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**'I DON'T HAVE TO WORRY'**

By Matt McKinney and Dave McKinney

Staff reporters

Six years ago, when Sandra Briceno was 12 years old, her mother sat her down and delivered a hard truth: She was different from most kids in America, and if she wanted to stay in this country, she'd have to learn to toughen up and begin to live a careful, sneaky life.

That's also when Briceno's vocabulary expanded to include the word "undocumented."

Briceno - whose parents came to America illegally from Mexico when she was only two weeks old - was thrilled Friday to learn about the Obama Administration's order to stop deporting younger immigrants who are here illegally and to begin granting them work permits.

"These are young people who study in our schools, they play in our neighborhoods, they're friends with our kids, they pledge allegiance to our flag," President Barack Obama said in announcing the policy. "They are Americans in their heart, in their minds, in every single way but one: on paper."

Briceno, who lives in Albany Park, was delivering a meal to her mother's workplace, when her older brother told her about Obama's announcement.

"I'm very happy," said Briceno, 18, who this year graduated from Amundsen High School in Ravenswood. "Now that I can actually get a work permit, I don't have to worry about working with fake papers."

The extraordinary deportation move, which is estimated to affect as many as 800,000 immigrants who have lived in fear of deportation, bypasses Congress and partially achieves the goals of the so-called "DREAM Act," a long-sought but never enacted plan to establish a path toward citizenship for young people who came to the United States illegally but who have attended college or served in the military.

The order comes in an election year in which the Hispanic vote could be critical in toss-up states like Colorado, Nevada and Florida. Obama enjoys support from a majority of Hispanic voters, but he's also come under fire among Latinos for his inability to win congressional support for a broad overhaul of immigration laws and by his administration's aggressive deportation policy.

Under Obama's new plan, undocumented immigrants will be immune from deportation if they were brought to the United States before they turned 16 and are younger than 30, have been in the country for at least five continuous years, have no criminal history, graduated from a U.S. high school or earned an equivalent degree, or served in the military. They also can apply for a work permit that will be good for two years with no limits on how many times it can be renewed.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel offered praise for his former boss' plan.

"Immigrants are a driving force in cultural and economic life in cities throughout our nation and a vital part of our country's history and future," Emanuel said in a written statement. "Here in Chicago, whether in Rogers Park or Little Village, our city's vitality has been built on the strength of immigrant populations that have come to enjoy new freedoms and access new opportunities. I applaud President Obama for making strides that will not only help the city of Chicago grow but will give families and students across the country a better chance of achieving the American Dream."

For Johan Balaguera, an undocumented Roosevelt High School senior originally from Colombia, Obama's plan came as a "shock."

"Everybody's going to live their dreams because of this," said Balaguera, 17. "It's going to wake everyone up. There had to be a point in which we deserve something, not in a personal way, but everyone - because we came here and didn't have anything to depend on because of our parents. They brought us. We forgot all about our country. It motivated me to keep [working] hard in school. My personality and everything was built here."

For Brianda Abila, an undocumented Mexican student at Wilbur Wright College, Obama's initiative left her with several unanswered questions.

"When I learned about this on the news, I saw that people over 30 aren't eligible," said Abila, 21, speaking through a translator. "So my question was: What happens when I apply for this? When I turn 30, what happens to me then? Am I going to continue to be a legal resident?"

But State Rep. Michael Tryon (R-Crystal Lake), who has advocated for tougher immigration policies as a state lawmaker, called Obama's move a "blank check" for people who didn't follow the rules to gain entry into the U.S.

"Just to give a blank check to 80,000 kids here in Illinois, I don't think that's right. I think that has to be well debated," Tryon said. "Illegal is illegal, and that's what really gets under the skin of people. You're basically going to grant citizenship and ignore the fact people got here by breaking the law; that's not right."

Briceno did something recently that she knows isn't right - she used fake papers to land a job as a waitress.

"I'm a person who always does the right thing," she said. "I don't like to break the law."

Until Friday, Briceno lived in fear of being sent back to Mexico, even though what she knows about her parents' hometown there, she's mostly learned from looking at Google Maps images.

In Chicago, Briceno lives with her mother and older brother in an apartment. Briceno hasn't seen her father, who she described as "abusive," since she was 4 years old.

Briceno said her mother works multiple jobs to try to support the family, and has been driving a car without a license for 14 years - somehow avoiding arrest.

"I always tell her to drive carefully and make all the stop signs," Briceno said.

Briceno said she blames her parents, in part, for putting her in a situation where she has no identity, something she would have in Mexico.

But now, at least, she has the opportunity to go to college without fear of being discovered, she said. She plans to study photography at Truman College.

She's certain Obama's move is all about politics, but she's still grateful.

"He finally did something for us," Briceno said.