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Undocumented teens face hurdles to fulfilling their American dreams

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Luis Escoto practices traditional Mexican dance with Patricia Vivanco. Escoto's family brought him to America when he was 2. Now 19 and a high school graduate, Escoto is trying to find a way to go to college. / Larry McCormack / The Tennessean

Written by **Tony Gonzalez**
The Tennessean

Luis Escoto will gather with his family for the Fourth of July in La Vergne today, to grill out, dip into an inflatable pool and inevitably talk politics — in Spanish.

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Escoto, brought by his parents to America from Mexico when he was a toddler, isn't an American. Not technically.

But lately, the 19-year-old has been thinking more about what it means to be, or to live like, an American. He's trying to find a way

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to go to college as an undocumented immigrant. And last month he learned of President Barack Obama's [order to block deportations of young people like him](#).

As a child, he just didn't think about those things. He was an American, a Southerner, who happened to have Mexican parents. In high school, he began to see difficulties ahead.



Jonny Garcia, 18, will attend college in the fall, but not in Tennessee, where undocumented immigrants must pay higher tuition rates. / Larry McCormack / The Tennessean

In what is a particular sort of American experience, undocumented teens encounter challenges unlike anything their native friends face — with more to fear, they said, and almost certainly with more difficulty in making long-range plans.

That's not to say immigrants can't make their lives dramatically better. But finding work can be difficult, and undocumented students pay international or out-of-state rates at Tennessee's public universities, costing thousands more over four years.

"I have had times when I asked my parents, 'What was the point of bringing me here if all you wanted was for me to go through high school?' " Escoto said. "But that's just something I kind of optimistically look to and say to myself, these obstacles are things I have to go through in order for myself to be stronger.

"That's just part of what I feel is American."

Last month, activists celebrated Obama's order to block deportations for undocumented immigrants under age 30 who are in school, have a high school diploma or its equivalent, or have been honorably discharged from the military.

Those immigrants also must have been brought to the U.S. before turning 16 and have lived here five years. They're disqualified if they've been convicted of a felony or multiple misdemeanors. Still elusive are terms in the failed federal DREAM Act, which proposed a path to citizenship through



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'They didn't ... come here for nothing'

For many immigrant families, America stands for quality education.

Yet for 18-year-old Jonny Garcia, whose parents moved him from Mexico to Virginia at age 4, difficulties in finding citizenship-blind college scholarships had him considering a return to Mexico — where he'd feel like a foreigner, he said, but would be able to go to college.

The mere suggestion made his parents uncomfortable. They made a precarious journey to America and scrambled to work various jobs to support him and his sister.

"They didn't just come here for nothing," Garcia said. "I want to be able to one day give my parents everything they worked so hard for, as well as contribute back."

Garcia, who musters only vague memories of his birth city, Aguascalientes in central Mexico, said he considers himself American as much as Mexican. His family lived about eight years in a diverse suburb of Washington, D.C., before moving to Nashville.

At McGavock High, Garcia participated in the National Honor Society and French Club. His grade point average put him in the top 10 percent of his graduating class, and he was on the prom court.

"I've grown up here, I've gone to school here, my English is understandable," he said. "I do consider myself an American, so when it comes to the barriers and the policies and the laws, that's when I feel like I'm not."

The approach of high school graduation magnified differences between Garcia and his peers, including the ability to make long-term plans.

"Most friends know where they're going to school. They've known their answers to their plans for a while," Garcia said. "Then there's me. I feel like I should be in their shoes just as well. I feel just like a part of them, but when it comes down to it, it's going to be a little bit different for me."

Garcia said undocumented immigrants he knows often hesitate to make plans long-term plans because of difficulties in finding consistent work and fear of encountering law enforcement.

He eventually found a Western Kentucky University program that offers in-state tuition to residents of Davidson County and will start school in the fall. But his own tendency to live day by day means he

can't say for sure he'll be able to afford and return for future semesters.

Details of how Obama's announcement will be carried out aren't yet known, either. The Department of Homeland Security is expected to launch an application process in August, said Stephanie Teatro, policy coordinator for the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition.

"People are looking forward to having this opportunity, but there's a lot of questions about what the scope of the policy change will be and the implementation," Teatro said. "Until we see the application process, we're just cautiously optimistic about the impact it will have on the community."

Difficult dreams

Escoto, meanwhile, doesn't see a way to pay for college.

"If I can't go to school, I want to do the other American thing: make a business," he said.

That also could be legally complicated without a Social Security number, but Escoto said he thinks he has an idea people will pay for. He wants to be a dance choreographer, specializing in quinceañera events, the extravagant birthday parties that Mexicans families host for daughters turning 15.

Escoto said he has embraced his heritage — speaking Spanish at home and practicing traditional Mexican group dances weekly — while he also seized the chance to join the ROTC and carry a flag as part of the color guard at Glencliff High.

"To me, American doesn't mean a color of your skin or a language that you speak or a deep-rooted history of where you're from," Escoto said. "To me, American just means someone with dreams, someone with the hope to achieve what they want in life and a person who stands up for their rights and the rights of others."

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