

Young immigrants stage a risky border protest

By Cindy Carcamo, Los Angeles Times on 07.25.13

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"Dreamers," wearing their school graduation caps and gowns to show their desire to finish school in the U.S., march with linked arms to the U.S. port of entry where they planned to request humanitarian parole, in Nogales, Mexico, Monday, July 22, 2013. AP Photo/Samantha Sais

NOGALES, Ariz. — Lizbeth Mateo paid her tuition Sunday for Santa Clara Law School, where classes begin next month. On Monday, she paused to send the California school an email. “I’m letting them know I may not make it in time,” she said.

The reason for her delay: an unorthodox — and risky — protest at the U.S.-Mexico border. The 29-year-old Mateo, who was brought into the United States illegally at age 10, voluntarily flew back across the border recently in a protest aimed at recognizing the thousands of people deported from the United States over the last five years as the Obama administration struggles to adopt a long-range program for immigration reform.

The protest Monday focused on the U.S. border station in Nogales. Mateo and two other young immigrants who had been brought into the U.S. as children asked to be admitted legally across the border they had surreptitiously traversed so many years ago and had spent much of their lives trying to avoid.

The immigration debate has focused on how a sweeping bill now in Congress might affect an estimated 11 million people who entered the country illegally or overstayed their visas. Lost in the debate, Mateo and other protesters say, are those already expelled from the country. Deportations have increased from just under 300,000 in 2007 to nearly 400,000 in 2011, according to federal statistics.

“We should not forget the people who have been deported,” she said. Monday’s action quickly grew in number as about 30 others spontaneously joined the petitioners at the U.S. border, taking activists by surprise. Organized by the National Immigrant Youth Alliance, the immigrants planned to ask for humanitarian parole, which would allow them into the country, or, failing that, asylum.

As part of the planned protest, the trio was joined by six other immigrants who had returned to Mexico more than a year ago. The nine were questioned and transferred to a holding facility in Florence, Ariz. Activists in contact with the attorney for the youths said that they were denied humanitarian parole and that immigration officials would consider their request for asylum while holding them in Florence.

Immigration officials declined to comment on Monday’s events and had said previously that people hoping to enter the country had to meet standard immigration requirements. The border action highlights the plight of children who are in the country illegally. Many have grown up in the U.S., have attended American schools — Mateo graduated from California State University, Northridge — and hope to maintain a connection to their pasts without fear of losing their futures in the U.S.

With Mateo were Marco Saavedra, 23, of New York and Lulu Martinez, 24, of Chicago. Both came to the United States when they were 3 years old.

Saavedra, a graduate of Kenyon College in Ohio with a degree in sociology, says he’s American in every way, except for having legal papers.

“There have to be alternatives,” Saavedra said of the nation’s immigration system. He recalled how his 60-year-old grandfather, who lives in Mexico, makes a perilous trip each time he visits relatives in the United States. “Why does it have to be almost a death sentence every time he wants to go see his daughters?” Saavedra asked.

Martinez, a student at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said that the symbolism of their action was important, even if critics have called the action unwise, and that someone had to take a stand. “We’ve been accused of being petulant children,” she said. “We realize that it had to be us.”

Wearing graduation caps and gowns, Mateo, Saavedra and Martinez chanted “undocumented, unafraid” as they paraded Monday from Nogales, Sonora, to Nogales, Ariz. They were joined by five other young immigrants, also in graduation attire. Unlike the original trio, who had traveled to Mexico to make a political point, four of the others had voluntarily left the U.S. years ago because life had become too difficult. The fifth was deported.

“They are insane, but my respect is with them,” Luis Leon, one of the five, said of the trio. “Nobody throws away 20 years of their lives for someone else.”

Leon, brought to the U.S. when he was 5, had been living in North Carolina when he returned to Mexico in 2011 because he thought immigration reform would never happen. He says he regrets that now. He's tried to return to the U.S. six times but without success. As the eight immigrants headed to the border, they were joined at the last minute by a ninth immigrant who had left the U.S. voluntarily some time ago. As word of the action spread, as many as 30 more young people presented themselves at the border, but their status was unclear.

By returning to Mexico voluntarily, the three immigrants have put themselves at considerable risk. Under an immigration reform package backed by the Obama administration, young immigrants deported could apply to return to the U.S. Those who leave voluntarily would not have that option, immigration experts say.

Mateo, Saavedra and Martinez are old hands at activism and civil disobedience. Saavedra once occupied an immigration facility in Florida and was detained. Mateo joined a sit-in at the Tucson office of Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz.

Immigration authorities offered Saavedra and Mateo the chance to apply for the Obama administration's deferred deportation program, which allows immigrants brought into the country illegally as children to stay in the U.S., at least temporarily.

Both declined to apply for the program, saying they wanted their cases adjudicated — a way of putting a spotlight on the nation's immigration system.

Mateo recalled how she and her mother crossed the desert to enter the United States 19 years ago. "I've never been as thirsty as then," she said.

She described how they drank from rank pools of water and how her mother struggled — sometimes pulling, sometimes pushing — to keep her going north. Eventually, they settled in Los Angeles.

If she is ultimately deported, Mateo said, she will not attempt another desert crossing. She can't do that again.