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A WARM WELCOME TO ONE MILLION MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY

By Christopher Kerosky

Every day, they come to my law office and other law offices all over Sonoma County now. They come with tidy stacks of records from their years of life in the United States -- vaccination cards, dog-eared school grade cards, pay stubs from high school jobs, college awards. The older ones come by themselves or with their spouses. The younger ones come with anxious parents. All of them are expectant, nervous but hopeful.

These are the DREAMers, the young people covered by President Obama's Executive Order, effectively implementing the DREAM Act which Congress could not pass. They are undocumented youth brought here by their parents, usually without a visa. They have grown up in our county without papers: without a social security card, without a driver's license, without a real future.

Sonoma County has many thousands of DREAMers. They attend high school with our kids. They wait on us at restaurants. They often excel at Santa Rosa Junior College or Sonoma State. Our county has been enriched by their presence and yet they have suffered with the fear, the anxiety and the helplessness that goes along with lacking legal status from the US government. They were unable to get school financial aid or move forward with a career. Most cannot even drive legally. If they did, they risked being deported to a country many of them never knew.

These are the invisible "illegals" that the anti-Immigrant forces in this country like to attack. In fact, they are our neighbors.

In June, the Obama Administration has given them the first opportunity in their lives to obtain legal status. In one stroke of both political genius and humanitarianism, President Obama created a "deferred status" program for as many as 1 million young people living in the United States. To qualify, applicants had to come here before their 16th birthday and be under 31 years old. They need to have spent at least 5 years here and either obtained a

high school diploma or be presently studying. Persons with a criminal record are largely disqualified.

Now, thanks to the Obama re-election, this program is no longer in danger. Mitt Romney had called it ill-advised and promised to kill it. That would have returned these kids to their undocumented status and taken away their hope. Apart from the other tangible consequences of the Obama victory, this is the most profound for me: up to one million young, talented members of our communities will be finally given a chance. They no longer have to live in the shadows, fearing an ICE agent at every knock on the door, or deportation every time a policeman pulls over their car.

The politicians who thought they would self-deport did not understand their lives. Moving to Mexico would be like moving to a foreign country for them. Their lives are here. As the President said, they have grown up pledging allegiance to our flag.

Now they have truly something to be thankful for this new year: a future.

But what about their parents and their older siblings? They won't self-deport either. Should we deport the other 10 million undocumented immigrants living in our midst?

Our country is better than that. Let's hope Congress will have the wisdom and humanity to pass comprehensive immigration reform next year and give millions more of our neighbors the legal status they've been waiting years for. They deserve a future too.

CHRISTOPHER A. KEROSKY of the law firm of KEROSKY PURVES & BOGUE has practiced law since 1984 and has been recognized as one of the top immigration lawyers in Northern California for the last seven years by San Francisco Magazine "Super Lawyers" edition (2006-2012). He graduated from University of California, Berkeley Law School and was a former counsel for the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington D.C.

WARNING: The foregoing is an article discussing legal issues. It is not intended to be a substitute for legal advice. We recommend that you get competent legal advice specific to your case. If you would like such advice from our office, call (415) 777-4445 (San Francisco); (916) 349-2900 (Sacramento) or (707) 433-2060 (Santa Rosa or (707)244-2272 (Ukiah).