



As deportation nears, Novato family draws national attention

Jim Welte

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With the scheduled deportation of his parents fast approaching, the case of Gilbert Mejia-Perez, an 18-year-old Novato resident in legal limbo until July 2010, is drawing national attention.

DreamActivist.org, a organization created in 2007 to lobby for passage of legislation that would give students like Mejia-Perez a path to legal residency and eventual citizenship, has thrown its weight behind his case. It started an online petition drive that has garnered 1,200 signatures and held a vigil with the family Thursday outside the San Francisco office of Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

The vigil drew about 30 people Thursday afternoon, but Feinstein's office did not meet with the group or send someone to speak with them, said Lizbeth Mateo, who organized DreamActivist.org's campaign on behalf of the family. Immigration attorney Marc Van Der Hout said Feinstein has reviewed the family's request for private legislation twice and declined to intervene both times.

Mateo said the group was drawn to the case largely because Mejia-Perez is a clear example of someone who would be eligible for the Development, Relief and Education of Alien Minors Act, or DREAM Act, proposed national legislation that has garnered bipartisan support but has not yet come to a vote in Congress.

The DREAM Act would apply only to students who entered the U.S. illegally but who graduated from a U.S. high school, arrived in the U.S. as children, display good moral character and who have been in

the U.S. for at least five continuous years prior to the bill's enactment. The bill would give those students six years of temporary residency, during which they would have to complete at least two years in pursuit of a bachelor's degree or have served in the armed forces for at least two years. If they meet the requirements, they would be given a path to legal permanent residence.

As a 2009 graduate of Novato High School and a current student at Santa Rosa Junior College, Mejia-Perez is exactly the type of student for whom the bill was written, Mateo said.

"He'd definitely be eligible for it," she said.

Although Mejia-Perez's deportation case was postponed last week until July 28, 2010, his parents, Salvador Mejia and Elida Perez, are set to be deported next week. They will take with them their youngest daughter, 4-year-old Dulce, a U.S. citizen. They will be leaving behind Gilbert and 13-year-old daughter Helen, also a U.S. citizen and a freshman at Novato High School, so as not to disrupt her school semester. Helen will be left under the care of her brother and her uncle, Jaime Perez, Elida's brother. All three live in the Novato home the family owns.

"The parents almost fall apart when they have to think about that," Van Der Hout said.

Van Der Hout said his office continues to lobby the Department of Homeland Security to reverse its decision.

"The basic and fundamental issue here is, why does the government want to insist that this family be torn apart and leave," he said.

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