

< Status Update

26-Minute Listen

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI, HOST:

This week, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a case that affects the lives of more than 700,000 people in the U.S.

GENE DEMBY, HOST:

That's 700,000 people who were brought here as kids and are undocumented today - people like Miriam Gonzalez.

MIRIAM GONZALEZ: I mostly refer to myself as undocumented. But at the end of the day, it's like, no, I'm not a DREAMer. No, I'm not undocumented. I'm Miriam.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DEMBY: Miriam Gonzalez is one of the plaintiffs suing the Trump administration for ending DACA - that's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. You'll remember that for certain undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as kids, DACA offers protection from deportation. It allows them to get jobs. But they have to re-up every two years.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MERAJI: So right now, Miriam has DACA.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

GONZALEZ: OK. So are you going to take it away? Are you going to, like, leave it? Like, what are you going to do?

MERAJI: But her youngest sister, Abigail, has no documentation at all - no DACA; nothing.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

ABIGAIL GONZALEZ: I feel like I don't belong anywhere.

MERAJI: And Miriam's youngest brother, Joseventura, is a U.S. citizen; the only one born in the U.S.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

JOSEVENTURA GONZALEZ: There's so much pressure on me.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MERAJI: This is CODE SWITCH from NPR. I'm Shereen Marisol Meraji.

DEMBY: And I'm Gene Demby. And Shereen, you first met Miriam and her family about two years ago - not too long after the Trump administration announced that it was ending DACA.

MERAJI: That's right.

DEMBY: There have been a bunch of legal fights over the fate of DACA ever since. And this week, it's the Supreme Court's turn to decide whether DACA lives or dies.

MERAJI: And Miriam Gonzalez is one of the plaintiffs in that case.

DEMBY: Miriam, as you all heard, lives in a mixed-status family, like 9 million other people in the United States. Some family members may be citizens. Some may have green cards or some other legal status, like DACA. And some may be facing the constant specter of deportation and being separated from their families.

MERAJI: And this is what the Gonzalez family has been dealing with for years. There are four kids in the family. Three of them were living at home with their parents here in LA when I first met them back in 2017, and that's who we're going to hear from - Miriam, Abigail and Joseventura. I actually met Abby (ph) first, working on a different story. She was a high school senior, class president. She was taking a bunch of AP classes. She played softball, was obsessed with the Dodgers.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

A GONZALEZ: I love alternative rock music. And then I recently started listening to K-Pop, so I really like that. And I love to eat. That's like - like, I love eating all kinds of food - Mexican, Italian,

Korean. Like, I love trying different types of foods.

MERAJI: You're very tall.

A GONZALEZ: Yes, I'm tall. So I'm the tallest, like, compared to my older sisters. And, like, my brother actually beat me now. But before, I was taller than everyone.

MERAJI: Abby's lived in LA since she was a baby. And she told me she and her sisters - all of them undocumented - never gave much thought to being deported until Donald Trump was elected.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

A GONZALEZ: Me and my sisters are actually talking about it, how we don't have a plan if we're deported. We've been in this country long - like, so long that we feel like nothing's going to happen to us because, like, it just - it hasn't happened before.

MERAJI: Right now, Abby is the most vulnerable of the three sisters. She's in the U.S. without any documentation. Her two older sisters have DACA.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MERAJI: She calls her oldest sister, Miriam...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

A GONZALEZ: My biggest inspiration, and she remembers - she's

the only one who remembers Mexico, bits and pieces.

MERAJI: And Miriam calls Abigail...

GONZALEZ: My little prodigy - but she's done everything on her own.

MERAJI: Abby was 6 months old and Miriam was 6 years old when their mom brought them to Los Angeles. Here's Miriam, again.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

GONZALEZ: I don't, like, really remember a lot of it. I just kind of remember my mom saying, like, oh yeah, we're going to go, like, visit your dad, you know, because my dad had been working in the United States for a while. As kids, you can't say, like, oh, no, I want to stay here - so, you know, following your parents wherever they go. And then, I remember we took a plane from Guadalajara to Tijuana, and we were staying, like, at this house. I just remember we were in a house. There was, like, a lot of people in there. And there was a couch, and we would sleep on the couch. And then I think we were only there for, like, maybe a day or two. And then we took a bus from TJ to downtown LA.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MERAJI: You didn't even know at that time that this was going to change your life forever. You had no idea. You were just going to

go visit your dad.

