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## **Don't Deport Benita Veliz**

By LAWRENCE DOWNES

A question from the realm of the unanswerable: How will this country be a better place once we force Benita Veliz to leave it?

Ms. Veliz is an illegal immigrant facing deportation, but she is nobody's idea of a criminal, social undesirable or drain on the public till.

She is a 23-year-old college graduate from San Antonio who works in a church office. She is smart, self-sufficient and hard-working. She is bursting with academic and professional ambitions — dreams that she has set aside because her paths to achieve them have all been closed. Immigration lawyers have told her that she has no hope of avoiding expulsion. She can only postpone it.

Ms. Veliz is here illegally, but not by choice. She arrived from Mexico with her parents in 1993 on a tourist visa. She was 8. She had never lived in the United States before but has lived nowhere else since. By all detectable measures, she is an American, a Texan.

And an impressive one at that. She was valedictorian at Jefferson High School, graduating at age 16. She went to St. Mary's University in San Antonio on a full scholarship. She doubled majored in biology and sociology and fully deployed herself beyond the classroom in clubs, student government, choir. She volunteered in a children's hospital. And she waited tables 45 hours a week in a Mexican restaurant.

Her honors thesis was about the Dream Act.

A quick digression about that. The Dream Act is a Congressional bill that would allow children of illegal immigrants to earn citizenship after going to college or serving in the military. The idea is that America should not expel but assimilate dedicated young people who are not at fault for their illegal status. The Dream Act seeks to make citizens out of people, like Benita Veliz, who are longing — and fighting — for its passage. Bipartisan Dream Act bills were introduced in the House and Senate just this week, their future uncertain.

Ms. Veliz wanted to go to law school, but couldn't afford tuition and didn't qualify for federal loans. So she started a photography and design business, taught piano and tutored in math and science. She now works in a regional office of a Pentecostal church in San Antonio, doing payroll and other administrative tasks.

Her fateful encounter with the law happened on Jan. 21. A police officer pulled her over, saying she had rolled through a stop sign. She says that is not true, but acknowledges driving without a license. She had a Mexican consular identity card, and after a series of questions, the officer called immigration authorities. She was jailed overnight and released on bond.

Nancy Shivers, an immigration lawyer in San Antonio whom Ms. Veliz has consulted, said she met some of the requirements that might have allowed her to stay in the United States. She has been here more than 10 years and is demonstrably of good moral character. But without a qualifying parent, spouse or child to petition on her behalf, she cannot stay.

Ms. Shivers says Ms. Veliz is a poster child for the Dream Act, but hardly the only one. For every Benita Veliz, she said, there many others who dropped out because they saw no point in getting a college degree. They are working in low-wage jobs, off the books, their bright futures prematurely dead-ended.

Ms. Veliz's voice cracks when talking about her case, but she gets excited when asked about her dreams. The words just tumble out:

“I would like to go to law school and be an attorney for a few years, and then after that get into politics on a Congressional level, either senator or representative. I’ve actually always wanted to do international relations, get a master’s in international relations, with a law degree. I would want to do international law, or immigration law, but not really just that, but that’s just one small sort of thing in the long spectrum of things.”

For Ms. Veliz, the long spectrum of things might involve a long or permanent stay in Mexico, a country that she does not know or belong in anymore.

As for the country she knows and loves, if it were smarter and kinder, more like the country we see in fuzzy old documentaries, where hopeful families cluster on the decks of ships passing the Statue of Liberty, it would find a way to let her stay. It would let her go to law school. It would accept Benita Veliz as the American she is.

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