

Texas valedictorian's tweet draws deportation threats

By Michael E. Miller, Washington Post on 06.15.16

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Mayte Lara Ibarra (right) graduating from David Crockett High School in Texas. Photo: Washington Post

On the afternoon of June 3, Mayte Lara Ibarra stepped to the podium in front of a cavernous Austin, Texas, auditorium. As valedictorian, Lara was in charge of delivering David Crockett High School's commencement speech.

"Wow. I'm so honored to be standing before you all today," she said, a medal clanking around her neck and a hint of nervousness in her voice. "I thought long and hard about what to say to you."

The 17-year-old said she had spent four years worrying about her speech, jotting down notes and ideas for the day she would finally walk triumphantly across the stage.

But she had spent years worrying about something else.

Lara had a secret.

And after the ceremony was over and she posed for pictures with her proud parents, she decided to share that secret as so many teenagers do nowadays.

On social media.

"Valedictorian, 4.5 GPA, full tuition paid for at UT, 13 cords/medals, nice legs," she wrote on Twitter above three photos of herself and her family clutching celebratory flowers.

Then she added the four words that would cause a firestorm of controversy, not just in Austin but across America.

"Oh and I'm undocumented," she wrote, along with emoji showing a medal, a graduation cap, rock 'n' roll fingers and the Mexican flag.

The reaction was swift.

Some supportive tweets came from friends. Others came from total strangers.

As Lara's tweet went viral, however, it also attracted criticism, including racist memes and threats of deportation.

One person tweeted a screenshot suggesting they had submitted a tip to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

As her post approached 10,000 retweets and twice as many "likes," however, Lara began to get uncomfortable.

"Thank you!" she wrote to a friend who congratulated her. "I want all this attention from strangers to stop already though haha."

"I checked your tweet this morning and it BLEW up," the friend responded.

"I know! I didn't think it would do that tbh and it's kinda scary and want it to stop," Lara wrote back, adding a worried emoji face.

Some critics accused Lara of "stealing" the university spot or scholarship of a legal citizen.

Others went so far as to complain to the CVS pharmacy where Lara worked.

"Are you aware that you have an illegal alien working for you and bragging on Twitter about being undocumented," one woman wrote on the pharmacy's Facebook page, according to the San Antonio Express-News. "Do you even check the immigration status of your employees? She is Austin, TX ; Mayte Lara. Google her she is all over the Internet."

Eventually, the backlash became so intense that Lara deactivated her Twitter account.

On Wednesday night, however, the teenager told KVUE that the whole thing was a misunderstanding and that she was not undocumented.

That caused a reaction from advocates for undocumented students.

"I do hope that she is not lying about her status because being undocumented is not easy, it's not something that you can play with," Edlisa Lopez from UT-Austin's University Leadership Initiative, a program catering to undocumented students, told the television station.

But less than 24 hours later, Lara again reversed course, admitting in a lengthy interview with the Statesman that she is, in fact, undocumented.

Lara told the newspaper that she came to Austin from Mexico illegally when she was about 2 years old, but that she had received Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Instituted in 2012 by the Obama administration, the program allows some people who came to the United States illegally as children to request a deportation deferral. The deferrals don't provide lawful status or lead to a path to citizenship, but they do allow recipients to obtain work authorization and can be renewed every two years.

"I do pay taxes, have a DACA which allows me to work and study here, and I have a Social Security number," Lara told the Statesman, adding that she hopes "sooner or later it will open up that path so I can become a permanent resident from the country I was raised in and have lived in my whole life."

"A lot of people think that because I used a Mexican flag emoji, I'm not grateful for the opportunities this country has given me," she continued. "I'm extremely grateful. The only reason I used that emoji was to show that I'm proud of my heritage, and to show that we can do great things."

Adding to the controversy over her tweet was the fact that Lara's school, Crockett High, is named after Davy Crockett, the frontiersman and Texas revolutionary who died fighting the Mexican army at Battle of the Alamo.

As for her full ride, although undocumented immigrants cannot legally receive federally funded student financial aid such as loans, grants and scholarships, they can receive financial aid from the state of Texas.

"In accordance with state law, Texas universities - including the University of Texas schools - have for decades granted two-semester tuition waivers to valedictorians of Texas public high schools, without regard to their residency status," UT Austin spokesperson Kylie Fitzpatrick told KXAN. "State law also does not distinguish between documented and undocumented graduates of Texas high schools in admissions and financial aid decisions. University policies reflect that law."

Lara admitted that she should have been more "cautious" about her tweet and that she may not return to Twitter since "social media is filled with so many mean people, who always have something to say."