GONZALEZ: Yeah. I was just visiting my dad. And then a lot - it's funny because, I think, my mom had also mentioned Disneyland. Like, oh yeah, because he lives in LA, we're going to go to Disneyland. And I was like, oh, yeah, cool. We didn't end up going to Disneyland until, like, two years later. (Laughter) So it was always like, oh, you promised Disneyland to me, and now we're here. I'm 8 years old, and I still haven't been to Disneyland. (Laughter) So, you know, it's kind of funny.

MERAJI: Miriam told me she adapted fast. The oldest of four, she became the family interpreter, the planner; basically the responsible one. And she went through a bunch of firsts that helped pave the way for her younger sisters. She was the first to know their legal status.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GONZALEZ: I always knew I wasn't born in the United States so that, to me, was clear. I just never knew, like, the legality of, like, my situation until I was in seventh grade.

MERAJI: There was a flyer at school. Miriam told me she couldn't remember exactly what for - some sort of afterschool job. And to get it, you needed a Social Security number.

GONZALEZ: And I went home that day. And I told my mom, like, hey, Mom, can I have my Social Security number? And then she

was like, you don't have one. And then I was like, well, let's go get one.

MERAJI: Her mom told her why it didn't work that way - because she was undocumented.

GONZALEZ: She just said, don't tell anybody. And I do remember that.

MERAJI: Miriam didn't, until high school. She was the first in her class, the valedictorian, and she was determined to go to college. So she shared her secret with a high school guidance counselor who told her that UCLA had an undocumented student organization. And that's when Miriam says she realized, wait, not only can I go to college, I can have a support network.

So she applied to UCLA, and she got in. But her parents couldn't afford the tuition. Her dad worked at a factory, and he wasn't making a lot of money. And she couldn't legally work or apply for financial aid. But being the planner she was, Miriam had a plan. She'd live at home. She'd commute to school. And that worked for the first couple of months. But...

GONZALEZ: (Laughter) I didn't get one of those scholarships that I was depending on, so I had to take time off from school. So yeah.

MERAJI: Months went by while Miriam was trying to figure out what to do, when something big happened.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: Effective immediately, the Department of Homeland Security is taking steps to lift the shadow of deportation from these young people.

MERAJI: President Obama announced DACA. It was June 15, 2012. Miriam was still on a break from UCLA, but she was hanging out with a bunch of other undocumented students from UCLA that day. They were all seniors. And when they heard the president signed the executive order...

GONZALEZ: You made me get emotional (laughter). Yeah, so it came, like, at a perfect time where, you know, they're getting ready to graduate, and now they have the opportunity to work.

MERAJI: Which meant she did, too. Miriam got DACA. She reenrolled at UCLA.

A GONZALEZ: It took her five years to graduate just because she had to drop one semester because we couldn't afford it.

MERAJI: That's Miriam's little sister Abby again. She's super proud of everything her older sister Miriam has accomplished - finished college, a first for the Gonzalez family; attend graduate school at Loyola Marymount University, another first.

A GONZALEZ: And she's getting her master's at LMU, and she's in a program called Teach for America. So she's teaching seventh-

and eighth-graders currently, while being in school.

MERAJI: And you can tell that Abby thinks the world of Miriam. And no, you can't see her facial expressions, but if you saw her face, you can tell she is just, like, so in awe her sister. But she told me her family doesn't talk that much about their feelings with each other, whether they're good or bad.

A GONZALEZ: We aren't very vulnerable to each other, and I wish we were. I do resent the fact that, like, just the feelings that my status has had on me and just, like, the impact that it has had on me emotionally - I feel like I don't belong anywhere. I feel like if - I don't feel a part of Mexico because I've never lived there. I don't remember my relatives. I don't remember life in the ranch. I don't remember anything.

In America, I've had to assimilate. I mean, I don't speak Spanish fluently, like, perfect Spanish because all my years I've tried to perfect my English. And so I've had to let go of certain things from my own culture just to assimilate into a country that, you know, where people don't respect me because of just legal documentation.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MERAJI: Remember - Abby is completely undocumented. She wasn't 15 when DACA was announced, and you had to be at least 15 to apply. And when she turned 15, she was in high school, and

she didn't think she needed a job until she graduated. She wanted to focus on getting good grades and playing sports - not working. She really thought of DACA as something you only needed if you wanted a job, and she wasn't thinking about deportation at the time at all.

So when Abigail finally started thinking about applying, her older sister Miriam called up a lawyer who said, wait - hold off. Don't give the government all of Abby's information until the Trump administration decides what to do with DACA.

