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Unafraid and Unapologetic, Still

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Alyshia Gálvez, with Luis Saavedra, Melissa García Vélez, and Marlen Fernández
Still Unafraid and Unapologetic

Three cofounders of the Lehman College DREAM Team in New York City discuss the past, present, and future of undocumented youth organizing in the Trump era.

Luis Saavedra, Melissa García Vélez, and Marlen Fernández were among the cofounders of the Lehman College DREAM Team, the first official group organized by and specifically for undocumented students at the City University of New York (CUNY). From their first semester on campus, until they graduated in 2014, Luis, Melissa, and Marlen worked tirelessly on campus, around the city, regionally, and at the federal level, demanding better services for undocumented students at the college and throughout the CUNY system, while also helping college and high school students mobilize on their own campuses. They engaged with national activist groups and debates, and remained centrally involved in the New York State Youth Leadership Council (NYSYLC), an organization Melissa had joined between high school and college. The three students consider themselves part of the “undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic” movement, and, along with many other undocumented youth, they “came out of the shadows” to declare their immigration status as they became active in the immigrant youth organizing movement.

In recent years, they have been on the frontlines in key moments of immigration activism: Melissa was in the Senate chambers in Washington, D.C., when in 2010, the federal DREAM Act failed to receive enough votes to pass. Shortly afterwards, Marlen and Luis participated in a 150-mile walk, from New York City to the state capitol Albany, on behalf of the New York State DREAM Act. Although both the federal and statewide efforts ultimately failed, President Barack Obama’s signing of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) executive order granted work authorization, driver’s licenses, and protection from deportation to some of those who came to the U.S. as children. Today, hope for continued protection hangs in the balance under the Trump administration.

To be sure, the Obama presidency was hardly a paradise for undocumented youth activists. Some immigrant rights groups referred to Barack Obama as “Deporter-in-Chief,” because his administration deported more people than any other previous sitting president. But the transition from Obama to Trump was bitter for many immigration activists for whom things can perhaps be seen as going from bad to worse. In this interview, Alyshia Gálvez, the founding faculty advisor with the Lehman DREAM team, discusses with Melissa, Marlen, and Luis, the

state of the immigrant rights movement in the U.S. in the current moment of anxiety and uncertainty—and the challenges and successes youth organizers have faced since they first met seven years ago.

Alyshia Gálvez (AG): Just a few years ago, it seemed that some kind of immigration reform was inevitable. What is your sense of the outlook today for immigration reform?

Luis Saavedra (LS): Much like the Trump White House’s wishful deconstruction of the “administrative state,” immigration reform is dead on arrival.

Marlen Fernández (MF): It is now a long-lost dream. Under this administration, and the effects that this administration will leave behind as part of its legacy, undocumented people will never be able to have immigration relief that will put them on the path to citizenship. If things were to change in the next 20 to 50 years, immigration relief would be too late for many working families who have already been here for over 20 years and are now growing old. Many of their children will also be middle-aged adults.

Melissa García Veléz (MGV): Our immigrant communities are in a decisive moment. We can either stay with the hopes that immigration reform is going to come out of the “goodness” of our current politicians—or continue the radical work that undocumented immigrants have cultivated to push beyond temporary forms of relief to achieve full citizenship.

AG: What shape could immigration reform take today, if it is at all feasible?

LS: At the federal level, draconian deportation policies are a product of the discourse and dialogue of immigration reform. Enforcement and militarization of the border have been presented as a sound policy precursor to any pathway to citizenship. Yet time and again, it has led to programs such as Secure Communities [a federal policy that relies on the partnership of local law enforcement and ICE to identify and detain undocumented immigrants for potential deportation] and strict vetting of immigrants; and of course, the deportation of millions.