But she also said she wanted to open up about her struggles while inspiring others.

"One of the biggest hardships I've had to overcome was the stereotype of people like me," she told the Statesman. "Many people think that people like me can't be successful. We have all the odds against us, and I think it's important to highlight the fact that anything is possible, regardless of your status. I've accomplished things that most people wouldn't think a person with my background could have, and I'm proud of that."

"The reason I posted that tweet was to show others that you can accomplish anything, regardless of the obstacles you have in front of you," she added. "It is a common trend on Twitter to highlight your success through a tweet like that, and I saw many other students from across the country doing the same and sharing the things they'd overcome, so I thought I'd share mine."

In fact, Lara wasn't the only Texas valedictorian to come out as undocumented.

On the very day Lara divulged her secret on social media, another teenager shared a similar story, but from the podium.

Larissa Martinez used her speech as valedictorian of McKinney Boyd High School in McKinney, Texas, to make a stunning announcement.

"I am one of the 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the shadows of the United States," she said.

Like Lara, Martinez had long agonized over how and when to reveal her status. Her mother brought her to Texas in 2010 after fleeing an abusive and alcoholic husband.

"We just flew over here with luggage and a lot of dreams," Martinez told WFAA.

And like Lara, Martinez is doing everything possible to become a citizen.

Unlike Lara, however, Martinez dove into politics in her speech by challenging presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump.

"America can be great again without the construction of a wall built on hatred and prejudice," she said before receiving a standing ovation.

There was little hint of Lara's immigration status, or her intention to divulge it, during her speech.

As valedictorian, the senior with straight hair and studious-looking black glasses was charged with leading her class in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Few in the Frank Erwin Center appear to have known, however, that Lara was not actually an American citizen.

Half way through the ceremony, Lara took the stage again for her speech. Principal Sissy Camacho asked - in English and Spanish - for Lara's parents to stand and be recognized.

In her speech, Lara said she had ultimately decided to ignore the copious notes she had made over the years for her speech.

"As I rummaged through my notes, I realized that my younger self is not the same person that I am today," she said.

"Look back with pride on a job well done," she said at the end of her six-minute speech.

"Look forward with excitement to what lies ahead. Celebrate this moment because it's yours to enjoy. And remember: What is coming is better than what is gone."

Quiz

- 1 Read the selections from the article.

"I do pay taxes, have a DACA which allows me to work and study here, and I have a Social Security number," Lara told the Statesman, adding that she hopes "sooner or later it will open up that path so I can become a permanent resident from the country I was raised in and have lived in my whole life."

"A lot of people think that because I used a Mexican flag emoji, I'm not grateful for the opportunities this country has given me," she continued. "I'm extremely grateful. The only reason I used that emoji was to show that I'm proud of my heritage, and to show that we can do great things."

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from the selections?

- (A) Lara regrets posting the tweet because it made so many people angry.
- (B) Lara recognizes the benefits and responsibilities of living in the United States.
- (C) Lara thinks Mexico is a better country with a better culture than the United States.
- (D) Lara wants to become a citizen, but she knows the chances of that happening anytime soon are small.

- 2 Which of the following aspects of the article is NOT thoroughly discussed?

- (A) the public reaction to Lara's tweet
- (B) why Lara decided to tweet her undocumented status
- (C) how Lara came to the United States and how she has stayed in the country
- (D) serious repercussions Lara and her family might be facing for disclosing her status

- 3 Which of the following statements BEST conveys two central ideas of the article?
- (A) Lara tweeted that she was an undocumented immigrant; Lara wanted people to know that she had received a full scholarship to college.
 - (B) Lara had prepared for her valedictorian speech for four years; another undocumented valedictorian also revealed her status.
 - (C) Lara's tweet about being undocumented attracted much attention and criticism; Lara wanted to show others that it is possible to overcome serious struggles.
 - (D) Lara tweeted the Mexican flag to show pride in her heritage; the controversy is especially intense because Lara's school is named after a hero who died fighting the Mexican army.
- 4 Which sentence from the article would be MOST important to include in its summary?
- (A) The 17-year-old said she had spent four years worrying about her speech, jotting down notes and ideas for the day she would finally walk triumphantly across the stage.
 - (B) "Thank you!" she wrote to a friend who congratulated her. "I want all this attention from strangers to stop already though haha."
 - (C) Eventually, the backlash became so intense that Lara deactivated her Twitter account.
 - (D) On Wednesday night, however, the teenager told KVUE that the whole thing was a misunderstanding and that she was not undocumented.