



- News
- Blogs
- Dining
- Bars / Clubs
- Calendar
- Music
- Movies
- Arts
- Best of
- Classifieds
- Deals
- Promotions
- Search

# Undocumented immigrants urge citizens to use something they desperately want: the right to vote

## The Pursuit of Happiness

by STEVEN HALE @IAMSTEVENHALE

NEWS > CITY LIMITS

November 01, 2012

- Like
- Tweet
- Digg
- Share
- +1

On a recent weekday afternoon, Mercedes Gonzalez knocks on the door of an apartment in South Nashville. When the woman she's looking for emerges, the two launch into a lively conversation in quick, fluent Spanish, and Gonzalez explains the reason for her visit: There's an election coming up, and she wants everyone who's able to vote in it.

Flipping through a packet containing lists of polling locations, voting requirements, and a sample ballot, Gonzalez walks the woman through the process. It sounds more complicated when you're hearing it explained to someone for the first time, not to mention through a language barrier. Occasionally, Stephanie Teatro, the policy and civic engagement coordinator for the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC), joins the conversation in Spanish, or asks a question in English for Gonzalez to translate. At one point, the woman expresses what Gonzalez would later translate as her intention to "definitely vote for Obama." Gonzalez shrugs her shoulders and raises her hands, as if to say, "That's up to you."

Around a year-and-a-half ago, Gonzalez, who was brought to Nashville from Mexico with her parents at the age of 11, was sitting in a jail cell. Just a week before she was to graduate from Overton High School, she was pulled over for speeding — just slightly, at 48 in a 40 mph zone — and could not produce a driver's license. What happened next was disputed — by the Metro police department, and by the Davidson County Sheriff's Office. In any case, Gonzalez spent nearly three days in jail and faced deportation upon her release.

A movement led by TIRRC on Gonzalez's behalf succeeded in staving off her deportation. Today, having witnessed firsthand the power of their united voice, Gonzalez is taking part in TIRRC's ongoing effort to get out the vote among Nashville's growing immigrant community.

"I'm here," Gonzalez, now 20, tells the *Scene* after recalling the ordeal. "And it's thanks to the immigrant voice that I'm here. And I want to give help and thanks back to the community. Supporting voting and making their voices heard."

According to the Migration Policy Institute, Tennessee's foreign-born population increased by 81.8 percent from 2000 to 2010, making it the third fastest growing immigrant population in the country. The 2010 American Community Survey found that 96,905, or around 33.5 percent, of Tennessee's foreign-born residents are U.S. citizens. Teatro points out that many within the immigrant community, however, are legal permanent residents who are eligible for citizenship.

Teatro tells the *Scene* that TIRRC hopes to have facilitated the naturalization of approximately 150 people by the end of the year through their periodic Citizenship Assistance Workshops, the fourth of which will be held Nov. 10. They also devoted much of the fall to a voter registration campaign. But with this year's election fast approaching, they have undertaken to make contact with those foreign-born citizens who are registered to vote, and implore them to exercise that right.

Toward that end they have sent two mail pieces and robocalls to more than 7,000 registered immigrant voters. But Teatro says they know face-to-face contact is most effective, particularly with newly registered or low-propensity voters. So they've pored over the rolls to identify registered immigrant voters who might be less likely to vote — those for whom this would be their first election, or those who are not consistent voters. To reach them, they've enlisted undocumented

TOOLS

- email
- print
- share
- save to instapaper
- add to favorites
- add to custom list
- comments (1)

click to enlarge



TENNESSEE IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE RIGHTS COALITION  
Mercedes Gonzalez

### RECENT COMMENTS

#### Re: What's also on the ballot in Davidson County

Check out more of the issues my campaign stands for, other than not being Clayton...

POSTED BY JACOB MAURER ON NOVEMBER 1, 2012

#### Re: Police Bust Crazy Dumb Crackers, Er, I Mean White Boyz Gang and Drug Ring

I'll know when the Scene has arrived when they call out the various black and...

POSTED BY DAVIDLONGFELLOW ON NOVEMBER 1, 2012

#### Re: As Tennessee Dems promote GOP scandals in state races, can mudslinging stop a landslide?

"Voters always say they don't like negative campaigning, but it works just the same. That's..."

