

MY LIFE AS AN UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT BY JOSE ANTONIO VARGAS



All photographs from: Jose Antonio Vargas

Staying Papers The documentation that Vargas obtained over the years – a fake green card [and] a driver’s license – allowed him to remain in the U.S. In Oregon a friend provided a mailing address.

Pre-Flight In the Philippines with his mother, who was supposed to follow him to the United States but never did.



Benefactors Vargas with the school officials Rich Fischer and Pat Hyland at his high-school graduation.

[...] My mother wanted to give me a better life, so she sent me thousands of miles away to live with her parents in America – my grandfather (Lolo in Tagalog) and grandmother(Lola). After I arrived in Mountain View, Calif., in the San Francisco Bay Area, I entered sixth grade and quickly
 5 grew to love my new home, family and culture. I discovered a passion for language, though it was hard to learn the difference between formal English and American slang. One of my early memories is of a freckled kid in middle school asking me, “What’s up?” I replied “The sky,” and he and a couple of other kids laughed. I won the eighth-grade spelling bee by
 10 memorizing words I couldn’t properly pronounce. (The winning word was “indefatigable.”)

One day when I was 16, I rode my bike to the nearby D.M.V. office to get my driver’s permit. Some of my friends already had their licenses, so I figured it was time. But when I handed the clerk my green card as proof

15 of U.S. residency, she flipped it around, examining it. “This is fake,” she
whispered. “Don’t come back here again.”

Confused and scared, I pedaled home. [...] My grandparents were
naturalized American citizens – he worked as a security guard, she as a
food server – and they had begun supporting my mother and me
20 financially when I was 3, after my father’s wandering eye and inability to
properly provide for us led to my parents’ separation. Lolo was a proud
man, and I saw the shame on his face as he told me he purchased the card,
along with other fake documents, for me. “Don’t show it to other people.”

I decided then that I could never give anyone reason to doubt I was an
25 American. I convinced myself that if I worked enough, if I achieved
enough, I would be rewarded with citizenship. I felt I could earn it.

I’ve tried. Over the past 14 years, I’ve graduated from high school and
college and built a career as a journalist, interviewing some of the most
famous people in the country. On the surface, I’ve created a good life. I’ve
30 lived the American dream.

But I am still an undocumented immigrant. And that means living a
different kind of reality. It means going about my day in fear of being
found out. It means rarely trusting people, even those closest to me, with
who I really am. It means keeping my family photos in a shoebox rather
35 than displaying them on shelves in my home, so friends don’t ask about
them.

[...] There are believed to be 11 million undocumented immigrants in
the United States. We’re not always who you think we are. Some pick
your strawberries or care for your children. Some are in high school or
40 college. And some, it turns out, write new articles you might read. I grew
up here. This is my home. Yet even though I think of myself as an
American and consider American my country, my country doesn’t think
of me as one of its own. [...]

Source:

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Annotations:

- I.3 Tagalog: language spoken in the Philippines
- I.7 freckled: having small brownish spots on the skin
- I.9 spelling bee: a competition in which the winner is the
student who spells the most words correctly
- I.11 indefatigable: untiring
- I.12 D.M.V.: Department of Motor Vehicles
- I.18 to be naturalized: to become a citizen of the USA though you
were not born there

- I.20 wandering eye: here: looking at other women, being unfaithful
- I.26 rewarded: here: to be given in recognition of one's achievements