A GONZALEZ: Like, I definitely regretted not applying early, as soon as I turned 15.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

JEFF SESSIONS: I'm here today to announce that the program known as DACA that was effectuated under the Obama administration is being rescinded.

A GONZALEZ: And then, like, it was already too late once we waited out.

MERAJI: On Tuesday, September 5 of 2017, Attorney General Jeff Sessions made the official announcement - DACA was over. And the oldest Gonzalez sister, Miriam, got ready to fight. She's a plaintiff in a case suing the Trump administration for ending DACA - Department of Homeland Security v. Regents of the University of California. She's fighting for the more than 700,000

people who've applied for DACA and all those people, like her sister Abby, who hadn't applied yet but were eligible before the Trump administration canceled it.

GONZALEZ: Yeah, I didn't even, like, think about having a conversation with my parents. I kind of decided, like, yeah, I'm going to join the lawsuit. And it wasn't until I ended up hanging up with my attorney that I go out to the kitchen and I told my mom. I was like, so I'm going to be suing, like, the Trump administration for rescinding DACA. And then my mom thought I was joking, and she's like - she just laughed it off, like, ha-ha, yes, you are. And then I was like, no, I'm serious. And she's like, sure.

So she didn't believe me. The day that finally the case was submitted and I - like, I started getting, you know, media requests. And then I called my mom, and I was - hey, Mom. So, like, Telemundo and Azteca (ph) are going to go to the house. Like, you better clean it, you know (laughter). And then she was like, why are they going to come to the house? And I was like, I told you about my lawsuit. And then she's like, I thought you were kidding. I was like, Mom, turn on the TV (laughter).

(SOUNDBITE OF MONTAGE)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: (Speaking Spanish).

DICK DURBIN: Miriam Gonzalez - she's the 105th DREAMer that I've told a story about...

GONZALEZ: My name is Miriam Gonzalez. I am a seventh and eighth grade math and reading intervention teacher, and I am a DACA recipient.

MERAJI: Miriam's lawsuit - it started at the district court level, and a judge ruled that the federal government had to keep taking DACA renewals but it didn't have to take new applications. It was a short-term win that the federal government appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, and it wasn't a win that would help Miriam's sister Abby because Abby would have been a new applicant. Miriam told me she wishes she could go back in time or do something to sign Abby up for DACA before all this stuff went down.

GONZALEZ: That's, like, one thing that I do regret, that - you know, I feel like it falls on my hands since I was the one that didn't do it for her. And, like, I know that we don't talk about it because, you know, our family doesn't really talk about things. But in the back of my head, I'm just like, does she blame me? And, like, I wouldn't blame her for, like, blaming me since, you know, we kind of, like, didn't do it when we had the opportunity to do so.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

J GONZALEZ: I have more opportunities than my sisters. So now that I have more opportunities, I should take advantage, and I should stop being lazy and just focus on what I've got to do.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DEMBY: After the break, we'll meet Abigail and Miriam's little brother.

MERAJI: The only citizen in the Gonzalez family.

DEMBY: Stay with us.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DEMBY: Gene.

MERAJI: Shereen.

DEMBY: CODE SWITCH. All right, Shereen. You've introduced us to two Gonzalez sisters - one is DACA-mented (ph). Get it?

MERAJI: (Laughter).

DEMBY: Meaning she has protection from deportation and a work permit because of DACA. And one who is undocumented, meaning she doesn't have any protection, like, at all. And now you're going to introduce us to a Gonzalez sibling who has all the protections that come along with citizenship.

MERAJI: Yep. He was born in the U.S. He's the lone brother. And he's the baby of the family.

J GONZALEZ: So my name is Joseventura Gonzalez. I am 17 years

old, and I am in the 11th grade.

MERAJI: Joseventura - all one word, 11 letters.

That's a very long name. Are you named after anyone?

J GONZALEZ: I'm named after my dad and my - one of my dad's tios who took care of my dad and his family when my grandpa passed away at - when my dad was 6 years old.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MERAJI: So Joseventura isn't just a long name; it's a heavy one. He told me his grandfather was murdered in a fight over a piece of land back in Mexico, and his great uncle Ventura stepped up to take care of the family. And when his great uncle Ventura died, also young, Joseventura's dad Jose quit school to support his younger brothers and sisters. He never went to high school, but his daughters, Joseventura's three older sisters - they rocked high school. Miriam and Abigail told me their parents sacrificed everything to bring them to the U.S., and they were not going to mess that up.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

J GONZALEZ: I really don't push myself to have good grades. Like, my overall GPA isn't really - isn't that good. I pretty much blame myself because I don't push myself to finish the work. I become lazy, and I stop doing the work.

