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Interview of Fedora Castelino on 10.01.2023 conducted in Durham, North Carolina

Fedora Castelino is a 20-year-old student at Duke University and North Carolina State University. She is an activist based in North Carolina that advocates for immigration reforms for children of documented visa holders. As a child of a H-1B visa holder herself, Fedora works to be the voice of the 250,000 other similar situated individuals in the United States. Through her work with Improve the Dream Fedora has helped to bring the America's Children Act to Congress and hopes for the bill to pass. Fedora believes in the power of collective action and powerful narrative sharing to bring about change in the immigration field.

SAM ST. LAWRENCE: Alright, great. I think we're all set up. Just for the record, could you go ahead and just give a brief introduction of who you are?

FEDORA CASTELINO: Yeah! So, my name is Fedora Castelino. I'm currently a transfer inter-institution student at Duke so I go to both NC State and Duke University and I'm studying neuroscience. I am currently a North Carolina and South Carolina liaison for an organization called Improve the Dream ¹ in which we do youth-led grassroots organization for immigration advocacy for students and children of long-term visa holders. Which we will talk about more.

ST. LAWRENCE: Perfect, thank you! Could you just tell me a little bit more about how you initially got involved with this work?

CASTELINO: Yeah, so ever since I moved to the US, which was when I was 6 years old, I have been on a H-4 visa which is a dependent under a H-1B work visa². And I didn't really know much about it until I started applying to colleges and realized that I'm legally not allowed to work, I don't get FAFSA³, I'm not allowed to get scholarships, not allowed to get loans, and these hurdles that kept adding up. And I thought I was the only one and I thought I was just a rare case and that I just slipped through the cracks. But I was talking to my parents about it, and I had actually reached out to, just as a last stroke that maybe something had happened, to Senator Tillis⁴. Where I was just like, "Hey, I don't know what's going on, what do I do?" And through that I got introduced to Improve the Dream, which was an organization at the time which had 4 people who were kind of running the show. I realized "Wow, there are 4 other people like me". And after we did more surveys and research, we found out there are more than 250,000 of us in the country. It was at that point where I realized how big this issue was and it needs to be changed, whether it's not for me but for others before we turn 21. Because when we do turn 21,

¹ [Improve the Dream Organization](#)

² US visa for foreign workers in specialized fields granting employment in the United States

³ [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#)

⁴ US Senator Thom Tillis (R-NC) since 2015

we do have to self deport. So, as I come closer to that age, I'm about to turn 20, I kind of am losing that time. But for others that are 18, that still have that time, we're fighting for them.

ST. LAWRENCE: What's that pressure like of knowing there's a time limit to how long all this immigration stuff is lasting?

CASTELINO: It's so stressful. I know a lot of people who are so excited to turn 21, but I kind of have that pressure that as soon as I do turn 21, I don't know what my future is. I was born in India, but I moved out of India when I was 4 months old. So, I don't read the language and barely speak the language. And that would be the place where I do have to self deport to. And I would have to start a whole new life in a place I do not know and haven't been in 10 years. So, it's really stressful to think about. I have a younger sister who is 12 years younger than me. So, she's 8. She's a US citizen. And even her not being in this situation has affected her because she doesn't know how much longer she has with her older sister or how much time I have left with my family before I just have to leave and find somewhere to go. So, it's really hard.

ST. LAWRENCE: What is the solution to that? What is the alternative to self-deportation?

