

ISHA MARINA DI BARTOLO: I am not alone as a DACA physician. I am not alone in providing essential services to people with COVID. There are over 27,000 DACA recipients who are health care workers providing essential services, including physicians, nurses, physician assistants and others on the front line.

[MUSIC]

INTERVIEWER: Hello, and welcome to “We Roar.” When coronavirus ripped into our lives, we began asking Princetonians everywhere to share how they were living and working through the crisis, how their expertise could make a difference, and how their individual perspectives could help us all see more clearly. Last week, after the Supreme Court ruled on the immigration program called DACA, we spoke to a front-line doctor whose own life hung in the balance.

[MUSIC]

ISHA MARINA DI BARTOLO: My name is Isha Marina di Bartolo, and I’m a physician in Camden, New Jersey. I am a proud Princeton alum, Class of 2010, and I am a DACA recipient. DACA is Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, an immigration status that was created by President Obama in 2012, granting a leave for — from deportation for immigrants who arrived in this country as children.

[MUSIC]

I grew up in Caracas, Venezuela, with my mother and father. When I was about 6 years old, because of political unrest, voter suppression and economic trouble in Venezuela, which continues to this day, my mother and father decided to leave Venezuela and start over in a new country with new employment opportunities, new educational opportunities for me.

We moved to Brooklyn, New York, where I attended the public school system, where I quickly — because of, perhaps, my immigrant mentality, the kind of eternal search for the American dream — I was always an A student.

For me, DACA meant that I could train as a medical doctor, that I could live without fear of deportation, that I could apply for, you know, a job at the medical school library, that I could pay off some loans, that I could help my parents with bills. It meant a freedom and a lightening of my mental load that was really — there was nothing else like it.

[MUSIC]

Currently in my practice at my primary care practice in Camden, New Jersey, I see underserved patients: Medicare patients, Medicaid patients, almost exclusively. And as a person who speaks Spanish, who understands the cultural barriers, the immigration issues that these patients and their families face, I feel like I am uniquely positioned to help with these problems.

I am not alone as a DACA physician. There are over 27,000 DACA recipients who are health care workers providing essential services, including physicians, nurses, physician assistants and others on the front line. I know DACA physicians who have gone to Harvard, who are at some of the most prestigious medical schools around the country, doing really meaningful work, whether it's in research, advocacy, really doing amazing things for the communities that they serve.

With COVID, our health care system is facing some of the biggest stress that it has ever faced in terms of need for providers, for physicians, for nurses. And DACA physicians, nurses and other health care providers are filling a sorely needed gap in care.

But not only that — I think as we've seen, with all the data and the reports that we've seen nationwide — COVID is affecting populations of color, populations who are immigrants, populations from the inner city, who are underserved and socioeconomically disadvantaged, more than others. And DACA recipients have been known to disproportionately serve those communities, so we are on the front lines, and on the front lines of the front lines.

[MUSIC]

At the age of about 15 was when I first found out that I was undocumented. I found out because, like many other 15-, rising 16-year-olds, I wanted to apply for a driver's license. And at that point, my parents finally told me that I could not because I did not have a Social Security number. I stopped worrying about the driver's license and instead started worrying about, "How am I going to apply for, get into and pay for college?"

[MUSIC]

So in the last two years of high school, I hustled a little harder than maybe I would have otherwise. And thankfully, I was accepted to Princeton with a need-based scholarship. I had a penchant for Latin and Greek. I was a classics major, but I knew I wanted to go to medical school. At that point, I took all of the pre-medical courses with the hope that something would change, and I will be prepared when that happens.

I was a Phi Beta Kappa recipient at Princeton and got into Yale for medical school where I think I started — I started to feel the clock ticking, so to speak. Because the issue with entering medical training would be employability. For medical residency, I would have to have a Social Security number. I would have to have a green card or some other kind of work authorization, which as an undocumented student, I did not have.

However, even through that, I kind of took it day by day and hoped that by the end of medical school, I would have some kind of document or some kind of protection that would get me through. I started medical school in 2011, and it was in 2012 that DACA was passed, and I breathed a sigh of relief that at least for the foreseeable, short-term future, I would have a way to train as a medical doctor.

[MUSIC]

This morning, the Supreme Court upheld the DACA executive order, thus allowing it to continue to be in place for a period of time, hopefully into the future. This is a huge sigh of relief for myself and many other recipients of DACA around the country. There's a lot

of celebration, a lot of champagne emojis.

So I think everyone's very excited, but also ready for the next step. So certainly I'm happy about that, but I think also, mixed feelings about the way that this country deals with immigration. It was a very narrow decision. So I think it was a reminder of how polarized we are in this country, how far we are from really comprehensive immigration reform.

And I think today, while a victory certainly, and while we feel validated that we're being accepted in some way, it is important to make sure that we are going to be able to have a path to citizenship. This is the place that we call home, and it's the place that we've called home since we were children.

[MUSIC]

It would be unimaginable to imagine all of a sudden, 27,000 health care workers being pulled out of the front lines currently. But there are 800,000 DACA recipients in this country, many of whom have served in the military, who are schoolteachers, who work other essential jobs. Don't forget about us now that the Supreme Court has ruled. A path to citizenship is still needed and a path to legalization is still needed for many undocumented immigrants in this country. We need comprehensive immigration reform. I think we're just as American as anyone else.

[MUSIC]

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