

Harvard has admitted this Miami Dreamer, but her DACA status forbids federal aid | Opinion

BY FABIOLA SANTIAGO

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Monica Lazaro is a DACA recipient who has overcome many obstacles, including the loss of her mother while waiting for her immigration status to be resolved. In the fall, Lazaro heads for Harvard to obtain a post-graduate degree in public policy.

By **Carl Juste**

Only when she changes from work clothes into blue jeans and a T-shirt — “my favorite clothes,” Monica Lazaro calls them — and she tells you that the scarlet macaw on her shirt is *el guacamaya*, the national bird of Honduras, do you get a glimpse of her roots.

But just about everything about Monica, from the smallest details to the arch of her success, says “American” — and “I’m home.”

The diplomas mark her unrelenting years of work and accomplishments against the odds of poverty, painful losses, and the roadblocks of an immigration limbo that still haunts her.

There’s the associates in arts degree from Miami Dade College’s Honors College, the bachelor’s in biology from Florida International University — and now, her admission letter from the pinnacle of U.S. education, Harvard University.

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Monica applied to nine schools in a quest to achieve her biggest dream yet — to pursue graduate [studies in public health policy](#) — and eight accepted her. Only Yale held out.

“It is surreal,” the 26-year-old tells me. “I still can’t process it all.”

Her only regret is that her mother — the inspiration for her career path — isn’t here to share her joy and triumphs.

Monica was a senior in high school when her uninsured, undocumented mother, Marta Griselda, died of colon cancer at 40 because she was too afraid to call attention to her immigration status with a hospital visit — worried that her family could be deported. They were too poor to afford private care. Marta delayed treatment until she was so sick she couldn’t make it through another day bleeding and in horrible pain.

“We lived a secretive life in fear,” Monica says.

But, despite her success now, this Dreamer — one of the 800,000 young immigrants brought to the United States as children and whose legal status remains uncertain under a charged political climate in Washington — faces yet another obstacle.

Without permanent resident or citizen status, Monica isn’t eligible for federal grants and financial aid beyond limited scholarships. Harvard has given her a scholarship that pays for 50 percent of the \$83,162 tuition for three semesters. But that leaves her \$41,581 short, and rent, transportation and food to pay for in pricey Boston.

Monica says she doesn’t want to talk about “the money problem.”

“I don’t feel comfortable asking for money,” she tells me.

She adds in Spanish for emphasis: “*Se me hace demasiado duro.*”

And she quips: “I guess I won’t be running for public office.”

But her mentors, who helped fund her previous studies, are raising funds through the Priscilla R. Perry Scholarship Fund — and this is a generous community that invests in young people like Monica.

I know we can help.

Her work ethic, and most of all, her commitment to contribute to this country by becoming an expert on a critical national issue — access to healthcare — has brought her to this moment.

“Monica is extraordinary,” says Pam Perry, a lawyer who along with her wife, retired judge and mediation attorney Ellen Leesfield, treats Monica as a daughter and has helped put her through school, find work and an apartment, and run the scholarship fund.

Monica calls them one of the “angels” who have helped her overcome obstacles since the day she arrived in 2002 at age 9 in this village called Miami.

“There have been a lot of people in my life who have helped me,” she says. “If I started from the beginning, you wouldn’t believe it.”

Hers is an edifying story that begins on the day her father’s clothing store in San Pedro Sula was robbed at gunpoint for the second time. This time, the fleeing thieves shot dead two innocent people. The family was terrified. Her parents worked long hours to pay for a private school where the kids were learning English — and Monica and her younger brother, Mario, always came to the store after school to do their homework.

They felt they could no longer put their kids in the path of extreme danger and violence. Honduras was on the fast track to becoming the deadliest country in the world, second only to war zones.

The Lazaros obtained tourist visas, packed their bags, said goodbye to the rest of the family, and told the children they were going to Disney World.

“We didn’t understand why everyone was crying,” Monica remembers. “And why didn’t we bring grandma? She would have loved Disney too!”

They flew to Miami, where they had family.

In Honduras, they weren't wealthy but they were comfortable.

That changed instantly.

"We lived in *el cucarachero* in Little Havana, an efficiency full of *cucarachas* and I've always been afraid of roaches."

But, mindful of the power of education, her parents worked hard at whatever jobs they could get and saved to move to a district with good schools. Monica ended up at Ponce de Leon Middle School, where she became president of the National Junior Honor Society, and later, at Coral Gables Senior High School.

The parents worked all day and the children were alone at home after school with instructions not to answer the door. Monica was in charge. By age 10, she was already cooking meals.

Painfully shy at school because of the secrecy around her status, she saw an announcement for a club fair her sophomore year and "fell in love" with Best Buddies, a club that helped her "come out of my shell." She excelled in both academics and extracurricular activities with the help of teachers and staff set on helping her overcome her family's poverty, illness, and, when Monica finally opened up about it, lack of immigration status.

