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## Fabiola Santiago: Will Weatherford revives hope for Florida's undocumented students

By Fabiola Santiago

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Young people in college who've lived all their lives in Florida, graduated from Florida high schools — often times at the top of their class — yet are denied in-state tuition rates because of their uncertain immigration status have found a formidable new champion: Republican House Speaker Will Weatherford.

This may turn out to be one of the most rewarding issues the Pasco County legislator has ever tackled.

These young people are worth fighting for, believe me.

Whenever I need a boost to regain optimism about the future, I think back to the day I shared with college students at Miami Dade College's campus in Homestead.

I drove south on Florida's Turnpike past endless miles of lush green fields and red-tile roofed housing developments to talk about the writing process with students. Invited by English professor Jose M. Blanco, I was prepared to share useful tips and inspire with hopeful words with what surely would be a group of students depressed about the state of the economy and worried about their future.

But the most important lesson that day was mine to learn.

On this bright, clean campus with walls accented in navy blue and red sporting artwork by local artists and students, there was little, if any, negativity — despite the fraught times.

An exceptionally diverse student body — Hispanics of various nationalities and immigration statuses, African-Americans, Caribbean whites and blacks, and non-Hispanic white students — walked along the halls engaged in conversation with each other, gathered in animated small groups to talk, and sat side-by-side in classrooms.

The energy in the packed room where I spoke and the students' eagerness to pry every morsel of useful skill from the professional before them was overwhelming.

The small minds of lawmakers who'd like to see nothing less than a wall at the Mexican border topped with barbed-wire and rigged to electrocute trespassers was nowhere to be found here.

These were as borderless as people come.

But the fear of some students, the children of the undocumented, lurked in the background.

Some of these young people knew of life in no country but this one, felt as American as their classmates, and were haunted by the possibility that they or their families would be singled out and deported. They were aware that, had it not been for the willingness and skills of MDC leaders who raised scholarship money and jumped through all sorts of legal hoops to allow them to be here, they wouldn't be.

Their professor told me stories about teaching A-students who also worked picking okra and squash in those lush green fields the rest of us easily dismiss as scenery.

"I love my job," Professor Blanco, once a Cuban refugee, told me.

I easily understood why.

The spirit on which this nation was built thrived in that college, where not one student was glued to an iPhone while I spoke, where everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, shared one goal — getting an education — and where demonstrations of the best of humanity abounded.

That Florida's lawmakers have for far too long erected a wall on higher education, punishing the children of undocumented immigrants by making them pay more than four times the cost of tuition, doesn't serve anyone's agenda, least of all, that of the state's future.

Critics would like one to believe that the children of the undocumented compete with "legal" children for resources, but spend a day at MDC and see how the work ethic, the can-do attitude, and the commitment of these immigrant children are inspiring to everyone.

With the speaker's leadership, there's renewed hope that this issue of unfair tuition practices doesn't again deteriorate into another dead-end kerfuffle.

May this be the session that the Florida Legislature does right by all of the state's college-bound children.