Jose Antonio Vargas: My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant

Gates PSL: Jose Antonio Vargas

MAY 7, 2012

Laura Heisman

My name is Laura Heisman, I’m with the Social Work Immigration Alliance at UW.

James Liam

Hi, I’m James Liam also with the Social Work Immigration Alliance at UW. Thanks for being here.

Laura Heisman

But before we get started, this is going to be more of an interactive conversation rather than a speech, so be thinking about questions you want to ask Jose and we’ll kind of kick it off. We did want to thank our sponsors before we get started. So many people contributed to make this day happen: the ASUW, the GPSS, and the Diversity Research Institute. Thanks to the Ethnic Cultural Center, the Q Center, the School of Social Work, obviously, the Law School also obviously, the Department of Communications, and the Social Justice Fund of the Northwest.

So we’ll start off with. I’m sure most of you have seen this, but just a refresher, we’re going to start off with the Define American video and bethinking of your questions as we get started.

Jose Antonio Vargas

My name is Jose Antonio Vargas. I was born in the Philippines. I moved to the United States when I was twelve. My mother wanted to give me a better life, so she sent me to live with my grandparents in Silicon Valley. I loved America the moment I got here, embraced the language, the culture, the people. English was my second language and I learned to speak American by watching Frasier, Home Improvement, and the Golden Girls. I won the spelling bee in eighth grade by spelling indefatigable. In high school, I fell in love with journalism. I started working for my local newspaper, the Mountain View Voice, then I got hired at the Washington Post. I covered the 2008 presidential campaign from traveling on Hilary Clinton’s plane to pheasant hunting with Huckabee. I’ve interviewed Al Gore for Rolling Stone and profiled Martin Zuckerberg for the New Yorker. I even won a Pulitzer Prize for covering the Virginia Tech massacre.

At age sixteen I rode my bike to the DMV to get my driver’s permit. I brought my green card with me. The woman at the DMV flipped it around, she leaned over and she whispered, “This is fake, don’t come back here again.” I went home and confronted my grandfather. That was the first time I realized that I’m an undocumented immigrant, what some people call an illegal. The person I told was Mrs. Denny, my choir teacher. After she told me she was planning a choir trip to Japan, I told her I couldn’t afford it. She said we’d find a way, we’d figure it out. Then I decided to tell her the truth. It’s not really about the money, I said, I don’t have the right passport. I’m not supposed to be here. Mrs. Denny got it. The next day, she told me the choir was going to Hawaii instead.
Mrs. Denny

It just mattered to me that Jose was hard working, he was enthusiastic, he was always coming to class and it’s our job to educate them to make them better citizens of the world. It doesn’t matter what country they’re from or what their background or their legal papers are.

Jose Antonio Vargas

Mrs. Denny was the very first member of my personal underground railroad: Americans who decided to help undocumented immigrants like me. Other members of my underground railroad include Rich Fisher, my high school superintendent and Pat Highland, my high school principal. For more than a decade now, Pat and Rich have been with me every step of the way, guiding me and supporting me as I’ve tried to define what it means to be an American.

I define American as someone who works really hard, someone who’s proud to be in this country and wants to contribute to it. I’m independent, I pay taxes, I’m self-sufficient. I’m an American. I just don’t have the right papers. I take full responsibility for my actions and I’m sorry for the laws that I broke. What would you do if you were a teacher and you found out that a student in your glee club can’t travel for a competition. What would you do if you were a high school principal and found out that one of your students can’t apply for financial aid? What you do if your child’s best friend didn’t have papers? As a journalist, I’ve decided to do what I know best: ask questions. So let’s talk. What would you do?

James Liam

Okay, so just a little bit about SWIA for you guys if you guys aren’t familiar. SWIA is a student led group here at the school of Social Work, it’s open to everyone. I don’t where Miriam and Nancy went, oh there’s Nancy, but if you see one of them, we did thank our sponsors earlier, but it definitely wouldn’t have happened without the work of them, Miriam and Nancy, so if you get a chance to thank them, I definitely would.

What else? I was just going to talk a little bit about Jose just kind of to applaud his courage and the work that he’s done. Let’s see if I can say it right, indefatigable work that he’s done. It’s really inspirational, it’s really amazing, so I want to thank him for being here and thank you guys for joining this discussion.

