

## Allentown woman says family's struggles fuel her fight for immigration reform

Precious Petty | The Express-Times By Precious Petty | The Express-Times

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Like many of her peers in the Lehigh Valley, Viridiana Arguello was raised in [Allentown](#).

She graduated from the city's [William Allen High School](#), works as a waitress in [Bethlehem](#) and is saving money to attend college.

What sets Arguello apart is her place of birth.

The 25-year-old's parents emigrated from Mexico when she was a toddler. The family arrived in California and shortly thereafter headed east to Pennsylvania, where Arguello's maternal uncle was already settled.

Her 16-year-old sister, a student at William Allen, was born here, but Arguello and her parents are undocumented immigrants. She is hopeful the latest push for immigration reform, buoyed by the growing role of Hispanic voters in state and national politics, will change that.

Nearly 6 percent of Pennsylvanians were born outside the country and about half of the state's immigrants are eligible to vote, according to the [Immigration Policy Center](#), an arm of the American Immigration Council.

### Education and citizenship

Arguello doesn't hide her status, but it's not something she advertises either, explaining, "That's not something you go around saying."

Friends often are shocked when they learn the truth, Arguello says, because she has so much in common with them. That they support rather than shun her is a signal the time is right for immigration reform, she says.

Arguello was 2 years old when she arrived in the states, and so with assistance from a support group for Hispanic immigrants, Grupo de Apoyo e Integración Hispanoamericano, has applied for the right to remain in the U.S. temporarily under the deferred action policy adopted last June.

Immigration reform that includes provisions of the DREAM Act would offer a permanent solution: a six-year path to citizenship -- along with eligibility for the resident tuition rates she needs to continue her education. Arguello's goal is to earn an associate's degree in medical billing from either [Northampton](#) or [Lehigh Carbon Community College](#), land a job in that field and then pursue a bachelor's degree.

According to the Immigration Policy Center, Pennsylvania's 28,097 foreign-born college students pump \$887.9 million into the state economy and Arguello wants to be one of them. She isn't afraid of hard work, but can't afford nonresident tuition rates on a waitress' pay.

## Hard work and struggle

Arguello learned about the value of hard work by watching the example set by her mother, a housekeeper, and her father, a house painter.

[The Gang of Eight proposal for immigration reform](#) holds promise for her parents, who like many of the country's 11 million undocumented immigrants aren't eligible for deferred action. Still, Arguello worries about some of the bill's provisions -- chiefly, it's long path to citizenship.

For people who have spent the majority of their adult lives working and paying taxes in the U.S., 13 years is a long time to wait for citizenship, she says. "A lot of my friends -- their parents are in the same situation. Our parents came here with the dream of a better life for us. They've given the best years of their lives, all of their energy to this country."

Arguello's 48-year-old mother suffers from fibromyalgia, a disorder characterized by widespread musculoskeletal pain, fatigue and other symptoms. Citizenship would make it easier for her to find work that's less physically demanding, her daughter says.

"She has her good days and she has her bad days," Arguello says. It's sad to see her on her bad days, too see how much this illness has changed her."

Her father has had his struggles, too. The 51-year-old once ended up in detainment after a traffic stop, prompting a lengthy struggle to bring him home, she says.

He's also been stiffed on the job. Contractors underpay him or worse, knowing he has little recourse because of his status as an undocumented immigrant, Arguello says.

## Assistance and advocacy

[Erika Sutherland](#), a Spanish professor at Allentown's Muhlenberg College, runs the group that helped Arguello apply for deferred action. The organization has guided more than 200 Lehigh Valley residents through the same process, she says, and provides countless other services for immigrants.

Many of the region's youngest undocumented immigrants are like Arguello; they were raised and educated here, and so have no trouble communicating in English, Sutherland says. Once these individuals obtain legal status, they can begin to advocate for themselves and others.

"They speak English really well and it's important for them to take charge of their lives," she says. "There's a whole bunch of benefits of having just one person (in a family) in status. The people who are getting it aren't stopping there."

Making sure that immigrants, undocumented or otherwise, know how to help themselves is a priority for the group, said Sutherland, who founded it in 1999. "We show people what they can do on their own and then understand that when you know something, it's your obligation to teach someone else," she says.

## Reform and motivation

Advocacy is nothing new for Arguello.

**UPCOMING EVENT:** An interfaith prayer vigil for immigrants is planned 6:15 p.m. Wednesday at [St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church](#), 417 N. Seventh St., in Allentown.

She says those who oppose immigration reform and view deportation as a necessary consequence of illegal immigration may not realize undocumented immigrants are their co-workers, schoolmates, neighbors, friends or ancestors.

"They all need to remember that the United States was built by immigrants," Arguello says.

[She joined Sutherland and dozens more for an April 10 bus trip to Washington, D.C.](#) Once there, they marched on the Capitol with thousands of fellow immigration reform advocates.

It was her second such trip to D.C., and Arguello says she'll keep going back until legislators get the message.

"To see everybody from different ethnicities -- not just Hispanics, but Asians and Europeans -- all being there together to fight for one cause, it's very moving," Arguello says. "As a young person, seeing that and my parent struggling every days. That's what motivates me to keep going."

Contact *Lehigh County suburbs reporter Precious Petty* at 484-894-3854 or [ppetty@express-times.com](mailto:ppetty@express-times.com).

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