

SISTER KATHLEEN ROSS - ACCEPTANCE SPEECH  
NAICU Henry Paley Award  
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Thank you, David, and thank you to the staff and the Board of NAICU. I appreciate so much what you and the NAICU staff accomplish on behalf of all of us. Thank you for this very special recognition!

In thinking about what I would like to share with you today, I have chosen HOPE. There are so many forces around us today that militate against hope, that make us think the world is terribly bleak. Terrorism, the global economy, our national and state budgets, to name a few. We're standing in the midst of what looks like a pretty big MESS, and it's easy to discount HOPE as just "pie in the sky."

Yet HOPE is the bedrock of the faith and creativity that helps us find our way through the challenges. HOPE tells us, no matter what our religious tradition, that there is a power greater than ourselves – for me, this power is an incredibly loving and personal God – who activates within our deepest selves courage, and wisdom, and energy for action. This is the HOPE we need today. So I'd like to share with you some "Icons of Hope" for me.

I am referring to a small group of students at Heritage University who are truly remarkable. They all are first-generation and from very low-income families, and usually fairly large families. They all work at some minimum wage jobs, often in field labor and on a full-time basis. They have graduated from local high schools and both there and at Heritage they have exerted strong and highly regarded leadership. They have been elected to key student body or student club leadership positions by their peers, and they initiate campus-wide and community projects that reflect our best and brightest young minds.

But there is one more characteristic that is the reason I label these young people my Icons of Hope. These students are undocumented. They were brought by their parents illegally as little kids into the U.S. Under current immigration law they have no possibility of become legalized US citizens. If I were in their shoes, I doubt I would have the hope or the courage to enroll in college, let alone to pursue challenging degrees and very demanding leadership roles on campus and in the community. These students are

giving incredible witness to HOPE, and I think it is time we worked harder to help them realize their hopes.

Nationally, there are an estimated 65,000 students graduating from our high schools every year who belong to this category of “undocumented.” About 50,000 of them do go to college, paying their own way by working and perhaps accepting some private scholarships which ARE legal for colleges to award to them. But they have no prospect of being hired in the professional roles that their degrees are preparing them for without legal status. They are young people you can most accurately describe as “students without a country and without a future.”

Many people think that there are avenues where they can “sign up” for a waiting list to get a green card and become legal. Actually, under current immigration law, they have only one legal choice: return to your country of origin and reside there for a minimum of TEN years. Then you can go to the local US embassy and ask for a visa. You heard me right – you have to wait TEN years according to the current law. Now most of the undocumented students I have known would totally flounder if they were sent back to their birth country. They have only distant relatives or very elderly ones. They either don’t know the language at all or don’t speak the educated language and haven’t been in that country’s education system so they are not prepared for the professional or middle class work world there.

Why should we be concerned about these 20-somethings who have no viable futures? Well, obviously it is a matter of justice and compassion. But it is also a matter of valuing our future. My experience with the small group who are undocumented students at Heritage – which is only about 2% of our student body – is that they disproportionately represent outstanding talent and unusual leadership abilities. Perhaps it’s because of what they’ve been through. But I see unusually determined leadership, amazing perseverance and problem-solving abilities in campus and community projects, and great interpersonal skills. I see the kind of young leaders that I hope will be our next generation of legislators, entrepreneurs, teachers and community builders.

Immigration Reform efforts have mapped out a potential pathway for these young people, often referred to as the Dream Act. It would apply to students who have graduated from US high schools after being here a minimum number of years, have

enrolled in postsecondary education or training, and have completed their programs. If they haven't had any brushes with the law and meet other requirements, including a major fee probably similar to the currently required \$1,000 to get a Green Card, they could finally earn citizenship.

Surveys of the public indicate that a strong majority – as many as 85% -- favor allowing employable illegal immigrants with no criminal records to earn citizenship after paying a fine. But when the issue is brought to a legislature, those opposed are the ones who speak up. My experience is that most of our colleagues, and certainly the general public, are unaware of the dead end that undocumented college students are facing. I like to use this analogy. If I am driving on a highway at 80 miles and get stopped, I deserve to get a ticket and pay a large fine or jeopardize my driver's license. But if I had some children in the car with me, would it be right to tell each of them, "you can never have a driver's license?"

What can campus leaders do? Find out if you have undocumented students on campus. Find out if there are talented undocumented students in your feeder high schools for whom special scholarship dollars might be designated. And most of all, help raise the visibility of this issue -- speak out about how we are losing an incredible talent pool for our globalized future, and work together to strategize coalitions that will mobilize public opinion in favor of these amazing Icons of Hope among us.

Every day I am inspired by our undocumented students as they carry out academic and club projects that make Heritage shine and improve our local communities. They are authentic beacons of HOPE for me. They make me constantly ask myself, how can I even think of giving up on something difficult? Even this difficult challenge of immigration reform. We owe it to ourselves, our country, and the young people who are the focus of our NAICU mission. At Heritage, we have a saying, "Talent Deserves Opportunity." The talent of our undocumented college students brought here as children deserves the American Opportunity. Thank you for listening. Thank you again for this wonderful award. God bless you all!