Laura Heisman

So basically we have to have everything said into the microphone because we’re on the UW iTunes.

Jose Antonio Vargas

OH and some people are leaving at 1:30 so we kind of need to speed it up. Hold on let me get my burrito.

Laura

You can, if you want to stay...

Jose

OH no, no it’s okay we can start talking.
Laura

So if you want to ask a question, I can come to you or I can repeat it into the microphone or however is best.

Jose

And how many people are coming here to the talk? Okay so I’ll try not to say the same thing so I don’t bore you.

Thank you for having me here. One of my dearest friends, Karen lives in Seattle so it’s like perfect to get an excuse to come here. And one of my dearest friends actually graduated from your law school. She loved it here. She’s been advising me. She’s actually a lawyer now for ICE. I’m not going to say her name, but she’s got my back as much as she can help me out.

So the video’s really hard for me to watch. I’ve seen it maybe once. It’s just, you know, I mean we filmed it for two nights just to get me in that space of like, I really didn’t want to do the video at all. I felt like the essay will speak for itself but my friends who are the cofounders of The Fine American really felt strongly that there needed a visual component. That’s in my living room and the funniest thing I get about that video is people that Mrs. Denny is made up. A lot of people think that Mrs. Denny is made up. A lot of people think she is an actress. I’ve actually had people tell me, is that Mrs. Denny, did you hire her to say that? I’m like no that’s actually her. So it’s been interesting the reaction to it and the surprise of how many, the most surprising thing for me is how many schools have used it. There’s a high school in Alabama, a history teacher built an entire US history curriculum this spring on just defining American was the... So I was really, really happy about that. There’s a Jewish school here, the Yeshiva High School gave us an I Define American video and the teacher who teaches English actually built the curriculum on, again, literature on defining American and what that means. So from the very beginning, I think we should, since I’m in the law school it probably is appropriate to talk about SB1070. So I was actually in DC on the steps of the Supreme Court on the day of the hearing. And I think all of you know that it’s not looking very good. It looks like it’s going to be a split decision. And judging by the lines of questioning they’re probably going to uphold the most controversial provision which is that a cop can you know show me papers. Outside of the technicality of a cop being able to stop anybody here she wants who they deemed to be undocumented is this really larger question of well hold on us again how can you tell if somebody looks quote unquote illegal? And really that strikes at the heart of again whom we consider to be American and how we define. We didn’t think about this when we had a 6 hour session figuring out a name for the campaign. I know that I didn’t want the word immigrant even in the title. I knew that. When we were doing a 6 hour brainstorming session on who the target audience is. So the people that started Define American are three of my closest friends, an African American woman whose parents came from Liberia who were actually undocumented and got their citizenship through the Reagan amnesty program in the mid-eighties, Alicia Menendez who is half of Cuban, half Irish and are choking and kind of heterosexual white guy Jake who grew up in Tennessee. His grandparents are from Germany. So when we started the kind of naming process and naming this campaign it was really, really crucial. And we all had to come up with you know who is the target audience like who am I talking to them here. And my target audience was Michelle Malkin in my head like my target audience was a first generation, second generation Asian American woman in the Midwest somewhere who hates that she’s always being lumped with these quote unquote illegal people and who always makes the argument that they should do it the way my parents did it. Why can’t they wait in the back of the line? I wanted that to been my target group. Jim Moos target groups are African Americans who feel economically challenged by the undocumented workers that are coming and taking their jobs. Jakes target groups is his dad who still calls as people you know sometimes not very nice names will. And the community that he grew up
in Tennessee, are not quite involved when it comes to this issue, right? The strangers are taking over. Alicia’s target audience is how do we take this issue outside of the in some ways, Latino ghetto that it’s been in, as if all undocumented people are from Mexico and as if everybody’s brown, right? How do you honor and respect that fact without being limited to it? In a sense from just the target groups, we actually filmed this entire thing, I finally saw footage a couple of months ago, it’s actually really good. It’s interesting our goal was to broaden it, to take it outside of the kind of prism, the usual box that this issue has been relegated to. You know what I mean by ghettoized, right? And as a journalist, my training has always been, I need to talk to everybody. That’s just kind of how I’m trained. I’m trained to be able to, I mean I call it this Rashomon like quality of being able to see one issue from six different points of views. And I actually think that’s been my biggest asset going into this campaign and going into whatever it is that I’m experiencing, is that I’m trained to be able to sit in front of somebody who considers me an alien and thinks that I’m a threat to his or her livelihood. I’m trained to talk to people who don’t agree with. I’m trained to talk to people who question, who can’t quite explain to me in factual terms what they’re actually against because it’s something incredibly visceral, right? So I wrote that essay last summer. I’m currently working on a bigger essay that I’m really excited. It’s going to run in a few weeks. It’s going to be an even bigger dare. So I’ve spent the past year, visited twenty states, done sixty events in the past eleven months and so being in Alabama and Georgia. One little thing before I open up this conversation. I spoke at the University of Georgia in Athens two weeks ago. And they were a little concerned, so they actually invited extra security just in case Tea Part people started showing up. I had just done a CSPAN panel with Juan Williams and Toure and I said something I guess that was viewed by the KKK people as being anti-white and so I started appearing in their blogs. I shouldn’t be laughing about this. So I did this event and about three hundred people showed up and a group of undocumented students showed up, all members of this thing called Freedom University. Have you heard of this? Can you tell us sir, what is Freedom University?

