

Out of the shadows: Isabel Castillo, immigration activist

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [March 7, 2012](#) issue



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Isabel Castillo, 27, has been organizing in support of the Dream Act, legislation that would open a path to legal residency and eventual citizenship for immigrants who came to the U.S. as minors. The bill passed the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010 but failed to win passage in the Senate. Castillo organized a Dream Act chapter in her hometown, Harrisonburg, Virginia, and has argued the case with Virginia politicians. In recognition of her work, Atlantic magazine named her a "brave thinker" and the University of San Francisco awarded her an honorary doctorate.

Tell us about your background.

I am originally from the state of Michoacán in Mexico. When I was six years old, my parents brought my siblings and me directly to Harrisonburg, Virginia, where they had jobs in the poultry industry. I have been living here ever since. I started first grade in the public school system.

How did you make it to college?

The school guidance counselor had never worked with an undocumented student. He did not know how to help me. I graduated with a 4.0 GPA and I was involved in

many clubs, but I couldn't apply for grants, loans or scholarships. I remember looking through the scholarship book in the counselor's office for one that didn't say, "Requirement: U.S. citizen or legal resident."

After high school, I worked as a waitress. I remember crying inside the restaurant, "Why am I here? What am I going to do? I want to go to college."

Eventually, I found out that Eastern Mennonite University would accept undocumented students. I applied and got accepted. I graduated in three and a half years with a degree in social work.

But then I was at a point like the one in high school. I wanted to give back to my community. I wanted to start life and my career in the real world. But I was not able to work legally. I felt stuck.

How did you become an activist?

I had two options. One was to wait for laws to change. The other—as clichéd as it might sound—was to be the change that I wanted to see. I went online to sign up for anything that had to do with the Dream Act and sent an e-mail to an organization called dreamact.org. I said, "I am undocumented, and I want to help." I got an e-mail from the organization inviting me to a conference. So I went to D.C. for a weekend.

How did that conference change you?

It was the first time I met undocumented students who were already organizing. I met an activist who said, "You should go back to Virginia and start to organize." I said, "No, I am not an activist. I don't know how to do that." He said, "It is simple. Just set a time and space, and invite people who are in the same boat." It took me about three months to send out that e-mail.

We started a small local organizing group in October 2009. Our first campaign was to try to get the city of Harrisonburg to pass a resolution in favor of the Dream Act. Eventually, over 30 businesses and hundreds of individuals signed. We met with every city council member. The other council members said, "I doubt you will get Ed Burns's vote." When we brought the resolution to the council for a vote, I testified, and we got a unanimous yes vote. Burns said, "When I met with you, I said I wanted to see community support." We had packed that room that day. I said, "Please stand up if you are one of our supporters." The room full of people stood up. That was a great victory for us.

How did you make the decision to be public about your undocumented status?

When I presented at the council, a local TV station sent a team, and I did not allow them to shoot my face. I did not want to put my family at risk. Then I saw other undocumented youth getting involved. I gradually decided to let the media use my name and show my face. Now I feel that the more public you are about your status, the safer you are.

For me, this life now is better than before. It has opened up so many opportunities. If you go to a rally or a march, you can find me because I am the loudest person there. I love that energy. I can't be at a march without a megaphone in my hand.

I told the governor of Virginia that I was undocumented. I went to testify in the General Assembly in the presence of the most anti-immigrant man in the commonwealth. I've lost that fear. I am happier to be out here in the light.

I think of a young man in Texas who committed suicide in December. Apparently he was depressed about his future and about the failure of the Dream Act. He lived very close to the border, and I think it is harder to organize there. He wanted to give a better future to his mom, but he didn't see any way out.

I remember a point when I was depressed. Our parents risked so much for us, and you wonder if you can give back. You think, "I can't work; I can't go to school; I can't help my family." It is not a mistake, what my parents did. They risked everything, left everything behind, their culture, home and family. They did this for the sake of a better life for us. My parents are my heroes. I didn't know that man in Texas, but I can see why he did that. You feel helpless and hopeless, that you have no future.

What was it like to talk to the governor of Virginia?

I told him my story. At first, he acted impressed. He said, "Wow, a 4.0 in college," adding that more students like me were needed. Then I said, "But I am undocumented." The room got quiet. So I asked, "Would you support legislation like the Dream Act so that students like myself can have a future?" He said, "No. That's like turning a blind eye to people who have broken the law." People applauded when he said that we have to round up every illegal immigrant and send them back to their home country. But people cheered for me when I said, "I have been here my whole life." Finally I just said, "I am an American. Virginia is my home."