

IMMIGRATION

Teen takes Dream to D.C.

Facing a deportation deadline of Sept. 14, Juan Gomez pushes for a bill that would grant thousands of undocumented immigrant children like him a chance at legalization.

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WASHINGTON --

Juan Gomez's plight has sparked a national youth movement, of sorts.

When the Kendall teenager who was temporarily spared deportation to Colombia posted online that he'd be traveling to the nation's capital Tuesday, nearly a dozen students in similar circumstances joined in.

They pulled together enough cash for flights from California and a train ride from New York to lobby for legislation that would give undocumented immigrant children like themselves a chance to stay in the United States.

"These guys completely dropped their lives and came to Washington to assist us," said Gomez, 18, dubbing himself the "unintentional spokesman" for the cause. "I've never met any of them before and they gave up their time."

Like Gomez and his brother Alex, 17 -- who both face deportation deadlines of Sept. 14 -- most of the students were brought to the United States as infants or toddlers and fear getting deported to countries they say they don't consider home.

"In my mind, I'm an American, I just don't have the status," said a 20-year-old woman who asked that her name not be used because she's not in the United States legally. A community college student in California, she said she was brought from Mexico as a preschooler. "To me, we had to come [to Washington]. It's an opportunity to represent thousands of others who are just like us."

The group made the rounds -- meeting with House and Senate staffers to push for passage of the Dream Act, which would grant permanent residency to undocumented immigrants who graduate from high school, maintain a clean record and complete at least two years of college or military service.

To qualify, students must have been brought to the United States before they were 15 and must be able to demonstrate "good moral character."

Supporters say it's unfair to hold the children responsible for their parents' decisions. But immigration remains a deeply contentious issue and even the chief sponsor of the

legislation in the Senate acknowledged in a meeting with the students that the bill faces a tough slog.

"We're trying to figure out how to get this bill passed," Democratic Majority Whip Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., told Gomez's lobbying crew. "It may not be easy, but I'm certainly going to try."

Durbin said he's hoping to include the bill in a defense spending bill -- "the Department of Defense likes the bill," -- but Senate staffers noted the chamber is running out of time to take up the matter this year.

"It shouldn't be this hard," said Durbin, who keeps his Lithuanian mother's U.S. naturalization certificate close by his desk in his Senate office. "I can't understand how we can say 'We need more [business] visas for more talented people' and on the other hand we're saying to talented students, 'We need you to go.'"

The bill needs as many as a dozen Republicans to support the measure -- in addition to 45 or so Democrats who are likely to back it. Then there's the House, which has a vocal anti-illegal immigration coalition that says it opposes making any changes in immigration law until the border is secure.

But stories like the Gomezes are increasing support for the measure, said Josh Bernstein, director of federal policy at the National Immigration Law Center.

"We've got a secret weapon -- Juan," he said at a press conference, noting that in recent years "an unprecedented" number of campus-based groups have emerged to back the Dream Act.

Those lobbyists include Luke, 25, who would not give his last name because of his illegal status. He arrived in the United States as a 10-year-old with his parents from Poland. A recent college graduate, he said he's afraid he can't get a decent job without legal status.

Luke has turned advocacy for the Dream Act into a nearly full-time occupation.

He read about Gomez's trip on the Internet and joined up with him. Walking down the hallway to brief Senate staffers, the New Yorker recognized Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-New Mexico.

"I watch C-Span all the time," Luke said. "Bingaman's on the energy committee. He's been a co-sponsor."

One of the meetings was near Montana Democratic Sen. Max Baucus' office. Baucus, Luke noted, hasn't supported the Dream Act.

Luke drew a deep laugh out of Durbin when, as Durbin was about to launch into a story about his mother, Luke said he had heard it before on C-Span.

"I watch it so much," he told Durbin, "because I pray that I'll see you introduce the Dream Act."