MGV: Immigration reform has to be something that goes beyond citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the U.S. It has to include a shift in how we tell the history and herstory of this nation. It has to include wide, deep, and truthful conversations about capitalism, racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, Islamophobia, and U.S. imperialism, about how the policies of this nation have contributed to the current refugee crisis, about the push and pull factors that force migration. It must include conversations and action steps regarding how we are going to end mass incarceration and abolish the prison-industrial complex. It has to re-imagine a world without borders and a new criminal justice system. It has to challenge all of us to envision and work towards that world.

If we don't challenge ourselves, our communities, our leaders, and our politicians to include these elements when we speak about immigration, we will find ourselves with the same issues ten years from now. Immigration reform to me now is not just about acquiring a certificate of citizenship, it is about how we are going to, collectively and radically, change this violent, inhumane system that has been destroying communities across the world. It is about how are going to end the cruel separation of families, and how are we going to continue to envision, believe in, and achieve a world where each person can have access to all basic needs. We see every day that having U.S. citizenship does not always guarantee justice, a roof over your head, or a meal on your table. Thus, we have to continue pushing the envelope in terms of what a real, humane, and dignified immigration reform looks like in this country—and how can it be made to serve as a model for other countries. Immigration reform to me looks like a true, radical liberation of all our people, unafraid and unapologetic.

MF: If there were to be some type of relief during this administration, those who have DACA would be the first in the line of undocumented folks to qualify and benefit. Such measures will continue to divide the undocumented community into “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrants, while at the same time deporting many innocent people and fueling the separation of families. One aspect that remains clear is that undocumented immigrants will not be offered a path to citizenship. Rather, at most we have a weak promise to not end the DACA program. Undocumented people will always be wanted for their labor but never to fully integrate into

American society, and to benefit from the public goods that they pay into, such as health insurance, social security, and other benefits.

LS: The deconstruction of the “administrative deportation regime” starts at the local level. The New York State Youth Leadership Council (NYSYLC) has beautifully highlighted that community networks allow for self-agency and empowerment. A self-agency that led to dreaming of state financial assistance, healthcare, work authorization, and state identification for undocumented students—the New York State DREAM Act, in essence. The road to immigration reform at the federal level must start with the enshrinement of the needs of the undocumented community within local and state institutions. What does that mean? It means non-compliance with Secure Communities, state financial aid for undocumented students, driver’s licenses for all, etc. Communities must be protected by local structures that make it inhospitable for deportation and enforcement policies on arrival.

Alyshia: I was always impressed by the willingness of many undocumented youth activists to advocate for the entire community, not just themselves, the “DREAMers.” Where do you think this came from? Do you think it’s a broadly shared sentiment?

MGV: Well, it was not always that way. I remember back in 2010, when I first joined the movement, I was 17 years old. The main talking points were about advocating for us, the DREAMers, and saying things like “we were brought here through no fault of our own” or “we want to give to the only country we know.” When the DREAM Act failed to pass in the Senate, we were all distraught, but it was in that moment that the shift occurred. For many of us, it was the realization that we were combating a system that cared very little or not at all about us, and was rather using us and taking advantage of these talking points to further create the “good” vs. “bad” immigrant rhetoric by deepening the criminalization of our parents, of community members who did not fit the “good American student” image, and who otherwise represented a “threat” to the American way of being.

When this new model became more concrete, a shift in organizing tactics came about and so did a change in talking points and demands. From the hunger strikes and civil disobedience to the “Bring Them Home” campaigns [in 2014, people who had been deported arrived at border

inspection points to ask for return and sometimes asylum with support of activists], and infiltration of detention centers, undocumented youth were no longer asking for rights only for “DREAMers;” we were demanding—and rightfully so—dignity and rights for *all* immigrants. And yet we were attacked by other community members, leaders, lawyers, professors and politicians, who felt we were taking away from all the “progress” that was being made. But progress for whom? The truth is that those actions, led by undocumented immigrants, are what emboldened other people to come out of the shadows, not just for them but for their entire communities. It’s what pushed the Obama administration to sign the executive order that is known as DACA.