CASTELINO: Currently we have three options, then I'll expand more on what our proposed solution is. When we approach the age of 21, so probably around a year prior to that, we have to start making plans of what we are going to do. One of the pathways is self-deportation. So, knowing that at 21 we will have to pack our bags and leave. Number two is transfer over to an F-1⁵, which is a student visa. If you are planning to pursue studying so whether that would be you're still in college or you're pursuing a Master's, PhD. If you're still in school, you can do an F-1 visa. However, the problem with that pathway is as soon as I transfer to my F-1, I am no longer a dependent under my parents, so my Green Card application has been pulled out. And I am now a student, I have to pay international tuition even though I am in-state. All those rules, I am no longer on a pathway to citizenship. Then the third one, is let's say I have graduated before 21. I can work on getting an H-1B, which is what my dad came here in. Which would start a whole new second generation of getting a work visa. But as someone who was born in India, if I applied for an H-1B visa, you have to win a lottery. And they literally pull names out of a bucket and it's a 20% chance of winning—you get three tries. Let's say you're lucky enough to win that lottery, well now you are in the H-1B lottery, and you are in the bottom of the line for the green card application which currently has a wait time of 152 years. That's more than a lifetime, maybe two. So those are our three pathways that we have currently. None of them really guarantee living in the country I've grown up in my entire life. But our proposed solution is the America's Children Act (ACA)⁶. So, this is what we are advocating for. It is a bill that was first introduced in 2020 and has been reintroduced every congressional year since by Representative Deborah Ross ⁷from North Carolina and Representative Miller-Meeks ⁸from Iowa. This is a bipartisan bill in which we have a few propositions that we want to be put into place and made into law. The

⁵ Academic Student visa allowing foreign students to enter the United States while enrolled as a full-time student at an accredited university

⁶ [America's Children Act](#)

⁷ US Representative Deborah Ross (D-NC 2nd district) since 2021

⁸ US Representative Mariannette Miller-Meeks (R-IA 1st district) since 2023

first one is aging out will be stopped. Which means that when I turn 21 I will not age out of my parents system; I will still be their dependent so that don't just face self-deportation at a deadline. Whenever my parents get their Green Card will be when I get mine too. The second one is legally allowing me to work. This means giving me a Social Security Number⁹ and a way to make money, help my family out, and grant me access to employment. And the third one is granting students like me a green card upon graduation of an accredited four-year university. So, this really streamlines it into making sure that we're not just handing out new Green Cards¹⁰. We're providing them with people who are high skilled and have earned their place in getting a Green Card. And all of these are only true and only work if you have legally resided in the United States for 12 years and 8 of those being dependent under a long-term visa holder. I know that's a lot of words but that's as simplified as we've made our bill. So, we were able to get I think last year we were able to get it into the NDAA¹¹ but it fell through because of just talks and conference. If it went up for a vote it would have passed, but it went into a conference so that's why the NDA didn't go through. But we're hoping this year to [get again in the omnibus] or see what else we can do.

ST. LAWRENCE: So, what would you say is the biggest hurdle that the ACA has faced throughout its time since 2020?

CASTELINO: It's mainly just political issues. Our biggest hurdle is that we are always compared to the issues at the border. Which is a big struggle for us who are advocating because we have nothing in common with the border. So, we have nothing to say about that because we are not immigrating from the border. Most of us are from highly populated countries like China and India. We also have no way to change their mind about border security when we're here fighting for legal immigration reforms, completely different from DACA¹² recipients and other policies. That is our biggest hurdle and also making sure that both of the political parties are open to our idea—which is really difficult when it still seems that it is a bipartisan bill. There's always troubles in policies to make that work. I think that has been our two biggest issues.

ST. LAWRENCE: Would you say it's more frustrating when it's very direct opposition or when people are just indifferent like, "Oh yeah, I'll get around to it". Which is more frustrating for you?

CASTELINO: Definitely the latter. When you have indifference to it, or people are like "yeah we'll look into it", and then you never hear back, it really throws off our strategy. When you have direct opposition, we just can't change your mind so we can attack other people, work on a different strategy. When you have someone who just is kind of indifferent, it's like "are you interested are you not interested do we convince you more?" Definitely takes a lot more effort, a

⁹ 9-digit number given to US citizens, permanent residents, and temporary residents primarily given to track income

¹⁰ Permanent resident card granting authorization to work and live in US on a permanent basis

¹¹ [National Defense Authorization Act](#)

¹² [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals](#)

lot more funding, a lot more to work around people who are indifferent. And you find a lot of those in the government.

ST. LAWRENCE: Would you say that's the majority of the people you have to deal with? People who are like "I'll get around to it" or is it more direct opposition?

CASTELINO: I actually would say it's neither. We have found that the majority of people in Congress that we have talked to in some way, form, or other agree with our bill. Their issues are more in how it would make them look as a Congressman. So that is where I think more of our efforts go into kind of seeing how we can talk to one person to make them talk to another person to know that "if you vote for it, I'll vote for it too", making sure they're brave enough to say yes to it. What we have seen is that behind the scenes most of the politicians agree with it since it is a very common-sense bill and most politicians do agree to that. I think we haven't had a lot of issues with indifference and only very little direct opposition.

