

Five Things DACA Recipients Want you to Know
By Ofelia Montelongo

The Supreme Court will be ruling any day now the future of DACA Recipients. Last November, the Supreme Court heard arguments for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in Washington, D.C. The immigration policy started back in 2012 intending to provide deferred action and work authorization to certain people who came to the United States as children.

The Obama-era amnesty program has been a political conversation for quite a few years. In 2017, Trump's administration announced the end of the policy and since then DACA recipients have been on the edge about what is going to happen next. The Supreme Court will be ruling this spring and decide if the president rescinded the program the right way or not and how to move forward.

However, we often hear the news talk about numbers, close to 700,000 (according to USCIS last year) of them living in the U.S., and rarely hear about them and the misconceptions of who they are. To begin with, they are more than an immigration status or a piece of paper. Also, DACA recipients are not only from Latin American. The recipients are from all around the world and from all ages. A lot of them are no longer students and live regular lives.

We spoke with a few recipients with the goal to share the five things DACA recipients want you to know. This article is not a guide and it doesn't pretend to give you an update on the minutia of the law, but to let voices be heard of recipients who happened to be with this status. For starters, they all agreed people should be informed before hiding behind a computer screen to rant about them.

Our interviewees:

Twenty-six-year-old Ana Laura was born in Morelos, Mexico, but has no recollection of her birth country. Now, an Arizona-based accountant she sees DACA as a blessing. “I feel very blessed to be part of it. To be able to *be*.”

Jesús Ramón, a graduate student at the University of Maryland, born in Chihuahua, Mexico, lived most of his life in Denver, Colorado. The twenty-four-year-old student was three when he arrived in the U.S. For him, “DACA means that I can pursue my education and achieve what my mom hoped for me.” Jesús Ramón has found it frustrating that institutions don’t know how to fill out tax information, “Workplaces are not prepared.”

Twenty-one-year-old Katia from El Salvador is a criminal justice major at Prince George’s community college and works at the Latin American Youth Center. She came to the U.S. when she was three years old with her cousins. About DACA, she says, “I appreciate I have something so I can be able to work and go to school, but I have a label on me.”

María, from South Phoenix, a marketing student at Grand Canyon University came to the United States when she was around three years old. She didn’t know she was undocumented until she was thirteen when she realized, “Me not being born here was an issue.”

Yesenia from Avondale, Arizona, works in an immigration law firm and helps migrants every day in her job. She says every DACA story starts with the arrival to the United States and hers starts when she turned two. Being DACA for her is a bittersweet experience, “It feels like a mask,” she says, but she is 100% grateful for it.

After our chats, here are the five things they want you to know:

1. **It’s an expensive and long process.** The whole process could last several months and costs around \$500 or more if you hire a lawyer.

Once you get it, it's only valid for two years. The application is not as simple as filling out a form, Ana Laura says, "You have to provide backup." They ask for your grades since elementary school (or since you arrived), letters of recommendation, fingerprints for a background check, any certificates or anything you have been involved with. "A lot of people assume that DACA is just the government congratulating people for crossing the border illegally," Ana Laura says, "They think it's just something Obama did and they [the government] are not even checking. It's a process; you can't just apply because you want. You have to meet certain requirements."

According to the USCIS, some of the requirements include: have not been convicted of a felony; currently in school or graduated from high school or have GED; have continuously resided in the United States since June 15, 2007, up to the present time.

Ana Laura also says, "Because you got it once, it doesn't mean that you are going to get it every two years, you still have to be in good standards."

Right now, after this presidential administration tried to cancel it in 2017, only those who were granted DACA, at least once, can renew it. New applications are not being accepted.

2. **DACA recipients don't have citizens' benefits.** That means no food stamps, no handouts or eligibility for federal financial aid. "Just because we have DACA doesn't mean we are getting the same benefits," María says. "[It seems that] a lot of U.S. citizens are angry that we have DACA. They say we don't deserve all of this, because we are getting scholarships and working. Even though we have DACA, it's still hard for us. They think is easy for us to get scholarships. Honestly, I've applied for so many scholarships and many of them require you to be a U.S. citizen."

“We know for sure that being DACA doesn’t mean we are citizens not even a resident. It’s a temporary protection,” Ana Laura says.

In some states like Arizona, if you want to go to college you have to pay out-of-state tuition. Also, for a couple of years in Arizona, you couldn’t even get a driver’s license. Yesenia from Phoenix had to work from home for a while because she couldn’t drive around. Now Arizonian recipients can have a driver’s license, but it expires when DACA expires.

3. **They pay taxes.** There’s often a misconception that the recipients don’t pay taxes. DACA gives you the right to work and have an SSN; hence, recipients pay taxes and report to the IRS. With the temporary work permit, they can also get health care through the employer. Also, they are eligible to buy a house and/or a car. However, they still have to go through the processes like anyone else.
4. **There’s no path to citizenship.** They are not eligible for a green card; ergo, they can’t apply for citizenship. DACA is just a temporary protection. Yesenia hears often from other undocumented people, “Oh well you already have papers,” but she has to answer, “No, I still can get deported just as much as you can. DACA is a small protection.” Jesús Ramón says, “DACA is great all, but I really would like a path for citizenship. I have hope.” This hope is shared among the interviewees, as well as the linked feeling about the future of DACA. María says, “We’ve lived here all of our lives, but yet, we don’t have an identity here without DACA.” And now with the decision of their status pending until later this year, Yesenia feels like “We have this giant clock looming on us.”
5. **This is their home.** DACA recipients arrived here as children. According to USCIS, you can apply for DACA if you “Came to the United States before reaching your 16th

birthday.” They have lived most of their lives in this country and many don’t remember a life in another one, some others do not longer speak their native language. They can’t even get out of the country to travel.

Regarding this misconception, Yesenia says, “You hear people telling DACA people to go home. But this is my home. I don’t know anybody in Mexico. I don’t know the place where I was born. I don’t even speak the language well enough to feel comfortable there.”

This main misconception [people telling other people to go home] is what sparked us in the first place to write this piece. Yesenia agrees and comments, “People with the loudest opinions are the ones with the least amount of education about the topic.”

“We’ve lived here most of our lives,” says María, “Some DACA students don’t even speak Spanish because they come here at such a young age. We’ve grown up here in the United States, with its culture. A lot of people want us to go back. But, we really can’t because we don’t how. We are not knowledgeable about how to live in Mexico.”

Some, like Katia, have random memories of coming to the United States. She remembers coming with a coyote “bajo tierra,” she comments about it: “I had a recollection of that process. I always knew, but I didn’t know what that actually meant.”

Our five interviewees are just a portion out of the 700,000 stories out there that need to be told and heard. Last November, hundreds of people gathered up in front of the Supreme Court and among their chants, they claimed #HomeisHere, a hashtag that has been trending since then and we invite you to use.