MERAJI: OK, so how would you describe yourself besides your grades? Let's take that off the table.

J GONZALEZ: Besides my grades, I describe myself as athletic. I love to play sports - really annoying to my sisters. I like to bully them.

GONZALEZ: Oh, my little pain.

MERAJI: Oldest sister Miriam told me Joseventura's description of himself is pretty on point.

GONZALEZ: He's so annoying, but, I mean, I'm his sister, so I guess I get to say that. He always says that he's, like, the dumb one in our family, and I'm just like, you're not dumb. You're just lazy.

MERAJI: And Abigail says all the sisters are telling him to basically get his you-know-what together.

A GONZALEZ: We tell him, too. Like, you're so lucky you have certain things that we don't. Like, you can travel to Mexico whenever you want. You don't have to fear deportation. You know, like, we put a lot of pressure on him because we need him to work, to go to college, because those factors will be able to help my parents get their papers.

MERAJI: Because Joseventura's the only citizen in the family, he can sponsor his parents when he turns 21, but to help his parents get their papers, he also has to prove that he makes enough

money to support them.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

J GONZALEZ: There's so much pressure on me. You have more opportunities than your sisters, so you should be on it. You should be getting good grades, focusing on school. So I feel like all the eyes are on me in the family. So if our mom says that - oh, I'm just waiting for you to get - turn 21 so you can have papers. But now that we have Trump, I feel like it's going to be hard to be able to fix them.

MERAJI: President Trump has tried to make things more difficult. In 2018 he pushed to restrict the people a citizen could sponsor to their spouses and their children - only minor children, so no parents. And the Trump administration threatened to withhold DACA protections to make reforms like that, right? The president has also used DACA to negotiate border wall funding and to end the diversity lottery during two different government shutdowns. So there's been a lot of back-and-forth from President Trump around immigration, legal and illegal, and Joseventura told me it's just - it's too much to keep track of.

J GONZALEZ: Pretty much, we don't really talk about Trump in our house. Everyone in my family's on it. They're still doing what they have to do. You know, life continues. They still wake up, do what they got to do, come back home, eat, sleep, do the same thing over and over again.

MERAJI: And then you - I mean, is it something that you think about? Is it something that gives you anxiety? Do you ever lose any sleep over it?

J GONZALEZ: So when he first got elected to office, you know, the next morning, I was just thinking about my family and my sisters. So I just thought about - wow. Like, I feel like our lives are going to change. And I even teared up about it. I don't really express myself to my family.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MERAJI: After I finished interviewing Joseventura, I was packing up all my recording equipment. And he came back into the room where we were doing the interview, and he told me that he had one more thing that he really wanted to share with me, something that he needed me to record.

OK. All right. What are you missing?

J GONZALEZ: So what I feel like I missed was the part about Miriam - when she first told me about suing the government, she was telling me about it, and I was just like, wow. And now that her name is out there, you know, people know who she is. I asked her - I was like, aren't you afraid of getting caught - like, ICE capturing you? And the fact that she just looked at me in the eyes and she told me, I'm not afraid - I was just like, wow. Like, it just made me think, like, oh, my God. Like, is this crazy?

Yeah, so that's pretty much what I missed - that she's not afraid of throwing herself out there, even if she's not a citizen. And she's like, if I do get caught and I go back to Mexico, then I'll find something to do over there. If one of us go, then all of us will go. I don't like the idea of families being separated. That's not fair for anyone, and I wouldn't want that to happen to anyone. So if my sister gets deported or my parents get deported, I'll go with them. It wouldn't matter if I don't have my chance of getting a better future for myself.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DEMBY: OK, so that's a lot. Shereen, that was a few years ago when you talked to the Gonzalezes. What's going on with them now?

MERAJI: There have been a lot of changes in the household. They're not all living together - at least these three are not all living together anymore 'cause Abby's at Pomona College.

DEMBY: OK.

MERAJI: And she's living on campus. And Joseventura graduated from high school, and he's going to Pasadena Community College. He's studying fire science because he really wants to be a fireman...

DEMBY: OK.

MERAJI: ...Which is something he actually said in our interview. So he's following through with that. And you know, his sisters are really hoping that he lands a good fireman job by the time he turns 21 so that when he sponsors his parents, he can prove that he's making enough money to support them because that's still the plan.