**Audience One**

It’s a school started by some educators who were really outraged by the lack of access to education for students and so they started this in DC I believe?

**Jose Antonio Vargas**

And they’re trying to get accreditation. Isn’t that amazing? Groups of professors just got together and said we got to educate these kids, so they call it Freedom University. So some members of this group showed up. And when the speech was over, we went out to dessert, I bought them dessert. And they had to drive back from Athens to Atlanta and of course I’m asking, hey do you have a driver’s license? None of them have a license. Can you imagine a Toyota Tercel with five young Latinos in the Tercel, four boys, one young woman? The young woman is the one driving the four boys. I’m like, hey you can’t. I’m like freaking out. I’m like really do you want to do this? Oh yeah, I do it all the time, this is Georgia, you have to drive around. And then she looks at me and she starts laughing and she goes, oh no it’s okay, when I get nervous, when I’m driving I just tell myself, it’s okay I’m white. It’s okay, I’m white, It’s okay, I’m white. Do you get what I’m saying? This girl driving at night time in Athens, Georgia, when she gets nervous, maybe she spots a cop, she tells herself to calm herself down it’s going to be okay, I’m white. That is the depth of what we’re talking about. And mind you even though my name is Jose Antonio Vargas, I look like this, I’m Asian. I’ve had some dreamers come up to me and actually say, do you think you would have passed if you looked a little more Mexican or if you didn’t speak English the way that you do? I’m not sure I would have, you know. It’s so funny because even what I’m talking about right now, we were at Karen’s house, and we were listening to this radio show on immigration and it was just laughable what they were talking about. This is NPR and we are still at the Mexicans are taking away jobs, right? So, the conversation is still on this incredibly superficial level. We still haven’t gotten beyond
the first paragraph and here I am talking about Defining American, and they’re just like what, but you’re not? My three biggest questions: why haven’t you gotten deported? I don’t know. Why don’t you just make yourself legal? Because I’m a masochist, this is so much more fun. And three, do you think you belong to a special group of people that can just break any law that you want? So I’m actually addressing those three questions in the essay that I’m writing right now. And the beauty of it is it’s really me as a reporter going around the country and talking about most everybody that I’ve met and talking about again, the complexity of the issue and this is really beyond papers. This is a conversation way beyond any piece of paper. And I think we really need to contextualize it that way, and frame it that way. This is about human dignity. So please ask me some questions or else I’m just going to keep talking. I don’t want to keep talking because that will tell you my presentation tonight.

What was that Karen?

Yeah if you want to do that.

Don’t be scared, I don’t bite. She is such a Mom I love it. Oh it’s gonna break or something, this high tech stuff.

So please any other, opening up for some questions. We’re like itching for a question. You want to ask a question? Yeah, so I guess let’s just pass the mic around.

Audience one

I’m just curious if there was that one moment that you’re like I have to come out and I have to explain my story at a bigger scale than just a personal relationship like what led you to this? There’s got to be

Jose Antonio Vargas

Mark Zuckerberg.

Audience one

That one moment. You know what I mean, there’s this long trail of things you’ve gone through, that add up.

