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Undocumented student turns to Miami Dade College, and a long journey, for his education

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Brayan Vazquez, 19, a computer science major at Miami Dade College North Campus, is undocumented. He commutes more than 100 miles to and from school each day.

On a chilly morning in Boynton Beach, glimmers of dawn cut through the black sky as Brayan Vazquez steps out of his home and begins a 55-mile journey to school.

Brayan is undocumented.

He doesn't have a car or a driver's license, so today, like every Tuesday and Thursday, his dad, Jesus, heads to his construction job in Boca Raton and drops Brayan, a 19-year-old computer science major at Miami Dade College, off at the Delray Beach Tri-Rail station to start his nearly two-hour trek to Miami Dade College's North Campus.

For undocumented students like Brayan, there aren't many options for affordable higher education. MDC is one of two schools that offer in-state tuition waivers to those granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which Brayan was accepted for in 2013. He could get a driver's license with his recently approved DACA, but affording a car and still having to make the one-hour-plus drive would be unfeasible.

A little after 5 a.m. on the mornings he has class, Brayan drags himself out of bed, jumps in the shower, and grabs a bagged lunch made that morning by his mom. It's a long commute many just wouldn't make.

Closer schools like Palm Beach State College — about a 10-minute drive from Brayan's house — don't offer the waiver, making the cost too expensive for him to afford.

At Palm Beach State, in-state students pay \$98.25 per credit hour, while out-of-state students pay \$358 per hour. At MDC the rates are similar, with in-state tuition at \$114.22, per credit, and out-of-state tuition at \$398.50.

Without the waiver, Brayan would be looking at a tuition bill of about \$4,800 for the four classes he is taking this semester. With it he pays a little more than \$1,370.

Palm Beach State isn't pursuing tuition waivers for undocumented students though the college does support proposed legislation as a long-term solution for students like Brayan, said Grace H. Truman, director of college relations and marketing at the school.

The commute starts with a 15-minute drive from home in Boynton Beach to the Delray Beach Tri-Rail station. On this particular day, they listen to Spanish oldies on a local radio station. Brayan mumbles along with the lyrics, gazing out the passenger window through his black, thick-rimmed glasses.

Suddenly, Jesus points out the passenger window, catching a glimpse of a white bus.

"Look there," Jesus says, pointing at the bus. "Those are agricultural workers; those are the jobs many of us end up having to work when we get here."

They arrive at the station and say their goodbyes for the day. As the sun starts to rise, Brayan waits for a few minutes on a bench before the train approaches.

When it arrives, he quickly scans an electronic boarding pass on the tap-and-go station and weaves through commuters into the train, taking the stairs to the top of the cabin. He grabs a window seat, puts on his headphones and listens to Puerto-Rican alternative hip-hop musicians Calle 13. He begins reading through his *We the People* textbook for his government class.

The train glides by nine other stops before reaching the Opa-locka station. He then hops on a bus to get to the North Campus around 8:30 a.m.

On most school days, Brayan leaves home around 6 a.m. and doesn't return until 6 p.m. He'll arrive early, go to his classes, study in the computer lab and later mirror his morning trip to the background of a setting sun.

"I worry if school is even worth it," Brayan said, during a recent commute. "Can I pay for next semester? I had to drop one of the five classes I had picked. This is what my parents want, this is their dream. So many of my uncles, aunts and cousins have so much hope in me. They believe in me more than I do sometimes."

As the national conversation on immigration reform remains a top-shelf issue, Florida is no exception.

In 2012, President Barack Obama signed the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. The memorandum provides a temporary solution for undocumented immigrants who are under 31, came to the U.S. while under the age of 16 and have attend, attended or have graduated from high school or completed a General Education Development (GED) degree.

Gov. Rick Scott, facing reelection in November and hoping to gain momentum with Hispanic voters, has faced increased pressure from Florida legislators on the issue of tuition equality for undocumented students.

Last week, he said he would support in-state tuition for undocumented students.

"I'll certainly consider it," Scott told the Florida Hispanic Legislative Caucus in early February, neither announcing or denouncing support for new legislation. "I think tuition is too high."

In February, HB-851, was filed in the house by District 119 Rep. Jeanette Nuñez, a Republican from Miami. The bill aims to establish resident status for tuition purposes for cases like Brayan's.

Passing legislation like that comes with challenges. It's been 11 years since the first piece of legislation regarding in-state tuition for undocumented students was debated in Florida, and though it's been discussed at several levels, nothing has ever been passed.

"There's a lot of football left to be played," said Nuñez of the bill's chances of becoming law. "There are 60 days of Legislature. ... I'm confident that this is as good a chance as any it'll have."

Students who attended at least three years of high school in the state and apply for college within two years of graduation would be covered by the bill. At least 15 other states have passed similar laws.

"It's not just a question of fairness, it's a question about what type of society and economy we want to live in," said state Rep. Jose Javier Rodriguez, D-Miami. "These are students that the state has already invested in going through high school. Just at the point where they're going to start being productive in society they're being cut off."

Eduardo Padrón, the president at MDC, believes helping students in this position isn't as much an intellectual issue as it is a moral one. He commends students like Brayan for their commitment to an education and recalls that without similar opportunities he himself wouldn't be where he is today.

"If I had to pay four times the cost of tuition at the time I came here I would not have been able to complete college," Padrón said. "This is very personal. I think [tuition equality] is personal to anyone who understands the basic fabric of America. It's something that needs to happen and it needs to happen now."