POSTED BY DAVIDLONGFELLOW ON NOVEMBER 1, 2012

#### Re: 'Not Only a Hypocrite But a Fraud'

Poor Dr. @\$h0!e; even his probe is broken.

POSTED BY ZOMBIE RONALD REAGAN ON NOVEMBER 1, 2012 VIA MOBILE

#### Re: Tennessee Conservative Union Calls for DesJarlais' Resignation

Ah, the much maligned and deservedly so, tea bag aficionados begin to eat their young...

POSTED BY JIM COLLINS ON NOVEMBER 1, 2012

More >

**SIGN UP!**  
For the *Scene's*  
email newsletter

- \* first name
- \* last name



youth volunteers like Gonzalez to bring the message to their doors.

The volunteers risk a life-changing traffic stop just by driving to such events. But they say it's worth the effort if it gets immigrant voters to participate in a way they can't yet.

Anyone who's attended a church youth-group meeting before a door-to-door evangelism effort would have recognized the scene at TIRRC's headquarters off Harding Pike earlier this month. Speaking to a group of fewer than 10 assembled volunteers, Teatro — herself an immigrant from Canada who will be voting in her first election this year — reiterates their gospel: Get out and vote. She provides a few guidelines. First, be respectful and to the point. If no one is home, leave information — but don't touch the mailbox, as that is a felony. Explain the new photo ID law, but don't scare people. And perhaps most importantly, just tell people to vote, not for whom to vote.

As a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, remaining non-partisan is a legal obligation for TIRRC, and therefore for its volunteers. But it is also crucial to the success of their ultimate goal, which is not to promote candidates from either party — whose promises on immigration-related policy have proven equally empty at times — but to create a more visible, politically active community that cannot be so easily dismissed by legislators, whether in Washington, D.C., or at Legislative Plaza.

"While we don't say who people should vote for," says Teatro, "I think next year when we go talk to the legislators, [we'll] be, like, 'I went around my neighborhood in your district, and I registered 20 voters.' It's more about showing political power than pushing one candidate or another."

No matter who comes out ahead in various state races, one way they'll attempt to demonstrate that political power is through TIRRC's annual New American Day on the Hill. For six years now, immigrant and refugees from across the state have convened at the state legislature to meet with their representatives and put a face on proposed legislation that is often aimed rather haphazardly at them.

Just this past year, TIRRC worked to stop bills that would have: required jailers to inquire and report on the citizenship status of booked individuals; made it illegal to provide transportation to someone who a person "should reasonably know is an illegal alien"; and implemented English-only driving exams. A bill placing caps on the hiring of foreign nationals did pass into law, though without a signature from Gov. Bill Haslam, who said he had "concerns about the bill's constitutionality." The state's attorney general has since rendered an opinion stating that portions of the law are in fact "constitutionally suspect."

In conversations with legislators, Gonzalez says she has learned that many are simply unaware of situations like hers, in which a longtime, albeit undocumented, young member of the Nashville community — who landed here as a result of their parents' choice — can become ensnared by the laws they pass. Gathering on the hill, Gonzalez and Teatro say, gives members of the immigrant community a chance to educate legislators about those affected by their proposals.

With help from TIRRC, Gonzalez is currently in the process of applying for deferred action, a kind of temporary authorization that must be renewed and does not provide a real path to citizenship. It will make her "under-documented," Teatro explains, as opposed to undocumented. She is also applying for a work permit.

"I want to work," says Gonzalez. "I want to provide something for Nashville and the community."

She still plans to apply for college, at Fisk University, and hopes to become a doctor. Even if she obtains a more-documented status, tuition for her will be significantly greater than for most students. But she wants to stay in what she calls the only country she knows — and she says that's why she's knocking on doors.

"Me, as an undocumented person, this is a big change," Gonzalez says. "I have lived many things that people haven't and will never, like you say, but I have that experience and I want to share it with them. I want to empower them and tell them that they can go and vote. And that will make a difference in my life, and in many people's life."

Email [editor@nashvillescene.com](mailto:editor@nashvillescene.com).

[City Limits archives »](#)

Like Send You and 6 others like this. 6 people like this.