This system and its leaders do not genuinely care about any of us, not even if you have a 4.0 GPA and a clean record; you are still a threat in the eyes of this country. Many of us understood that our liberation is deeply interconnected to the liberation of our parents and other community members. We cannot ask for a pathway towards citizenship just for DREAMers anymore. Today, there is no compromise. We’ve compromised enough, and one of its results has been the deportation of more than three million people under the Obama administration, and now the continuation by this so-called president.

LS: In organizing for the federal DREAM Act, undocumented youth employed narratives of the “DREAMer” and “good immigrant” to counter xenophobic and nativist criminalization of undocumented youth. Oftentimes, it led to justifying a pathway to citizenship at the expense of our parents—the principal actors responsible for the predicament of the DREAMer—or so it was said. After all, the parents had brought the DREAMers to the U.S. without their consent—this was a common talking point for Members of Congress. In painting ourselves as ideal 4.0 GPA, exceptional students and aspiring soldiers, we, as DREAMers, assisted in the continuing marginalization of single working mothers, farmworkers, laborers, etc. Our lived experience was that of an average American kid. Yet despite that, the DREAM Act failed in Congress.

MF: The undocumented youth and/or DREAMer community is divided. There are some who share this vision of advocating for everyone while there are others who believe in the political strategy that advocates for DREAMers first and then everyone else. With the failure of the DREAM Act in 2010, a sentiment in pushing for DREAMers first was left aside. It seemed that

bringing everyone out of the shadows might have made the issue more pressing and urgent. We promoted the idea that anyone you know could be undocumented as an attempt to humanize the issue. Furthermore, highlighting other narratives allowed for the industries that are powered by the labor of undocumented folks to be exposed. This revealed further complexities to the issues of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. These efforts may have made the issue of immigration more visible to a broader audience.

There is also a key part in bringing justice to the parents who in most cases have been in the shadows for over ten years. The frustrations of seeing our parents' limited opportunities and the hardships imposed by their status also pushed us to attempt to get some type of relief for them as well. Parents, also seeing their children going out and advocating, were and are inspired to advocate for change alongside their children. I have seen my mother get active. Parents are making food, participating in workshops, sharing their family stories, and marching alongside their children. Undocumented youth attempted to push the message that our parents are just as worthy and needing of immigration reform as we are.

LS: Out of the defeat of the DREAM Act came a powerful realization that our efforts to present and identify ourselves as American would not be accepted by the state apparatus. It was now time to own up to being “undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic.” The grassroots organizing and collective empowerment of the fight for the DREAM Act helped to educate us that our value comes from our communities. We must uplift and celebrate each other. This means advocating for the needs of the entire undocumented community.

AG: What do you think about DACA and its impact?

MF: DACA has provided many youth an opportunity to work and use their college degrees. However, DACA recipients are living in a bubble. They are in a way liberated from the many struggles they faced as completely undocumented people. However, they are also barred from fully entering American society. They are living a unique experience where they are expected to be exceptional Americans and contribute to the economy without questioning if they will receive anything in return. DACA has also caused a new division within the undocumented community.

Youth who do not qualify are left out and are more than often blocked out of resources that have become exclusive to DACA beneficiaries.

LS: DACA is the product of being “undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic.” Rather than appealing to the good hearts of Congress and the American public at large, undocumented youth forcefully, through civil disobedience and the amplification of marginal voices, demanded the right to exist, of being respected. That is what DACA means to me.

MGV: I have mixed feelings about DACA because it has permitted me to do so much—to work as a mentor, as a Board of Immigration Appeals representative, as a teaching artist, and most importantly, it allowed me to travel to Colombia to reunite with my family for the first time in 14 years. And I know it has done the same for so many of my loved ones. It has temporarily given us some sense of “normalcy” and “stability.” But, at the same time, it has been almost like an illusion. It was and has been a way that the government has controlled the activism and organizing that was taking over across the country. And now with the uncertainty of what will happen to it [under Trump], it has proved how divided we are, even in our communities.