ST. LAWRENCE: Would you say, and I don't know how much you can speak to this, but in general with policy and just being in that environment, have you seen that with any other issues? Is that a thing where behind closed doors a lot of support exists but it just doesn't manifest itself into passing legislation?

CASTELINO: Yes, definitely. I can't go into the specifics, but you will see a lot of the tension that happens in Congress, and you can see it in the public too, is we actually do understand each other. It's more just [that] we are living in [a] world where we are so politically divided that sometimes the middle ground never works out even though everyone agrees on it. And that's just a reality and it really sucks. I think it makes it really hard.

ST. LAWRENCE: When you're thinking of how to challenge that, how to push back, what do you think we can meaningfully do to push back on that extreme political divide that exists?

CASTELINO: I think the biggest common ground is knowing our common goal. If everyone has one goal, then steps will be taken will be taken to get to that goal. I think that is what is so harmful to Congress or at least modern politics, is everyone has different goals. With different goals you can't get to the same conclusion. You're never going to have everyone be happy but if you have a common goal you can get to a point where everyone agrees with the solution. I think that advocacy, standing up for things, using your voice, personal stories, testimonies in the House and the Senate¹³, those are things that really emphasize the common goal. That's what Improve the Dream has been working on and showing, that this is what our goal is, we want to make legal immigration accessible whatever your opinions are about the current illegal immigration crisis, we can all agree that legal immigration should exist and is reformed. And that is what we're trying to emphasize.

ST. LAWRENCE: With it being a very personal issue for you, how do you make sure you have the space to not get so wrapped up in all this tension, because it can be a lot? How do you deal with that on a personal level?

¹³ US Federal House of Representatives and Senate; highest legislative power in the United States

CASTELINO: I think my first full immersion to the organization this last summer and I think it was hearing my story. We would have to say over and over and over again to all these different people and hearing my peers say the same thing, I realized how draining it was. There is no better comfort in those situations than the people I'm advocating with, because they're going through the same thing. They understand what it is to repeatedly have to beg someone to listen to you. I think it is with them that I just tell them "Hey I'm feeling that this is just so much", and we kind of just bond over that. There's no solution to feeling better, but just knowing that someone else out there is going through my exact situation, knows exactly how I feel, we have such a large community that is so supportive.

ST. LAWRENCE: That's great. Who would you say is a big motivator for you to keep pushing? Is it the people in that community or some other person? It doesn't even have to be just one person.

CASTELINO: Definitely the community. Whenever I feel like nothing is going to work out and we always get so close, but it doesn't work out, I realize how much effort the community is putting in to make sure that at some point we're just using that as leverage to keep going and keep pushing. I think even more than that it's my parents. They came to the United States, and they're the first ones from my family to come to the United States and have their family with them, so whatever they created, that support system for me and my sister, has been all them. I think that for them to see that their daughter has less than a year in this country before she's separated from us, that urgency and that guilt that they feel, that's not even their fault, really drives me to be like "I need to make a change, whether it's not for just me but for the other parents in this country who are seeing their children leave."

ST. LAWRENCE: With the whole idea of "it not being their fault", in terms of this whole situation what would you say is the place to put the blame? Not necessarily a person, but what would you point to as "this is why the situation is the way it is"?

CASTELINO: It's a really tangled up bunch of reasons why we are in this situation. But I would mainly just say the lack of attention, and funding, and just knowledge of the immigration system. That's a big one. You have USCIS ¹⁴which does all the immigration paperwork and legwork but it's so outdated. They still use paper copies of everything. It's a lack of funding, it's a lack of attention paid to the immigration system, it's a lack of knowledge from politicians. They don't even know how immigration works. I had a meeting with a certain staff member at one point who didn't realize that you needed to go through this many hurdles in order to become a citizen. It was kind of just like, "oh apply for citizenship". It is all of that mashed together. This is why we are in the place we are.

ST. LAWRENCE: With the specifics of immigration, is this a very American issue? Or is this something that other countries have similar systems set up?

