long. It is heartbreaking as a parent for your child to not know who you are.

I applied for a waiver of the ten-year bar so I could come back home, but the government denied the request. They said that we hadn't documented enough hardship for my wife and daughter due to my absence. I would have to wait another year for the government to evaluate my appeal. But thanks to Senator Durbin, the Department of Homeland Security took another look at my case and granted my waiver. Three-hundred and sixty one days after I left the United States, I was able to return as legal resident.

Soon after I came back to the United States in August 2010, I decided to pursue my first dream and enlist in the United States Army. I started basic training in February 2011. I wanted to fight for the country that raised me, I wanted to prove my allegiance by my actions. In May, shortly before I finished one station unit training, I became a U.S. citizen. A couple of months later, I was deployed to Afghanistan with the 4th Brigade Combat Team of the 25th Infantry Division. Serving in the Army fulfilled my dream of going to airborne school and jumping out of planes like they did in "Band of Brothers."

It has been a great honor to serve my country. I looked forward to going to Afghanistan because I wanted to go into combat and protect the United States. Serving in the Army allowed me to contribute more fully to this country and make it safer.

Today, I am stationed at the Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska. I am a cavalry scout with the 1st Squadron, 40th Cavalry Regiment, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division. Our two year old son, Oskar Maximus, was born the day after I returned home for R&R from Afghanistan. Samantha is now five years old and loves kindergarten. Although we have grown to love Alaska, we are looking forward to coming back home to Arizona this summer, where I will apply what I learned at ASU and the Army to continue my career in mechanical engineering.

Over the years, I have met many Dreamers who also want to join the military and serve the country that they love. I sincerely hope that one day they will be able to follow in my footsteps and enlist. I believe my story is just one example of what Dreamers can do if they are given the chance to come out of the shadows and give back to our country.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.