MF: DACA came at a time when there were many pressures on the U.S. government to provide relief for undocumented students. However, it was also counterproductive. The movement seemed to slow down as a result of the stability granted to DACA beneficiaries. Many were able to pursue long lost dreams and use their energies for other activities. DACA pulled many forefront leaders from the table. On the other hand, DACA has created a new population of young, growing professionals, entrepreneurs, and heads of household, who with time might come to achieve more political power through other means. Furthermore, this group [of DACA recipients] is acquiring new skills and might be able to tackle the problem of immigration from a different perspective in the near future.

LS: The impact of DACA is that it has integrated undocumented youth within local structures and further institutionalized the right of undocumented youth for self-actualization and the right to reach their full potential. While DACA may only cover a privileged few, the benefits trickle down to the families of undocumented youth by allowing for a secure source of income.

AG: What do you think the future holds for DACA and DACA recipients?

LS: In terms of the future of DACA, it will always be one of uncertainty. Trump has certainly amplified the fear of taking away DACA. But we must acknowledge that DACA is not a permanent policy; it will always be at the discretion and control of the presidency. I do feel that DACA can best serve as a framework for building towards humane policies that address the needs of the undocumented community.

MF: While DACA is currently under constant threat of being terminated, this possibility now seems distant. The economic benefits of DACA beneficiaries by far surpass those outcomes of ending the program. It makes economic sense to keep the program in place. Since DACA recipients do not have access to many benefits, they are contributors to the U.S. In a capitalist United States, this is the ideal immigrant: work, give, and get nothing back.

MGV: No one can deny that the impact of DACA has been real and deep, but we know it will not be sustainable for long, thus we need to continue pushing for more permanent relief. Every two years we are investing \$495 USD, plus the cost of passport photos and shipping, to apply and renew our work permits. With that money we could have covered the application for a green card—and later on, the naturalization fee. So economically, of course it benefits the Department of Homeland Security, which might be a reason why Trump and his team have not done away with it as of yet. But for our communities who scrambled to find the resources to pay for these fees, it's creating deep financial burdens.

Furthermore, now we are also seeing more DACA recipients being arrested and detained, sending a loud and clear message that no one is safe from the deportation machine that the Obama administration passed down to the current circus we have for a government. My hope is that these unfortunate and unjust arrests of DACA recipients send a message to all those individuals who think they are safe with DACA and believe it is fair to throw their communities under the bus, that they'll wake up and join local groups and begin to organize, that they understand that this government does not care about any of us. We are all we've got, and if we can't see that, then the fight ahead is a going to be a really long and heavy one.

AG: What is the outlook for activism? Do you still feel like you're an activist or has your vision for your own role in the movement changed? Do you think current models of activism are effective? What would you hope to see from youth now? What role do you see for your cohort?

MF: Young activists today have an even tougher job: to change the narrative of what it means to be "American." I think this is the hardest part of being an activist. You are truly challenging systems of identity and belonging. Once the general audience can accept that being American is not a fixed checklist but rather an identity consisting of a culturally rich helix, then movements across different spectrums can take place. However, for the majority, it is hard to accept that in today's ever-changing world, the American identity is also a process that involves constant change. People will always feel comfortable with what they know, and they fear what they do not know.

LS: The future of activism lies within networks of grassroots organizers that holistically advocate for every member of the community. In essence, to advocate holistically, activism must draw from a political education lens as a means to achieving social justice for all. Self-agency and empowerment must be embedded in every facet of community life so that social change is attainable and within grasp for the working mother, the laborer, the formerly incarcerated, the student, etc. Equipping communities with organizing tools, leadership development, and self-empowerment is critical to building and instilling change.

Admirably, the NYSYLC serves as an exemplary model of effective activism by forming networks of grassroots organizers that incorporate leadership development and self-empowerment at all levels of engagement with the community. The NYSYLC meets every person "where they're at" in their knowledge of organizing, activism, and social justice. Now, more than ever, it is critical that activists invest in community organizing, arming the people with the weapons for social change and defense against racist, oppressive policies. I am neither an activist nor an organizer but my role as an undocumented, "DACAmented" immigrant is to serve as part of the infrastructure that allows for transformative change to happen. This means

aiding in building financial resources and investments for community organizations, in much the same way the NYSYLC invested in me.