CASTELINO: I am honestly not very familiar. I did live in England before I moved to America, and I do remember that the pathway was a lot more streamlined. My parents were on the

¹⁴ [United States Citizenship and Immigration Services](#)

pathway to get their permanent residency which is the Green Card equivalent here. But we moved out because my parents' dream was to move to America. I do know that my parents repeatedly have said how much simpler that was but again, I'm not too familiar with their policies and I don't have the personal experience of knowing other immigrants in the UK [United Kingdom] who might struggle. So, I'm not too knowledgeable to answer that.

ST. LAWRENCE: Going more personal, how has this influenced more of your personal life? How has this carried into more day-to-day life and interactions with people?

CASTELINO: I'd say there's both positive and negative effects. Starting with the negative ones, there's just a lot more pressure to do well in school. Which sounds so trivial in this whole thing, but I'm a pre-med student but legally I cannot apply to the majority of medical schools in the country. There are, I'd say, only 30 or 40 schools that accept international students. In the grand scheme of things, I don't have the flexibility of choosing "What do I want in a school? What kind of community do I want?" Those are the only schools that I can apply to. I don't have that much freedom in that. If I don't get into medical school, if I decide last minute that's not something I want to do, there is such a limitation on what my career can be. I can't work for the government; I can't do any government related job. Which, I've said in my previous interviews that my dream was to serve in the US Army. That is not something I can do at this moment. So, my career is very limited. Doing well in school is the only thing I have that gives me that flexibility to change careers or to get into medical school. Because legally I cannot get an internship that pays me. I can't get a job that shows my work experience. I can't get a scholarship that proves that I am a diligent student. So, all of these things really pushed me back and I don't have a lot of availabilities for what I do as a student. But I see that there are definitely positive outcomes through this whole thing. I have learned so much in being in advocacy. I don't think I would have learned any of that if I was just unaware of the situation in the first place. I have learned how politics isn't just an easy "you tell them what you want, and you get what you want". It's so much negotiation but that's such a skill that I think anyone needs in a current workplace. Communication is just a whole other level when you go to DC¹⁵. Trying to speak and you go to a restaurant, and you can't really say exactly what's on your mind because you don't know who's sitting around you. Just so much you learn being in such a hard situation.

ST. LAWRENCE: Going back to the career thing, I noticed you did mention serving in the army as a dream. What did that dream represent for you when you were younger and wanted to go into the service?

CASTELINO: My dad actually served in the Indian Airforce when he was younger and so I've heard so many stories about his time in training and what that was like for him. Ever since I was young, I knew that was something that I wanted to do. But I wanted to do that for a country that I am loyal to, a country I call home. That is America. I've lived here for almost 16 years now. So, it's been a long time. I didn't even know that that wasn't an option for me until high school when I wasn't able to apply for ROTC programs ¹⁶in college. I think it was then that I realized that

¹⁵ District of Columbia; capitol of the United States

¹⁶ Reserve Officer Training Corps; program designed to train young people for military service

there is no way around it. There's no way to find your way through. I've taken it and placed it in different places. I'm currently in the Duke Police Citizens Academy ¹⁷ and I did that back at UofSC¹⁸ too. I really enjoy service for the community and serving a small community too. That is where I kind of fulfilled my dream, but it is limited in terms of what I can do and can't do.

ST. LAWRENCE: With going into the medical sector, did you feel like that was a compromise or did you feel like that was just another iteration of what that dream could look like?

CASTELINO: So, I did know that I did want to be in the medical space whether that was healthcare, health policy, in some way form or other I did want to be in healthcare. Throughout my time in college, I have definitely reconsidered my choice to become a physician. And it is solely because of my limitation and growth in that place. I can't apply to the majority of medical schools, like I said earlier, and that just makes it so much more difficult in terms of the money that I can spend. I can't get loans or scholarships and so most of these schools are private universities that cost a lot and honestly, I don't know if I can afford them. Those are the only reasons that I have felt like I might have to compromise away from a medical career. Which is truly heartbreaking, especially now when we are looking for physicians, looking for people in healthcare to take care of patients. We have so many sicknesses now coming up that it just is needed. but we are losing on talent that grew up, used American resources.