DEMBY: Right. Right. And Miriam obviously is a plaintiff in this big Supreme Court case, so that's a big deal.

MERAJI: Yeah, that's huge. And so she had that going on, and she had a lot of other stuff going on, too. She ran for Boyle Heights Neighborhood Council, and she won. She got her master's in education, and she just started a new job teaching humanities to sixth-graders, you know, all while her case was winding its way through the courts. She was actually in D.C. for oral arguments this week, and I checked in with her the night before. And I asked her to imagine how she might feel at the end of that long day at the court.

The argument's over. You've been outside. You've participated in the rally. You did all the things. You're back at the hotel kind of taking stock of what went down. How do you think you're going to feel?

GONZALEZ: I think I'm just going to feel exhausted, but also, I feel, like, hopeful. And I feel like that's been a feeling that I've felt throughout these past couple months - just being hopeful about

the future. But then I'm also thinking about, you know, my students are going to have a sub. And I'm wondering if they're going to behave well and also, like, making sure that I have my plans ready for when I go back to work on Thursday.

DEMBY: So Miriam is at the center of this huge Supreme Court case that so many people are following that will affect hundreds of thousands of people. But she's, like, worried about the ins and outs of her teaching job.

MERAJI: Yes.

DEMBY: So she's obviously very good at compartmentalizing.

MERAJI: Yeah.

DEMBY: Are she and her siblings - are they still - like, are they still compartmentalizing all this? Like, are they finally talking about this big elephant in the room?

MERAJI: Actually, no.

DEMBY: OK.

MERAJI: Surprise.

DEMBY: That's not what I was expecting.

MERAJI: No, I know. Me either. I talked to Miriam, and I asked her if they had a conversation after the episode first aired. And

she was like, no, we still haven't had a family talk about all this stuff. But...

DEMBY: OK.

MERAJI: ...She was like, it's on my list of things to do.

DEMBY: (Laughter).

MERAJI: She said, you know, they've all been going to school. They're working. And when they do talk, they want to talk about the bands they like and the live music they want to check out, not the stresses of living in a mixed-status family.

GONZALEZ: In a week, I'm going to go see the Black Keys, and then we're going to see SUR in December. And then for Abby's birthday, we're going to go see BTS at Jingle Ball.

MERAJI: Oh, she still likes K-pop.

GONZALEZ: Yes. She's, like, obsessed.

MERAJI: (Laughter).

GONZALEZ: She's definitely, like, a hardcore BTS stan. I'm learning the lingo, you know?

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "PLUTO")

BTS: (Singing in Korean).

MERAJI: You're listening to the song giving us life this week from the K-pop boy band sensation BTS. And we're listening to "Pluto" because while Miriam isn't, like, a total K-pop stan like her sister Abby, she told me the melody of this particular song is soothing, and it helps put her mind at ease.

DEMBY: That's our show. Please follow us on Twitter. We're @NPRCodeSwitch. You can follow Shereen @RadioMirage. That's radio - R-A-D-I-O - mirage. You can follow me @GeeDee215. And if you like listening to CODE SWITCH, which, of course, you do, we want to hear from you. Send us an email at codeswitch@npr.org with the subject line CS love with a little audio clip telling us about a time when CODE SWITCH made you laugh, cry or changed your life. Subscribe to the podcast wherever fine podcasts can be found or streamed, like NPR One, and leave us a review on iTunes. It helps folks find the show.

MERAJI: Jess Kung and Kumari Devarajan produced this episode. It was edited by Sami Yenigun and Leah Donnella. Special thanks to the after-school program College Track for helping me organize interviews with Abigail and Joseventura, specifically Tina Kim and Jennifer Estrada-Feller.

DEMBY: And shout out to the rest of the CODE SWITCH team - Karen Grigsby Bates, Adrian Florido, Maria Paz Gutierrez and Steve Drummond. Our intern is Angela Vang. I'm Gene Demby.

MERAJI: And I'm Shereen Marisol Meraji.

DEMBY: Be easy, y'all.

MERAJI: Peace.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "PLUTO")

BTS: (Singing in Korean).

Copyright © 2019 NPR. All rights reserved. Visit our website [terms of use](#) and [permissions](#) pages at www.npr.org for further information.

NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by [Verb8tm, Inc.](#), an NPR contractor, and produced using a proprietary transcription process developed with NPR. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Accuracy and availability may vary. The authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio record.