

San Jose Mercury News

Opinion: Squandering the talent of undocumented youths hurts all of us

By Peter Fortenbaugh
Special to the Mercury News
July 4, 2011

At the Boys & Girls Clubs, we recently celebrated our members who graduated from high school. In addition to helping them graduate, we helped most of them develop a plan to become economically self-sufficient.

But for some, we don't know what to do. All avenues appear closed. Not because they are unqualified, but because they are undocumented.

From neighborhoods where more than half of their peers drop out of high school, these young people have overcome significant adversity. They have succeeded in school and are looking forward to college. We couldn't be more proud of them. I don't know of any group of youths who better embody the American ideals of hard work and self-improvement.

Recently I was congratulating a young woman, Anna, on earning a full four-year scholarship to an outstanding local college. She will be the first in her family to go to college, and she talked about lifting her family up the economic ladder. As far as I could tell, she was living the American dream. But when I asked about her career plans, she stared silently at me and then said it will be virtually impossible for her to get a good-paying job in America. She's an illegal immigrant.

I confess that I was ignorant of the plight of so many young people like Anna. She has done everything right to improve her future, but she will be limited to jobs that pay cash. She will mostly likely have to work in such professions as construction or housekeeping, like her parents.

Many of our youths have parents who are incarcerated, and society celebrates their ability to overcome obstacles. Then for youths like Anna, whose parents committed the crime of coming to America illegally, we make them pay for their parents' actions.

At the Boys & Girls Clubs, we work with countless children who are undocumented. Whether we like it or

not, they are here. As long as the economic disparity between the U.S. and other countries remains great, families will move here. That is the cold reality.

From an economic perspective, our policy is perverse. We invest substantially in Anna through public schools, keep her safe with our law enforcement and provide health care. Then, once she is ready to get a good-paying job and pay taxes, we say no thanks. This is a broken business model.

What advice should I give her? Should I advise her to go to college and have faith that the laws will change to allow her to work here legally? Should I advise her to go back "home," even though she was brought to America when she was just 11 months old, and America is the only home she has ever known? Or should I tell her to lower her aspirations and forget college?

Her parents broke the law many years ago by coming to America illegally, and I understand the belief that they should pay the consequences. But in the words of my own 12-year-old son: "Anna did nothing wrong."

Anna doesn't want handouts or an unfair advantage, just a chance to be a contributing member of our society. As a country facing significant challenges, don't we want hardworking, resilient, educated people entering our workforce?

Selfishly, I hope we can pass a law like the Dream Act that will allow Anna to work here after she earns her degree. I want her to get a good job so she can pay us back for the services she used. And when my son graduates in 10 years, I want her to hire him.

PETER FORTENBAUGH is executive director of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula. He wrote this for this newspaper.