ST. LAWRENCE: Is this something that the medical community has talked about? Is this something you find that you can talk to your peers who are also on a premed track [about]? Or is it something that people aren't even aware of?

CASTELINO: Only the people who share the same experience as me are the people who understand. I have not found someone in the medical community yet who actually understands the struggle of what it is. Of course, I explain it to them but there's always going to be that misunderstanding of not living that experience. But no one I have met has ever been like "Oh, I know what you're talking about". Because the hurdle isn't just, I can't apply to this medical school. The hurdle is also I am certified as an EMT¹⁹, but I can't be an EMT. So, I can't put that on my resume. My hurdle is also I can't shadow unless it's free, which a lot of people don't want to do. You do want to be paid. So, there are very limited volunteer opportunities. My hurdle is also I can't do research if it's a grant. It has to be no government touching this research. So, it's more than just one little hiccup. It's so many things that lead up to not knowing If that's a secure career.

ST. LAWRENCE: With working, could you talk a little bit more about how the solution in the ACA would fix that? What practical impacts would that have?

CASTELINO: Do you mean employment in general?

ST. LAWRENCE: Yeah.

¹⁷ [Duke Citizens' Police Academy](#)

¹⁸ University of South Carolina

¹⁹ Emergency Medical Technicians; medical professional that serves as a first responder in medical emergencies including transport to medical facilities

CASTELINO: So, from what I do understand about the bill is that it will provide students like me with a social security number or a replacement of a social security number that could count as a work identification number. Something that would allow us to be employed. Currently the way the F-1 student visa works is that you are allowed to be employed with 20 hours maximum a week and it has to be correlated with the subject that you are learning. So, you can't work in a restaurant if you're an econ major. It has to be an on-campus job or if it's off campus it has to be an internship related to what you're doing. We are still trying to figure out exactly how that would work in terms of the America's Children Act but it would give us the opportunity to work.

ST. LAWRENCE: With this policy, as it strays more away from just the immigration and more into employment, do you see that you have to work with more different issues beyond just groups related to immigration? Have you had to reach out to people further away from just the immigration issue?

CASTELINO: Yes. I definitely think so. Like I mentioned earlier, a portion of our bill was implemented in the NDA, the Senate version of the NDAA, and that's defense. But we were able to make a really strong case about defense because this is not just immigration but you're losing people who want to work in national cyber security, people who want to work in defense—in the military. And for reasons like that I definitely think it impacts so many more departments than just immigration which is why we've been able to make so many connections and progress in those separate departments too.

ST. LAWRENCE: Within the immigration field, there's a lot of different [groups] you already mentioned, how do you make sure to stay amicable with those other issues but also make sure you're on your own track? Like "we're related but different". How do you make that distinction? How do you make an intentional distinction?

CASTELINO: Could you reword that question for me? I'm trying to figure out how to answer that.

ST. LAWRENCE: Within the immigration field, how do you make sure that people understand that you might be related but you are different issues and should be addressed as such?

CASTELINO: I think that solely comes from personal stories. We have had the opportunity to have three testimonies in Congress. In the past two years, we've had one in the House, one in Senate judiciary, and just one this past month. These are opportunities for the senators and the public to see the differences between all of our stories and how they make us unique but also the fact that we all have one common issue and that is our immigration problems. So as much as it branches out, we all know that the core is immigration. And we know that from personal stories and experiences.

ST. LAWRENCE: With those personal stories, what is the process like to prepare yourself emotionally? Having to share very personal parts of yourself that most people don't feel like they have to share because they're not expected to. How do you prepare yourself for that? It just seems like a lot.

CASTELINO: It definitely is. I remember the first time I shared my story was actually at a press conference which I did not know was happening until the night before. I think it's very scary. It is very scary to begin with. Especially when it comes to immigration because most families that I know who are going through this issue definitely want to keep it to ourselves. It's something that's very personal. I think the preparation comes [from] seeing the efforts and stories of other people who have also shared theirs and getting heard from them. At least that's how I did mine. I think starting from the beginning is so hard and I don't have the experience to talk [about] that—on what it was like to be the first one to speak out about it. But as someone who did speak out about it a little bit later, just watching some of my closest friends speak out about their issue and seeing how difficult it was for them, but they still said it empowered me to realize that it's not just for me. It's not my story. This is the story of 250,000 students like me. They need one voice to say it and it has to be me. And it has to be the others who are speaking out.