MGV: I think this is the time to not back down; it's the time we need more organizers not just activists. We need leaders in all communities who want to genuinely and collectively organize with communities with the vision of a liberation that is dignified and humane, one that fights for our most basic needs to the most complex systems of our society. Activism is imperative but we need people who want to be intentional in growing and showing up for communities—for all communities—in all the ways our issues and communities intersect.

AG: Do you still feel like you're an activist, or has your vision for your own role changed?

MGV: We are at a point in history in which we can't fight for immigrant rights if we are not also showing up for and fighting with Black Lives Matter, raising an outcry against the attacks to our Native American sisters and brothers, protesting against these Muslims bans and other executive orders, and raising hell when there is a victim of rape culture, homophobia, and transphobia. We have to come to the understanding that all these issues are interconnected, here and across the world. Intersectionality matters. We have to see the humanity of each other in order to fight against this capitalist and violent system.

MF: It is important for young people who are getting involved to know that the most important work that is going on happens behind the scenes. Those who are creating alliances, working through back channels, and attending meeting with politicians, these are activities that will never be featured on the news cycle, yet they are the most important. It is more important than ever to get involved to create real change.

Sometimes not getting any credit is the best credit. History is written after, not before it happens. Let the historians do some digging and uncover the true story of the true players. Fifty plus years have passed, and we are still learning about the civil rights movements. Let us be on the right side of history by taking action. Let's not worry about how it is going to be written about. The stakes for immigration reform are far too high to worry about such things.

I see that there are four generations of undocumented youth. The first generation that managed to go to college without ever coming out. The second generation banded together to create the first community based organizations to advocate for undocumented youth and the Dream Act. The third generation experienced a failed Dream Act and got DACA. Now [we have] generation four, the newly arrived undocumented youth.

This movement desperately needs a revamp. Current leaders and future leaders need to make strategic alliances with older activists. This bridge needs to be built today to get more people involved, more people empowered, and more people to advocate for change.

MGV: I think my role and visions changed. They must, otherwise it would mean I am not learning or growing. The changes are encouraged and influenced by those around me, the new experiences and the circumstances of our current political and social climate. My role as an organizer continues today but in different ways—from being a program coordinator for a group that provides immigration assistance to being a teaching artist who utilizes dance to bring awareness to social justice. We are facing an administration that is throwing punches at our communities from all angles, from cutting budgets that support arts-based programs to the deportation of our people. We are not getting a break. Which is why it's so imperative that we use all the tools, resources, spaces, time, minds, hearts, and souls to show up, organize, fight, educate, resist, and agitate.

I hope the youth see the significance and value in organizing, in learning about our his/herstory, and in shifting the mirror so they can see how powerful they are. I hope they don't lose hope when they realize our current government does not care about us, that this system was designed against us from the beginning. I hope they can find the support they are seeking in their communities. I hope they create their own spaces and systems of change. I hope they—and we all—can dare to reimagine a different world than this one, and intentionally and unapologetically work each day until we've achieved it.

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***Luis Saavedra** is a graduate in Anthropology from Lehman College and in addition to being a Core Member at New York State Youth Leadership Council, works at the Human Services Council of New York.*

***Melissa García Vélez** graduated from Lehman College with a B.A. in Social Work in 2014. She has organized and volunteered with the NYSYLC, worked as a Fellow with Immigrant Justice Corps and is currently involved with Atlas DIY, an organization for youth. She also teaches dance in New York City high schools and is pursuing opportunities in her own career as a dancer.*

***Marlen Fernández** also graduated from Lehman College in 2014 with a BA in Latin American and Caribbean Studies and Anthropology and is the founding coordinator of educational outreach for the Jaime Lucero Mexican Studies Institute at CUNY, where she directs educational an educational outreach initiative with sites in Brooklyn and at the Mexican Consulate in New York City.*