Jose Antonio Vargas

Oh yeah.

Audience one

But there’s got to be that one moment that you are like ‘I’m doing this because of this one moment…’

Jose Antonio Vargas

I think it started I think moving after the presidential campaign—I remember when Obama got elected president, and I remember actually covering it at the time and being in D.C. and the Washington Post newsroom was like three blocks from the White House. On the night that he won, I don’t know if you remember this, people just started just kinda running towards the White House and throwing a party. And I got out of the office at three and my apartment is like 5 blocks from the
White House so I just decided at 4:00 AM to just walk to the White House and just sit on one of the benches in Lafayette Park. And to me, Obama getting elected... I’ve always framed American history maybe because I was spoiled, Howard Zinn’s “People’s History of the United States” of it in high school. I didn’t realize how liberal that was until I moved to DC. They’re like what was your text book? Howard Zinn, you know like OK. It’s always been about the other. The history of America has always been about whom we consider to be the other in America, right? And here we are we had just elected the quintessential other. We had just elected for rock Hussein Obama said. And I followed the Bomaron in lily white New Hampshire walking going oh my god what is happening, right? Here he is he just got elected president. And I know the moment the guy got elected president anybody in this country who has ever felt like “the other” Latinos, black people, Asian people, gay people all of us felt like wait up now what? We’re next. What’s gonna happen now? So that was when I started feeling like OK what do I do? And then what I did was I went to work for Arianna Huffington for a year. And then I left her. I started just leaving. I started kind of like I think I started almost preparing myself for whatever it was I wanted to do. I was approaching 30 which for me was a big deal because when I was younger I was like, by the time I’m 30 this thing is gonna get fixed. It’ll get fixed. I’ll just keep writing my way into America. I’ll just keep writing these articles and winning awards and whatever. And then I got the biggest assignment of my life was profiling Mark Zuckerberg for The New Yorker before The Social Network came out. And I remember taking a long walk with his on California Avenue near the Facebook headquarters which is right near Stanford University. And here I am asking him about why you miss it should take a in college what is this really about? This is not about money. What is this about? Here I am forcing Mark Zuckerberg this was his first major big profile right? I had five interviews with him. I’ll interviewed his parents, his girlfriend, went to his house. Here I am asking him to do this. And at one point He goes so Jose where are you from? The easy answer would have been I’m from Mountain View which is right next door but that isn’t the full story. And it just got a little too surreal that cure a am like writing like this amazing I’ve been really, really blessed in my career I’ve worked really hard for it. And I couldn’t answer Zuckerberg this question. So I think that’s when I started thinking in my head now what do I do after this profile ran? So the profile runs in September 2010 by June I’m out, right? That was my next article. And then between that is the Dream act of failed the senate in December 18. That was when I took a long walk from my apartment to like Brooklyn Bridge listening to Rachmaninoff and Beyonce and Jay-Z in my iPhone. When I got back home are mike OK I think we’re doing this this is what we’re going to do. And then I met with my fringe and new one of my closest friends and I told her that I wanted to do this. And she said well you know that’s good and I actually think it’s more of an obligation Jose. Can you imagine this African American woman in my living room drinking red wine and she goes, “It’s actually an obligation”. She is right. She was right. So that’s why I knew that when I did this I couldn’t just be about myself. It had to be about something way bigger so that’s what Define American, that’s where that starts. How do we tell other people’s stories? How do I stay in my lane which is that I’m a storyteller? It’s funny because again people have said now that I’m an activist warn advocate. I guess you can call me whenever you want to call me but I consider myself first and foremost a storyteller and I’m doing what I’ve always done. The differences I’m a part of this one. Sometimes when he gets a little crazy I’m I got I wish I was just writing about this Jose Vargas dude you know? I am actually going through it myself. So it’s been very weird and disorienting that way. By the way I recently told this to Zuckerberg. I’m doing a memoir I was like, ‘hey it’s gonna be in the book’. He’s like, ‘oh, great’.

Any other questions? You’re going to make me nervous if you don’t ask me questions so please just ask away.

Yeah.

