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Gay & Undocumented: “Coming out of multiple closets” *Suburban student “DREAMS” of future helping US war veterans*

Highland Park – July 15, 2010 – As if growing up as a minority in predominately-white Highland Park weren’t isolating enough, 21-year-old Jaime Perez is gay. He’s also undocumented, having come to Illinois from his native Colombia at the age of 10 with his parents, who decided to overstay their tourist visas to save money. He’s spent most of the last decade “coming out of multiple closets,” as he has attempted to pursue his dream of working in the field of prosthesis, a difficult endeavor given his uncertain circumstances. In many ways, coming out as a gay Latino in a conservative, predominately-white community was easier for Jaime than coming out as an undocumented student.

Jaime first understood the ramifications of his undocumented status at the age of 16, when all of his Highland Park High School classmates were getting their driver’s licenses. The milestone was a “big deal” among Jaime’s classmates: “I didn’t know what I was going to tell them, why I didn’t have my license,” he explained. “This was a community where students missed school to go get their license.”

Shortly thereafter, Jaime “came out” as an undocumented student to a guidance counselor at his high school. The counselor suggested that the straight-A student pursue his dual passions of science and art at nearby Lake Forest College, where he could be admitted as an international student. Able to study with financial support from his family and scholarship money from the university – after a rigorous application process, Jaime was awarded a \$10K scholarship given to one senior each year based on extracurricular involvement and academic achievement, prompting “tears” from his proud parents – Jaime graduated this past May with dual degrees in biology and studio art.

While focus has never been an issue for the high-achieving student, it wasn’t until he met aid workers from Guatemala that he knew his calling in life: Jaime wanted to be a prosthetist. The international workers used recycled prostheses to restore limbs to those who had lost them in wars or conflict, or to children who had been born without them. “I knew I always wanted to do something in the health field, and this was it.”

Jaime completed hours of service at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, along with summer lab work in a research laboratory, while completing his studies at Lake Forest. He found that his bilingual skills were especially useful in the field, which currently employs few Latinos. He also found a calling in working with veterans of war who had lost limbs in conflict – an ironic twist in a story of an undocumented student looking to serve his country by helping others who had also served.

However, unlike other students, Jaime could not be financially compensated for his time in the research lab, working instead as a volunteer. The experience was frustrating for him and his supervisors, but not as frustrating the situation waiting for him after graduating this past May: His desire to pursue a master’s degree in prosthesis would be thwarted by the fact that no school would accept him as an undocumented student.

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Multiple Closets//2

While his Lake Forest classmates are pursuing jobs or advanced degrees this fall – “I was embarrassed to have no plan,” he explains, “everyone was asking me, ‘what are you doing next year,’ and I didn’t have an answer” – Jaime is taking a year off to explore his options. He is considering graduate study in Canada or Colombia if his options don’t pan out in the United States.

Jaime also has become involved as an advocate for other undocumented students through work in support of the DREAM Act. He plans to travel with dozens of other Illinois students next week to Washington DC to ask President Obama to pass the important piece of legislation this year, giving students like him a path to education, careers and citizenship. The DREAM Act, introduced in 2006 by Senator Richard Durbin, has enjoyed strong bipartisan support in Congress, but has been stubbornly stalled as the country remains bitterly divided on the issue of immigration reform.

Students will stage a “mock graduation” next week to alert legislators of the urgency of their situation. Nobody, it seems, is more aware of this urgency than Jaime as he weighs his options for the future:

“It’s a waiting game,” he said. “But how much longer do I wait?”

EDITOR’S NOTE: Interviews can be coordinated with Jaime – either from his home in Highland Park or as he travels to Washington DC via bus next week to advocate for the DREAM Act – along with Jaime’s professors at Lake Forest College, who can speak to their frustrations in working with a talented student whose options are limited by a broken immigration system. Contact Sara McElmurry at 312 351 3890 or smcelmurry@latinopolicyform.org to arrange an interview.

