Locked In

WHEN A TRAVEL BAN KEEPS YOU FROM GOING HOME

STORY BY LORY HOUGH

NAJWA ELYAZGI, ED.M.'19, arrived in Boston on August 22, after spending the summer, reluctantly, 450 miles away in Virginia. It had been three months since she had graduated from George Mason University. Her original plan had been to go home after graduation — to her parents’ home in Tripoli, the capital of Libya. She was beyond excited to attend a cousin’s elaborate six-day wedding and be there for her sister when she had her baby. She was going to go on hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca.

“I was expecting a cheerful summer,” she says.

But none of that happened. In June, with her bags packed and awaiting one form from the Department of Homeland Security, Elyazgi learned that the United States Supreme Court upheld President Donald Trump’s right to ban people from certain countries from entering the United States. One of those countries was Libya. Elyazgi knew that if she flew home after graduation, she might not be allowed to come back to the United States to start her year at the Ed School as part of the Human Development and Psychology Program.

It wasn’t the first time her ability to pursue an education in the United States had been in jeopardy. In January 2017, while on a layover in Turkey on her way back to George Mason after the holiday break, Elyazgi was stranded at the airport.

“The same day, the travel ban was approved,” she says, referring to the first travel ban Trump imposed for citizens of Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. She was not allowed to board the plane to Dulles International.
Today, if you’re a young immigrant who received Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, you may be working an internship. You may be applying to medical school. Or you may be planning a trip to see a cousin get married this weekend. But next month, or next year? It’s all uncertain.

President Donald Trump or — ordered the end of DACA more than a year ago. Since then, its survival has relied on court decisions, with members of Congress unable to come to an agreement on immigration reform. The most recent court decision to extend DACA’s period in purgatory came in August, when a Texas judge ruled that DACA can continue for now — although he warned it will likely be deemed illegal in the long run.

And yet, even while its future is uncertain, DACA’s results are not. When it comes to helping the immigrant students who have used the program transition to adulthood, DACA works, according to newly published research from Professor Roberto Gonzales, who has been chronicling the effects of the policy since it went into effect in 2012.

The Findings
Gonzales and his co-authors describe adolescence for undocumented immigrants as “a waking nightmare,” a time when young people realize that the goals they had thought possible are, in fact, out of their reach because of their immigration status. He described this uncomfortable awakening in his 2015 book, Lives in Limbo. When DACA began, it unlocked previously unavailable rites of passage to students who immigrated to the United States without documentation. For students able to gain wider access through the program, the nightmare was largely over.

To understand more about the program’s impact, Gonzales and his colleagues analyzed interviews, conducted in 2015, of 408 beneficiaries of DACA, ages 18–32, about their experience with their new immigration status and how it affected their transition to adulthood — things like being able to work.

The Greeks wrote about it. Shakespeare wrote about it. It’s in the Bible.”