I’m glad you brought that up so there’s this thing called the Defense of Marriage Act that Clinton
signed into law. So even though in New York State or in Iowa and hopefully Washington State will join them is now granting same sex marriage licenses to gay couples, immigration is regulated by the Federal gov’t not the states. Jan Brewer can think whatever she wants to think, head of Arizona but that’s really the biggest argument before the Supreme Court is that this state… Does the state have the rights to preempt what is really the jurisdiction of the Federal gov’t? So because of the Defense of Marriage Act that doesn’t recognize same sex marriage federally even though my marriage is honored by New York State it wouldn’t be honored by the Federal gov’t that grants about these says. So one of my lawyers earlier on said, “Why don’t I just marry somebody and then sue the Federal gov’t for violating my 14th amendment rights?” I’m not sure I’m in any state to sue anybody so I’m not. I didn’t follow that advice. It’s been really hard for people to sometimes connect the dots between gay rights and immigrant rights. And there’s just so much intersection there. But yeah that’s why I can’t get married. And actually there was a group called Immigration Equality. Have you heard of this group? It’s a really great group. They deal about the immigration rights of same sex couples.

I’m in a room full of, come on people.

Yes? Oh yeah I think you need a mic.

**Audience two**

So after you came out was there a moment in time that you felt so fearful or did you feel fear of just shutting down and not moving forward with the movement with this Define American and what you’re doing now?

**Jose Antonio Vargas**

Not after. Before, I certainly had my reservations but I think it was mostly a family stuff of the, you know I’m Filipino. In Tagalog, we call undocumented people t and t, which translates to tago at itago, which means hiding and hiding, you hide. By the way so out of the 12,000,000 undocumented people in America, one million are Asian or Pacific Islander and the largest proportion of that are Filipinos. Filipinos, Chinese, Koreans and Indians those are the four largest undocumented groups within the Asian community. I wasn’t sure of my grandmother who is about to be 75… Can you imagine by the way… I can only imagine what other parents and other… Every time I left the house, she was afraid that I was going to get picked up. It got to the point of where I would never even tell her where I was going. It got to a point where… Because as far as my grandparents were concerned their idea of success was me working at Fry’s electronics or working at the flea market. That was success. That was the success that they knew. They couldn’t give a shit about the Washington Post, they didn’t even know what it was. And here I am flying around the country they were so scared. During my senior year I probably spent more time and Terrence house than I did in my own house. And I was so selfish and. I really blame to them a lot when I was younger. I wasn’t mature enough to understand what they did. I was like how can you just lie to me? How can you put me in this situation without giving me any sort of, you know, yeah. Every time I’d leave the house my grandmother would be really fearful. I was really more worried for her. I was actually thinking, there was a plan in my head and this is when you are thinking because we’re about to give… So I did an interview with Good Morning America and World News Tonight we were going to give it to 60 minutes and I remember talking to the producer there and that’s when I was like oh god maybe I can’t do this. Why don’t I just go to the Philippines were I haven’t been since I was 12? The Internet doesn’t require a passport I can write from anywhere and just write my coming out essay in the Philippines. But then I felt that that would have been too cowardly, right? But when I decided that I was going to do this it’s so funny I’m not really… It’s funny what happens when fear doesn’t become the dominant factor anymore, right? I am more afraid of not being successful in this thing,
of not bringing in more voices, which is really the goal. I am afraid of that. I am not afraid of ICE picking me up. I mean, I’ve gotten to a point now where I’m like you want to arrest me, please. The Filipinos will get really, really mad. Can you imagine all the Filipino nurses and accountants just leaving their jobs in protest? Can you live without lumpias and Adobos? I don’t know. I’m just kidding. I’m just totally kidding, totally kidding. And so I’m not really afraid of that but, Karen’s like… The hardest time I have is when I meet with Dreamers. That’s probably the hardest thing for me. It’s almost like survivor guilt. It’s like, how did I make this through, I am surprised, I asked Karen once are you surprised I got this far? I can’t believe I got this far. And I look at the skids. I was just in Miami meeting with Gabby Pacheco and some other Dreamers. All I can really tell them is you can never say no to yourself. Everybody else and everything else is mostly going to say no that you have to have the power to say yes to yourself. That you are not going to be determined, I mean you’re not going to be defined and limited by pieces of paper, that you are more than this. Because you talk to the undocumented Dreamers now who have grown up with this, this is their life, this is it. And when I was growing up with this there was no community. There was no Facebook. There was no Twitter. There was no YouTube. I didn’t know anybody else who was an undocumented person until fall 2009. I was so afraid to even meet them in person. I read about them. I have been Google alerting Dream activists since 2005 since Google Alert got created. But I never wanted to meet them in person because I was too ashamed.