ST. LAWRENCE: With a community that is so big, do you notice that it's something that people are talking about a lot within the community or is it something that's all kind of kept like “we all know it's happening, but we just don't say anything”? What is the energy within the community talking about this issue?

CASTELINO: I think it started out definitely where it was like “we don't really talk about it. We know that we're all kind of in the same boat.” But I have seen it over time grow into a support network where we're able to talk about it and learn from each other. We have a big group chat in which anyone can ask any question about something that they're going through in terms of mentally, if they're having immigration issues, [if] they're looking for a lawyer. Every single person gets an answer and it's because we know how to help them out. I've definitely seen it evolve over time.

ST. LAWRENCE: What do you think was a catalyst for that movement? That switch to a more “we talk about this”, a welcoming community?

CASTELINO: The stories that you repeatedly hear. It's knowing that there are individuals from your community speaking out about your story and their story and the whole community's stories repeatedly over and over again. I think that kind of ingrains it in the community's brains that “no, this is something I can talk about. If someone else is doing it, then I can do it too.” A sense of security.

ST. LAWRENCE: You mentioned finding immigration [resources], what's the process like of organizing all that information? Taking the time to find it and sharing it with people?

CASTELINO: When you do it alone, when you do that within your own family and you try to seek out lawyers, that process is very difficult and very expensive. But when we share those resources, we're not exactly like organizing it and [just] giving it to people it's more like [if someone] asks a question and if I happen to be like “oh I know someone in your area” I just send that information over. I'm not in a place to really speak out about how they structure that, but it is more like “I ask a question, you answer it”.

ST. LAWRENCE: It is a community of a very specific background, but do you notice that there's people who wouldn't normally be in community with each other that are bonding over a shared experience? What is the makeup of the 250,000 people that are part of this group?

CASTELINO: The majority, like I said, are people like me with an H-4 visa, but it's not just that. We have people on all different kinds. You have EB visas²⁰, O visas²¹, these are all random letters but they're all different visa types. That's one big thing, I didn't even know there were this many types of visas. They're all different types of backgrounds. So largely about that, what I think is really interesting, I never knew that I would bond over someone with two letters and a number for a visa type. I think that is really interesting. We all know that there is some kind of immigration struggle that we're going through.

ST. LAWRENCE: Is it also a space that you can connect on a level that isn't really related to that? Is there time and energy that you put into just connecting as people outside of just your immigration status?

CASTELINO: My closest friends I have made through this community. She's a Robertson²² so we get to see each other quite a bit. She's one of my best friends and she has been a huge and integral part not just in me figuring out my own immigration process, my own immigration system, but also, she is my best friend. I tell her everything. I'm so happy that I can see a future with her and that is because we originally did bond over the fact that we struggle in the same way. But when you find one thing to bond over, you always find more, that's just how friendships grow.

ST. LAWRENCE: Within that same energy, do you find that it's generally easier to connect with people that are already part of that community? Is there some aspect of "no one else would really understand this big part of my identity"?

CASTELINO: I think definitely it is easy to bond with people in the same issue as me. I wouldn't say it's easier than others because I do have a lot of specific identities that I find I can bond with people over. It's not like this is the easiest over others. But having that one big thing in common definitely helps and makes it easier.

ST. LAWRENCE: With those other identities, are there any that you specifically want to speak to in some way? Or just explain more about who you are outside of just this one aspect of your identity.

CASTELINO: I am Catholic, and I think I have a really big Catholic group of friends that really share that same identity with me. I just came back from church actually. I do think I have a big Catholic center and I just got here a month ago but the warm, welcoming community that they have there. I think the separate identities that you have, for me a big one is my religious life, that makes the struggles of your other issues so much easier to deal with. A lot of the times people are like "how do you deal with it mentally?" It is because of my religion. It is because of my faith. I

²⁰ Employment Based visa; work visa for non-US citizens granted for extraordinary ability

²¹ Visa granted to individuals of extraordinary ability in sciences, arts, education, business, or athletics

²² [Robertson Scholar](#)

can't imagine going through something so big, like the separation of my family, without it. That is a really big part of my life.