Growing up in Jaral del Progreso, a city about four hours northwest of Mexico City, was a humble start.

"I had a doll, it had one broken eye. I used to make it clothes, sew little dresses for it," said Brayan's mother, Maria de los Angeles Aguilar. "I saw my doll as beautiful, but she was ragged and broken. I always dreamed when I could, I wanted to give my kids something I never had."

On a recent Wednesday night, the family gathered in the living room of the Boynton Beach home they recently moved into. Abril Denisse Vazquez, Brayan's 9-year-old sister, is sitting on a couch on the far side of the room, finishing her homework. Jesus and Maria recall memories of their early life in Mexico, as Brayan listens intently.

Jesus and Maria were born and raised in Jaral del Progreso. They met in high school and started dating after Maria split up with a boyfriend. They laugh as they talk about how they would go out on Sundays, per tradition, to El Jardin or the garden. It was a small park

where people would walk around looking for dates and mingle. Single women would walk in one line and the men would walk in a parallel line, going for a stroll in hopes of finding a match.

“When I met him and he asked me to go around the garden, we started to get to know each other more,” Maria said. Her smile got bigger as she looked toward her husband. “He was so quiet. I felt so happy when I was with him. I knew every Sunday we’d go out. I even took him to church.”

Jesus would leave to the United States early in their relationship, already having family in Arizona.

Maria remembers the day: Jan. 4, 1994. It was a sad day, she said softly, the uncertainty of the man she loved weighing on her.

They wouldn’t speak again until November that year, but Maria always prayed for him. When they finally spoke on the phone, Jesus told her he missed her. Maria didn’t tell him, but she decided she’d wait for him.

When he returned to Mexico, a few years later, they married. They had Brayan in 1995 and Jesus constantly jumped between the U.S. and Mexico for work.

“Back then, it was easier to save money as a single man in the U.S.,” Jesus said. “I lived with my sister, so I’d pay \$100 in rent, \$50 in food. I could send [Maria] money back through Western Union or MoneyGram.”

Maria raised Brayan without the constant presence of his father. Around the time Brayan was 2, Maria decided she’d come to the U.S. with her son for the first time.

“When I brought him he was 2 years old. We walked through a canal and I kept walking, soaking wet,” she recalls, her voice softly painting the details of the difficult journey. “We walked and my face was cut from the branches. The clothing would get stuck on the branches. I walked with him, protecting him. It was hard, so hard. We were a group of about 12 people, and they put us on a truck to bring us over.”

Maria would end up returning to Mexico when Brayan was still a baby. The financial constraints in the 1990s made it difficult for her to stay. Ten years later she’d come back for good, this time with her 2-year-old daughter and 12-year-old Brayan.

A family enjoying the simple pleasure of a roof over their head, watching TV and food in the refrigerator are what they always fought for. It’s not a life of luxury — the family makes under \$30,000 a year, but they’ve got what they need, and more importantly, each other.

“We are not a perfect family,” Jesus said. “We argue, we disagree, but we try to talk things out.”

They take their conversation outside to the porch and continue talking about their day. Outside, Maria giggles as Denisse tell her a joke about her friend at school, whose name is May but instead she calls her March.

Jesus gets up from the porch and walks onto the lawn. He leans over and starts to pull weeds from the grass. He wants to keep the grass of his new home pristine. Brayan sees his dad and joins him. They quietly pull weeds for half an hour, piling them up into a big stack before receding back into their home around 9 p.m.

They'll go to sleep and in a few short hours, they'll be up again for school and work, ready to face the type of long days they've fought so hard to keep.

After his first class, Brayan usually grabs a seat by the lake at North Campus to eat his lunch. Today he's eating the turkey, queso fresco and avocado sandwiches his mother made, along with grapes, a protein bar and a bottled water. He normally sits by himself.

"It's hard to make friends," Brayan said. "When you only come to school twice a week, it's not easy to meet people."

His second class, intermediate algebra, lets out at about 3:30 p.m. From North Campus he'll catch a bus back to the train station. The Tri-Rail train he usually takes leaves around 4:15 p.m., but today he is running a bit late. That means he has to wait a half hour for the next train.

Sitting at the station, waiting, he begins to talk about his story. Words uttered last night are echoed. Brayan's thoughts, begin to wander toward his future and his family, and the possible hardships his sister might face when she gets older.

"You can't break her smile, you can't tell her that not having nine-digit [Social Security] number won't let her accomplish all her dreams," he says, his voice shaky and his eyes slightly welling up. "You can't break her smile, but when 16 comes along, the cruel reality hits her. I don't dare to tell her what life is like being undocumented."

On the ride back, Brayan is quiet. He's looking out the window of the northbound train as the sun sets.

He breaks his silence when asked about his dreams. He mentions wanting to help people in less-than-favorable positions. His goal is to eventually start a safehouse for women and children who've been through traumatic experiences.

At the end of the day, Brayan will have traveled more than 110 miles on two trains and two buses. He'll file off the train and get picked up by Jesus, who waits for him at the Boynton Beach station with his sister. He isn't quiet like in the morning. In the car he jokes around with his sister. they discuss their day, and all that happened at school.

Despite the length, Brayan says he has learned to love his commute.

"People might feel sorry for me because I have to travel for an hour and 30 minutes on the train," he said. "But if I was driving in a car, I wouldn't meet some of the amazing people I've met."

This article originally ran in The Reporter, Miami Dade College's student newspaper.

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