7 0 2

Tweet Digg +1

## COMMENTS (1)

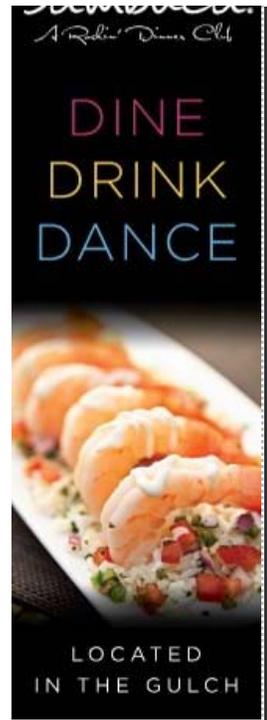
Showing 1-1 of 1

[add a comment](#)

 Given the topic of immigrants in upcoming elections, an interesting new book that helps explain the role, struggles, and contributions of immigrants is "What Foreigners Need To Know About America From A To Z: How to understand crazy American culture, people, government, business, language and more." It paints a revealing picture of America for those foreigners who will benefit from a better understanding. Endorsed by ambassadors, educators, and editors, it also informs Americans who want to learn more about the U.S. and how we compare to other countries around the world on many issues. As the book points out, immigrants are a major force in America as they are in other nations. Immigrants and the children they bear account for 60 percent of our nation's population growth. Legal immigrants number 850,000 each year; undocumented (illegal) immigrants are estimated to be half that number. They come to

- \* email
- Weekly Newsletter
- Dining Newsletter
- Critic's Picks
- Promotions Newsletter
- The Big Deal

\* required



## LATEST IN CITY LIMITS

**Occupy Nashville isn't the uprising it was a year ago, but its die-hards aren't through fighting the power**  
Unoccupied

by Jonathan Meador

**When it comes to conservative film, Middle Tennessee has front row seats**  
Gone Galt

by Jonathan Meador

**In the Gotto-Jernigan House race, Mayor Dean could help out a Democrat and punish a foe — but is it worth the risk?**  
Pay Back or Stay Back?

by Steven Hale

[More »](#)

## MORE BY STEVEN HALE

**Republican National Convention Part II: Four Pics From the Tennessee Delegation's Trip to the Aquarium**

by Steven Hale

**What's also on the ballot in Davidson County**  
Lever Fever

by Steven Hale

**Campfield Challengers Emerge, But Do They Blog?**

by Steven Hale

[More »](#)

improve their lives and create a foundation of success for their children to build upon, as did the author's grandparents when they landed at Ellis Island in 1899 after losing 2 children to disease on a cramped cattle car-like sailing from Europe. Many bring their skills and a willingness to work hard to make their dreams a reality, something our founders did four hundred years ago. In describing America, chapter after chapter identifies "foreigners" who became successful in the US and have contributed to our society. However, most struggle in their efforts and need guidance and a helping hand. www.AmericaAtoZ.com

report

1 like, 0 dislikes



like



dislike

Posted by Iqjhere on 11/01/2012 at 11:24 AM

Subscribe to this thread: By Email With RSS

Showing 1-1 of 1

Subscribe to this thread

Share this comment on Facebook

News

- Cover Story
- Features
- Letters
- Pith In The Wind
- Sports
- Stories

Music

- Critics Picks
- Features
- Giant Steps
- Nashville Cream
- Upcoming Events

Restaurants

- Bites Blog
- Features
- Restaurant Reviews
- Restaurant Guide

Movies

- Reviews
- Show Times
- Television
- Short Takes
- Archives

Arts and Culture

- Critics Picks
- Art
- Comedy
- Theater
- Books

Best of Nashville

- Music
- Arts & Entertainment
- Goods & Services
- Politics & Media
- Readers' Poll



The SouthComm Set [Nfocus](#) | [Her Nashville](#) | [The City Paper](#) | [LEO Weekly](#) | [BusinessTN](#) | [Music Row](#) | [NashvillePost.com](#) | [Medical News Papers](#)

[About Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Advertising](#) | [Free Classifieds](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Monster](#)

All contents © 1995-2012 City Press LLC, 210 12th Ave. S., Ste. 100, Nashville, TN 37203. (615) 244-7989.

All rights reserved. No part of this service may be reproduced in any form without the express written permission of City Press LLC, except that an individual may download and/or forward articles via email to a reasonable number of recipients for personal, non-commercial purposes.

Powered by Foundation