ST. LAWRENCE: So, you'd say that's a grounding force for you?

CASTELINO: Yes.

ST. LAWRENCE: That's great. How much has this really shaped your life? Has this kind of been your whole life? Have you gotten more into it throughout your time with this activism work? Describe more of that relationship.

CASTELINO: Well, I grew up Catholic, so it's always been a really big part of my life but, like you said, I think it definitely changed when I did start my activism. In my life it put me on a different level than I was before in terms of what I would do with my time. I was a very private person in high school. I didn't do a lot. Well, I did do a lot, but I didn't do anything in the public side of things. So, throwing myself into advocacy where I'm speaking in Congress and speaking to politicians is a very very different lifestyle. It's a very different side of me that I didn't know existed. I think during that time my faith and my relationship with the community in the Catholic Church definitely changed. I relied on them more because I realized that when you are in a space where you are either in the media a lot, speaking about your story that used to be so personal and is now public, you still have to have that security in knowing that only your friends and your community knows this side of you. Because it's just so hard to spread yourself thin and let everyone know exactly who you are and everything about you. So, it definitely strengthened during my time when I was first getting involved in this.

ST. LAWRENCE: What put you into such a public, being everywhere space? It seems like a very big jump from very private to being all over and speaking to Congress. It can be a big shift. So, what pushed you over to where you were like "I need to be out and speaking"?

CASTELINO: So, while it was my choice, I think I first signed up for an Improve the Dream advocacy trip last summer because I wanted to meet people who were going through the same thing. That was my main thing was that I wanted to meet the community. Advocacy was not my forefront at the time. I just wanted to see people. I was like "there's no way there's other people like me". That was my goal. It was at that trip where Dip Patel—he's actually the founder of Improve the Dream, he runs the show—he was like "Oh, Fedora, you're going to speak at the press conference. Don't worry about it just speak." So, I wouldn't say that I chose it at first but after that first time telling my story to the media and Senators, I think it was then that I realized that they were so receptive and a lot of the times in Congress they will be receptive. Whether or not they agree with what you're saying they will be receptive. That is their job. That drove me to realize that I need to keep doing this. I need to keep pushing and keep fighting. Seeing my peers do the same and put so much time and effort into it, I realized that I needed to keep going. But it wasn't my choice the first time.

ST. LAWRENCE: That's definitely an interesting push into it being like "oh, I guess I'm doing this now!" What would you say is your mindset around your activism in general? Where's your head at when you're preparing for all these things?

CASETLINO: Do you mean in terms of at the moment? What do you mean?

ST. LAWRENCE: You can take it more general or more specific just what you want to accomplish with this. Your goals and mindset with that.

CASTELINO: So, I usually, whenever I try and get into the headspace of doing Improve the Dream activism, advocacy, people are going to disagree with you, people are going to be rude, people are going to be mean—especially on social media. That can be very disheartening. But if you keep the thing in mind that this is what you want in the end. I always try to visualize me and my family, we're living together. Me raising a family in the United States which is one of my biggest dreams of living in the United States with my family. I visualize knowing that I'm secure in the place that I live. I am a citizen. I can work wherever I want to without the fear of not getting a work visa. I can work for the government, do research, and work as a doctor. I think about those things and that is the mindset I go into advocacy with because I think, no matter what you're advocating for, if you enter that space with the doubt and the fear that comes with advocacy. That's always there but if that's the prominent thing you're thinking of it will push you back. It will not give you that strength to fight for it. Because if you don't have the visualization of what you want in the end, what exactly are you aiming for? What are you doing? It is hard to make that the prominent thing, but it has to be. Otherwise, you are not effective in your advocacy. People can sense that in the way you speak and the way you fight for what you want. If you're not sure about it, they're not going to be sure about it.

ST. LAWRENCE: For people who are struggling either in their activism or just personal feelings of being very pessimistic about change, what either advice would you give, or consolation would you give people who are really struggling with the pessimistic take on all this change we're fighting for?