You want to pass that thing he? Thank you.

Miriam.

Miriam

Yes. It is interesting that you mentioned that because seeing different Dreamer groups across different states, I am originally from California so I still say connected with some of the young people organizing down there.

Jose Antonio Vargas

Where in L.A.?

Miriam

L.A.. Julio Delgado…

Jose Antonio Vargas

That’s a big one. L.A., a Chicago. Chicago’s a big one. Texas.

Miriam

Yeah Texas.

And often I hear from them, when I mention your name or if somehow you come into the conversation. You’re coming out is a big deal for them in how they organize now. And I’m wondering what your thoughts are around that?

Jose Antonio Vargas

Oh that’s really great. We are living in the age of disruption. Everything is getting disrupted, right? I have been very clear about this from the very beginning. The Dreamers led me. I am not an
organizer. I’m not an active this. I just joined the party, right? This is why from the very beginning we said Define American wasn’t just about the Dream Act. Can you imagine if we had launched Define American and said that I’m just fighting for the Dream Act and here I am, all of these kids have been organizing it since they were in high school, and all of a sudden I show up and I take the credit? That would’ve been horrible. Again, this is where studying the civil rights in the fifties and sixties was really instructive to me. I was actually a prepared, Miriam for them not to embrace me. I remember preparing a series of Tweets, you know? Just preparing if any one of them said, “He’s not one of us, he doesn’t represent us. He is too privileged.” Or, “He got too successful,” or, “He lied,” or whatever. I was prepared for that. I was prepared for all… Especially the leaders in the movement to completely reject me. So I was really pleasantly surprised that they have really been amazingly supportive.

Right now I have 114 text messages. This is from today. And this is mostly from undocumented people, kids that have been, “Hey can you read my Bio I’m submitting it to Dick Durbin?” or “Can you help me with a press release?” I am getting help now so I am not the only one returning all of this stuff. So I think they have looked at me as, “OK he knows how to write, he knows how to talk to media”. I’m like, “OK guys, can you make sure when we do events can you bring the Jewish groups can you bring the black groups?” you can’t do any more immigration events and just have Hispanic and Asian people in it. That time is over. Like Karen was just making this comment about the May Day parade here in Seattle. Most of the immigrant groups were mostly Latinos apparently. And again I am not blaming or none of that. All I am saying is we just need to make sure we’re opening up this discussion as much as we can and that black people and white people feel welcome. And in some ways almost feel responsible. That they have been silent for too long, that we have let FAIR and Numbers USA and CIS frame the conversation in which they can come up with something called Secure Communities and make it sound as if it’s actually about securing a community when really it’s just about hate mongering. So this is really important. One of the best meetings that we’ve had is Karen assembled in meeting of Seattle ELL teachers. We did this two months ago now. And we met up, like 80 of us, mostly white a couple of Asian people, some Hispanic people. And one of the best part was when this elderly white woman raised her hand and said she wasn’t sure if she is allowed to talk about it. Because one of the Latino ELL teachers was saying how tired, here she was being the only person to go to the board and saying well here’s yet and other Hispanic talking about immigration surprise, surprise. Can you imagine if all the white teachers all the black teachers in the Seattle public schools system when to the school board, signed a petition and said um, this is our issue too? That’s powerful. It will happen. Karen is going to help me with this. We are actually using Seattle as kind of a lab for this because I think it’s an interesting place to do that.

Laura

So you just segued into my question for you.

Jose Antonio Vargas

I prepare to four you Laura it. I tipped it off.

Laura

Oh my gosh you know my name.

You spoke about obligation and the obligation that you have to do this work. And I think that a lot of this we come from a lot of different spheres and I think we’d like to know about what a good ally would be like? You have a friend in ice, you have a friend and public education, what does that look
like for us coming from all of these different places, all these different ethnicities, what’s an ally?

