

Immigration, at its most basic, is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “travel into a country for the purpose of permanent residence”. This proves rather insufficient in explaining a topic that has been at the root of so much recurring controversy throughout United States history — including in our contemporary political climate.

As a resident of the Contra Costa County, current issues surrounding immigration deeply affect the community I live in. In particular, the Trump administration’s rescission of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, as well as its empowerment of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to take increased action against undocumented immigrants, jeopardizes the tens of thousands of undocumented people residing in the County. Without a doubt, our community is being impacted.

Most glaringly, this impact entails the outright deportations of undocumented people, regardless of whether or not they have a criminal history. Last August, an Oakland nurse named Maria Mendoza-Sanchez and her husband were deported to Mexico; throughout the country, undocumented immigrants have been detained by ICE after dropping off their children at school, or, in the case of Rosa Maria Hernandez, on the way to the hospital.

But on a more insidious level, recent developments contribute to a heightened sense of general insecurity and fear among undocumented communities in the area. While insecurity has surely always plagued unauthorized residents of the U.S. (after all, deportations occurred under Obama as well) the Trump administration’s rhetoric and actions mark a strong anti-immigrant direction. Consequently, families in the Contra Costa County anxiously anticipate ICE raids and the possible detentions or deportations of their loved ones. Undocumented students — who attend both DVC campuses as well as numerous primary and secondary schools in the area — are concerned about their DACA status. Evidently, and with good reason, the current atmosphere for significant demographics in this community is one of considerable unease and disquiet.

Yet both here and nationwide, it’s also one of strong community activism and hope. When DACA was rescinded last September, protesters took to the streets within hours; here in Contra Costa County, a program called Stand Together Contra Costa provides legal representation and an emergency hotline for undocumented immigrants. And along with the court battles, there is a larger ideological discussion that seeks to redefine the very notion of the American Dream in this country.

Today, immigrants — particularly undocumented immigrants — are writing the next chapter of the American Dream by insisting that social mobility and the ideals of life,

liberty and the pursuit of happiness belong to everyone, regardless of their country of origin or their documentation status.

Part of this necessitates removing some of the man-made distinctions between “legal” and “illegal” immigrants. To examine this idea, I will tell a brief story about my parents.

My parents came to the United States from China in the early 1990s. My dad landed at Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport with a Form I-20 student visa, enabling him to stay legally in the United States; he is now a naturalized citizen. But that ultimately isn’t the important part — what’s important is that, like millions of other people coming here or brought here, he arrived with less than \$200 and limited understanding of English. What’s important is that, like the 800,000 young people with DACA status, he longed to complete his education and open new doors. What’s important is that, as a student who participated in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, he wanted more freedom of expression — just like many of the people, documented or undocumented, coming to this country today.

In other words, immigrants like my parents shouldn’t be set apart from the hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. because they have legal residency papers and undocumented immigrants don’t. No — it’s the opposite.

In the current political climate, these divisive designations of “legal” and “illegal” create a barrier of separation. But whether they crossed through the southern border or were resettled as refugees, all of these people came here for a more rewarding life for themselves and increased opportunity for their children. And that will always be more significant than any piece of paper.

Ultimately, it isn’t documents or nationality that define America’s immigrants — it’s unwavering human aspirations that transcend the arbitrary lines called borders. As Brenzy Solorzano explains in her powerful spoken-word poem “[un]Documented in L.A.”, borders and divisions “only exist because we create them ... You call me *indocumentada* but joke’s on you.” She maintains that she’s documented not through a particular piece of paper given out by a government, but rather because of the moments and ambitions in her life that make her human.

Of course, this unity and solidarity among all immigrants and all people should not erase the unique struggles that undocumented Americans face, nor should it lead to overly romanticized perspectives on immigration to America. The facts remain that many of the circumstances that compelled immigrants to come here are the result of the United States’ violent imperialism and destabilizing foreign interventions. Drawing from her

experience working with undocumented youth, Valeria Luiselli writes in her book *Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions*, "It is perhaps not the American Dream they pursue, but rather the more modest aspiration to wake up from the nightmare into which they were born."

Nevertheless, it's heartening that this new chapter of the American Dream recognizes that the desire to ensure that one's children have more opportunity is not just an American one, but a human one. It's a new chapter that maintains that one's right to seek a better life shouldn't be limited by nationality or documentation status, and that even the Constitution should be interpreted so that certain rights, such as equal access to education, transcend citizenship.

And at the end of the day, this next chapter, this interpretation, is one that every American — from Washington, D.C. to here in Contra Costa County — should affirm.