CASTELINO: An example that I like to think about is I think in 2011 or 2010 there was a time when H-1B holders, usually people who were the holders of a work visa they came to the United States, and they were able to work. But their spouses had no way of working. They'd be sitting at home, and these are people who are people with PhD's²³, people with bachelor's degrees who are very highly skilled to work in the current economy. They were not allowed to because only the person who had the H-1B was allowed to work. It was actually a large number of these wives who were all master's holders, bachelor's degrees, some of them were PhD's but they could not work because their husbands had work visas. They advocated, these are at this point housewives, they are in the white house and really pushing "we need to work. We want to contribute to the economy." Now, my mom works. My dad is the one that holds the H-1B, but my mom works in Xerox, which is a large printing company. We have a double income family which was not possible just 10, 13 years ago. Seeing that huge change in a relatively short period of time really motivates me that we can make this happen too. We're just not at the end yet.

ST. LAWRENCE: With the timeframe issues, is it something that you're working with a timeframe in mind, or do you find that less helpful than just continuously pushing?

²³ Doctor of Philosophy

CASTELINO: I think a timeframe is needed in my case at least. I turn 21 next year. That is my deadline. I have no way of advocating for this if I'm not in the United States. So, for me personally, I do have a deadline. I know politically deadlines are very hard to work with. A lot of politicians don't even believe in deadlines, it's just whenever it happens it happens. For me, I have a deadline and I'm pushing with that deadline in mind. For everyone else, they have a deadline that is 21. One of my friends is just 12 but she has a deadline. She doesn't have that much time left.

ST. LAWRENCE: I know it first got introduced in 2020, is it something that you think is going to be able to get passed within the current session? I don't know how much you're allowed to say but what are the feelings about the probability of things going to plan?

CASTELINO: So, I can't say too much about the politics behind the chances of it passing but I think it is very hard in the current state of Congress—the way the House is working right now, the way the Senate is working right now. It's definitely hard. There is always a possibility. We have a lot of co-sponsors²⁴. I'm sure you know, but we need 10 Republican co-sponsors and 10 Democrat co-sponsors, and we will be able to bring it to the Senate for a vote. So, we have such bipartisan [support], we have Rand Paul²⁵ on the bill as well as Dick Durbin²⁶. We have quite a bit of variety and I think that really is hopeful and proves to the government that we are bipartisan. This is what everyone wants.

ST. LAWRENCE: For people who are more removed from this issue and aren't personally affected, what would you say is the best means of support for people who maybe aren't even aware that this is an issue that people are constantly fighting for?

CASTELINO: Calling your senators. That has been our biggest support from people who can't advocate or don't necessarily want to be in that space, which is also fine, but they call their senators, email their senators. It takes 30 minutes of their time and the staffers they actually keep track of all these things. They keep track of "how many people want this?", "what do our constituents want?" When This goes to the senator himself or herself, they're able to see that this is something that our constituents want. This is our demographic; how can we make that happen? This is our biggest way of support right now.

ST. LAWRENCE: Has that been a pretty big means of support? Are people actually acting on that?

CASTELINO: Yes. We actually have a lot of family members and friends. We are always asking them, "Hey, it's been a month! Go ahead and call them, just remind them, let them know we're still fighting for this. We still want this to happen." For our friends and family who are already citizens and can vote, definitely vote to begin with and then take a look at who you're voting for. Let your representatives know that this is an issue that you want to be passed and want to be fixed.

²⁴ A legislator in support of a bill being brought for consideration

²⁵ US Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) since 2011

²⁶ US Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) since 1997

ST. LAWRENCE: That's great. It's very inspiring to hear that people are actually acting beyond just people who are immediately affected. I just want to ask, is there anything that you wanted to speak more about? Anything we didn't really touch on, ask much, anything you want to put more out there on?

CASTELINO: Not that I can think of. No, I think we hit all the main things.

ST. LAWRENCE: I just wanted to thank you for the time that you spent with me and your answers. They were all very insightful and I appreciate them. Obviously, keep me up to date with everything that you're getting involved with because it is very exciting, especially with bipartisan issues. It's something that it feels like there's less and less of—something that can truly be supported by both sides. It's just very exciting to hear about something that seems like it's actually making some progress in terms of the politics behind it all.

CASTELINO: Thank you for listening!

ST. LAWRENCE: Yeah, of course! Well, I'm so excited that we got to do this.