Jose Antonio Vargas

And again for me that’s where my training as a journalist again comes into play. That’s what I’d do, right? So I think within your own sphere, and again I’m going to open it up tonight so it started here. This idea of white privilege of how white people are really in a position, in this really desperate position to talk to other white people about this issue. We all exist within our own support networks, within our own family members. How many times have you heard a relative oh or a coworker or a neighbor or a friend just say something really ignorant or bigoted? And do we ever stop them? It’s too hard a conversation it’s too uncomfortable. ‘I don’t wanna talk about that.’ I think those are the kind of conversations that really need to... What shouldn’t have surprised me but has surprised me deeply is just how poorly uninformed people are when it comes to this issue. When I talk about white privilege I’m talking mostly like in the conservative south, right? People don’t even have a language to talk about it. But I think for the conscious and awake white Allies that we have this idea of connecting the dots and making sure that when you speak about this issue, you remind people, ‘I’m a third generation Ireland or Germany or Italy or whatever’. I’m so sorry but we are not simply a country, a nation of immigrants we are also a nation of immigrants and slaves. That’s the truth, right? Unless you’re a native American who was here before Christopher Columbus got here and got lost. Or unless you are an African American brought here to slavery we all came here from somewhere, right? That is really the context that is so missing in the conversation. The way the media covers it, and again it’s so easy to gang up on the media. I’m a part of it, right? I actually think this is the most misunderstood policy issue in America because I think for the most part the media has poorly informed us into how even the process works. The fact that people can ask all over the country, people are like why don’t you just make yourself legal? I remember talking to this woman had a mitt Romney rally in Iowa once I tell her my story she’s like, “oh my god have you contacted senator Grassley?” 40:53?? He can totally help you.” And I’m like, ‘O that is so nice ma’am but you know no he actually can’t.’ I think Americans, once they hear the facts and the stories, can relate to it but we haven’t had that, again the conversation is completely superficial and it’s all about left, right, republican, democrat politicians framing it. They are really talking amongst themselves and we’re all just kind of paying attention to it saying like wait a second. It’s almost as if all of us are out of the closet, all of us have come out on this issue and they’re still in the closet. Does that make sense? And for me I remember PTA groups, Kiwanis clubs, chambers of commerce all of these groups are so important in kind of bringing other people into the table.

Any other questions? Yeah.

Audience three

I have a question. I just want to know what your response is to this. So as a person who is Korean American I am faced with a lot... our Korean American community especially those who are undocumented tend to be silent about immigration and I also think it’s also this Asian American culture thing to I just want to know what is your response to that?

Jose Antonio Vargas

That is such a good question. Last week, I just helped a kid, Korean kid who is an RN, a registered nurse and who is waiting tables and a sushi restaurant in Fremont in California. So the AP is writing a really good story on him and guess who his mentor is, his white pastor who bought him a bike when he was in high school. So Koreans are I guess big Christians, very religious. And when you go to his Facebook page it’s all evangelical quotes from the Bible and his pastor who happens to the white has been his support network will go. I’m just going to call in Ely. And Ely, listening to him
talk about how ashamed his family is, right, even getting him to get this interview with the AP, getting their permission, I think there is just a lot of shame and a lot of fear. I guess which is why, because I am an Asian, it’s been great hearing from other Asian American undocumented students who are like, ‘I’m so glad you did this I can talk to my parents and say, “OK”’. They can show your face and say, “oh my god see somebody who looks like us did this.” So that’s been great. My bigger concern is I did a few Asian American events. O it’s Asian American Pacific islander month. I’m Jeremy Lin how’re you doing? Just kidding. I’m a lot shorter than Jeremy Lin. I actually met him at the Time 100 party. He is so nice. He is going to give us a Define American video so I’m really excited about that. So when I do these events, and I did one of these in Chicago, for example, like 300 Filipinos showed up and I’m like, ‘so how many here are American citizens?’ Most everybody raises their hand. ‘How many here are registered voters?’ 10 people raise their hands, 10, 15 people. So after that I was like, ‘that’s it no more Asian events where they come in, they make up an award, they take a bunch of pictures and that’s it’. So now it’s like, ‘Alright, how many here are registered to vote? Like you understand that I’m fighting for something that you like, I don’t know, already have, right?’ Sometimes I think in the Asian American community I think more than any other community I don’t think, and I’m just going to be very blunt about this, I don’t think we have been as willing, not this generation the older generation, to build this much coalitions as we should be. This is why I am so glad, it’s really is kind of the Jeremy Len era in which we are much more integrated to other groups. I think our older siblings and our parents are like wait a minute that’s a black thing or that’s like a Hispanic thing or a gay thing like we don’t you know no, no, no, we just go to school and we get a house and we drive a nice car that’s we do. I don’t think for some reason we haven’t really been civic participants enough. But this is why it’s great that I think our generation, like your generation is changing that, right? That makes me personally of really hopeful. I did an event at the University of Chapel Hill where most of the kids were advocating for the undocumented students are Asian American and white students. They put together the whole immigrant rights week, 25 of them and there’s two undocumented people both Hispanic. I mean, to me that’s success.