"I had opportunities in school and I tried to seize every one of them," she says.

When Monica couldn't afford to buy the golf team uniforms, the coach gave them to her. To raise money for track clothes, she sold chocolates. One time, her mother now sick and the family suffering even more shortages, teachers at both Gables and Ponce held a fundraiser for an unidentified "good cause." Monica sold raffle tickets, too. The winner would get an iPad.

But to her surprise, the "good cause" was to buy Monica the laptop and printer she desperately needed.

"School was my haven," she says.

In between classes, being junior class president and Student Council president her senior year, Monica filled out medical forms and translated for her mother, negotiated doctor appointments, and helped make decisions about the cancer treatment. She also took care of her toddler brother, Michael, and counseled the teenaged one, Mario, who had turned to drugs as an escape from the sadness of his mom's illness and their circumstances.

With one income, her father could hardly pay rent and put food on the table.

How could she even think of college?

No matter what she did, Monica wasn't like her peers. She couldn't apply to college — her dream. She had learned the meaning of being undocumented when she asked her mother for her Social Security number to put on a form — and there wasn't one.

"It was very disappointing," she says. "I started doing my own research and understanding that I wasn't going to be able to go to school."

No one at school knew.

"January of my senior year," she says, "I had the student activities director ask me, 'Where are you going to school? You are going to get accepted everywhere!' I stayed quiet, trying to dodge that conversation. Then, I started crying and I told her I couldn't go to school and why and I also told her about my mom. Nobody until that day knew what I was going through."

When she tells me this, her voice cracks and she asks me to excuse her a minute. But I can't answer. I'm crying, too.

The revelation, however, broke through the taboo. It got Monica the help she needed from the school, which contacted Miami Dade College — and a donation of \$10,000 from Marlins baseball player Mike Lowell started the [scholarship program](#) that funded her college and that of other high-achieving Dreamers.

Another light shone in her life that bittersweet year, 2012, when her mother died in June after seeing her graduate from high school.

President Barack Obama created DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), the status that, for the first time in her life, allowed Monica the luxury of having a Social Security number, a driver's license, and a work permit.

It wasn't perfect. Under the limited birthday and entry date parameters of the program, some Dreamers didn't make the cut by months. But Monica qualified.

"I was able to tell my mom before she died that everything was going to be all right — and that I would go to college," she says.

But she didn't have time to grieve with all the responsibilities of caring for her brothers, keeping up her GPA and the household for her father Mario, who fell into a deep depression.

And there was more bad news.

Her cousin Damaris — a U.S. citizen, 21 years old, and with local private insurance — was diagnosed with brain cancer.

Monica once again jumped in to help fill out the paperwork, go to appointments, and in the process, she learned that there was medication, equipment and services Damaris couldn't get because the insurance company would not approve them.

Just like her immigrant mother, Americans also struggled.

Damaris, too, would lose her fight in 2018.

"The health system really infuriates me," Monica says. "If you have cancer and you can't walk, you should not be fighting with your insurance to give you a wheelchair. Or fighting to get an appointment, or an MRI or a CAT scan."

Now working as a research assistant to a University of Miami doctor in the neurology department doing clinical trials on epilepsy and sleep apnea medication, Monica also is an [eloquent speaker on immigration issues](#).

She never gives up hope.

"You have to work hard, center yourself, believe you can do it," she says.

When President Donald Trump [struck down DACA](#) in 2017 saying Congress needed to find a permanent solution, she lived through moments of tremendous angst again.

Uncertainty won't go away until Congress passes legislation permanently legalizing the status of young people like her and forging a path toward U.S. citizenship — and the president signs it into law. It will be difficult with a presidential election coming up and Dreamers and DACA playing the role of bargaining chips to the building of a wall.

In Monica's home office hangs a photo on canvas of her late beautiful mother. A coat hanger holds a Mickey Mouse tote bag and the baseball cap collection of the states she has visited. Her first was California, a trip to mark her newly acquired DACA status.

Miami is where her heart sings.

"This is the place that I call home," Monica says. "My friends are here. The culture is here. The people I love are here."

She'll only leave it — for a little while — for Harvard.

To make tax-deductible donations to the Priscilla R. Perry Scholarship Fund, send checks to 201 Alhambra Circle, Suite 1205, Coral Gables, 33134, c/o Ellen Leesfield. Or use this PayPal link: <http://PayPal.me/PerryScholarshipFund>





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GALLERY



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Award-winning columnist Fabiola Santiago has been writing about all things Miami since 1980, when the Mariel boatlift became her first front-page story. A Cuban refugee child of the Freedom Flights, she's also the author of essays, short fiction, and the novel "Reclaiming Paris."