Yes in the back.

Audience four

You also sort of segued into my question. With the impending election and the amount of people the Obama administration has deported and detained setting record numbers under I sit as a Latina who stumped for him because the election before I hadn’t stumped and I needed to or whatever it’s really hard for me to think about going in asking other Latinos to vote for him although obviously the alternative is so much worse but it’s also really hard to do that, you know? So I’m just curious about what you’re taking is with that, how you’re talking about the election and how you’re talking about Obama and what he has failed to do?

Jose Antonio Vargas

Okay last question which is a good question. When the history of the Obama Administration is written and I think he’s going to get reelected I think this is going to be maybe one of the two biggest if not the biggest dark, dark spot, a hole really. I don’t think he’s ever going to be able to justify historically why he did what he did. I would understand it if the republican house was more willing to play ball, right? For him to say, ‘hey, look I’m deporting all of these people so therefore give me this’. From the get go there was no dribbling going on anywhere. No one was playing ball. The moment he got elected president what did Mitch Mcconnell say? Mitch Mcconnell in the senate floor said that the number one goal of the republicans is to make sure that Brock Obama is a one term president, right? The day after Obama gets elected president. And the day he gets elected president what happens? The Birther Movement, I mean what luck do I have if their own
democratically elected president in the United States is being asked for his citizenship papers? So the fact that Obama has not found the courage and the will and the political capital to do this is going to be a big hole that he’s going to have to justify that he can never justify. Frankly I think for some reason, and you know gay rights and this being the two biggest things, for some reason it’s just not, somehow it doesn’t seem to be a part of his constitution. You know what I’m saying? And we are talking about a man whose father got through America through a student visa who by the way we could call an anchor baby which is a first generation American. By the way you why doesn’t nobody in the media ever frame it like that? Here’s a guy who was actually born of an immigrant dad, right? All I know is around this time in 2008 I was in New Mexico, Colorado and Virginia writing about the Latino vote because even though I am not Latino for the Washington Post I was Latino enough so they sent me to cover the Latino vote. And then I show up people are like why it and who are you are you lost? And Obama could not have one Virginia, Colorado and North Carolina without the Latino vote, without the Latino vote it would not have happened. So he is lucky that he is going up against etch-a-sketch Romney, that’s pure luck. Otherwise, you know and Marco Rubio, Marco Rubio is not going to be VP which means he has nothing to lose right now. Marco Rubio is building legacy. Marco Rubio is thinking about six years from now or 10 years from now. If Marco Rubio checkmate’s the president and actually comes up with a Dream act that actually gets it something it’s going to be really interesting. So you now let me ask you this are you going to vote for Obama?

My last point about this is I don’t understand how to me signing an executive order saying that you’re going to stop deport a nation of dream act up eligible kids is like a win, win, win, win, John Legend singing a song win. How can you not to do it? It makes absolutely no sense. If he does this he would fire up the base, completely fire it up, right? Because right now the way that it’s looking these Dream Act leaders that are organizing, they’re going to make Tampa and Charlotte looked miserable for both the republicans and the democrats and god bless them for that I will be right there with them because we need to make them uncomfortable. I am just glad that Rubio has joined the party. I’m just glad that he’s opened up a conversation now mind you we have not seen a single detail of this bill. I’m just glad that at least he’s willing to play ball and I think it is forcing Obama to somehow play ball too. But the beauty of this is let’s take this issue outside left and right, republican and democrat prism. I think we would all do better for that if we did that. So hopefully you come tonight and I won’t bore you. So thank you for the burrito.