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Young Iowa DREAMer Wins ACLU of Iowa's Mannheimer Youth Advocacy Award

(Des Moines, IA) - A young Latina immigrant who has fought courageously for her rights and the rights of those around her is the winner of the 2013 American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa's Robert Mannheimer Youth Advocacy Award.

Nilvia Reyes-Rodriguez, a 19-year-old sophomore in history at the University of Northern Iowa. She has worked on a variety of advocacy efforts, often with her mother and older sister, Monica, in her small hometown in northeast Iowa. She is what is popularly called a "DREAMer," a young person who was brought to the U.S. as a baby or child without documentation. Reyes-Rodriguez has been able, however, to get Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, giving her lawful presence and employment authorization in the U.S.

While still a freshman in high school, with her mother and sister, Reyes-Rodriguez helped organize cultural events to help raise awareness and appreciation for Latino culture in her hometown. She also helped organize informational meetings on legal rights, bringing in immigration lawyers as guest speakers. She has also been on call--sometimes in the middle of the night--to do translations for community members in need of a translator at the police station, when stopped or questioned by police, or when reading or writing legal and other important documents.

Stopping Racial Profiling

When local police were stopping and following local Latinos at what Reyes-Rodriguez and her sister felt was an increased and unfair rate, they perceived it as racial profiling and harassment. So they spearheaded efforts to meet with local police, community leaders, and local church members to combat the problem. She and her sister collected written testimonies, which they presented to the ACLU of Iowa and the Iowa Civil Rights Commission, to seek assistance. Reyes-Rodriguez says she feels the police have responded and community complaints about racial profiling and harassment seem to have ceased.

Reyes-Rodriguez and her sister also have helped several local students put together their own applications for DACA status, helping the young people write letters and fill out applications, as well as continuing to guide them through the extensive process. The sisters also gave the students rides to Des Moines and government offices as part of the application process.

Reyes-Rodriguez also is a community-builder. Last year when she found out the Iowa Department of Transportation was not going to grant drivers' licenses to DREAMers (it has since changed its policy), she created a Facebook page for Iowa DREAMers to connect and advocate together. She plans on attending law school after getting her undergraduate degree.

Organizing Other DREAMers

Now she's organizing a group of DREAMers to train and run in the Dam to Dam Run in Des Moines June 1.

"I firmly believe that service to others is what this nation and this world need to stay united," says Reyes-Rodriguez. "I believe that in order to build stronger communities and stronger nations, we need to empower as many people as possible. I believe that although I am one of a few, I can make a difference. Knowing I made the difference in just one life is enough to keep me going for a lifetime."

Reyes-Rodriguez hopes to attend law school after graduation. ACLU of Iowa Executive Director Ben Stone said Reyes-Rodriguez's passion, courage, and effectiveness impressed the award judges. "Among other things, we were especially struck by how courageous Ms. Reyes-Rodriguez has been in fighting racial profiling in her small town where she grew up. She's obviously a strong advocate for civil liberties, and we're delighted to be able to give her this award."

Other Winners

The second-place winner is Gabriella Daft of Colfax, Iowa. Daft says she was expelled from her private Christian high school when administration found out that she is gay. She then transferred to Newton High School, where she is now a senior and has been a vocal leader in her school's Gay-Straight Alliance. That GSA was recently honored by Iowa Pride Network with the "Best GSA Award." Daft has also been active in high school LGBT issues statewide.

The third-place winner is Hector Salamanca, a student at Des Moines Area Community College. Salamanca didn't know until he was in high school that he was in the U.S. with his parents without documentation. He has since been able to get DACA status. He has become a leader and organizer among other DREAMers and young undocumented students in central Iowa.

Honorable mentions were awarded to Jerson Valenzuela, a senior at North High School in Des Moines and Connor Allen Ferguson, a University of Northern Iowa student from Wayland, Iowa.

Reyes-Rodriguez will receive a \$500 cash prize at the ACLU of Iowa's annual dinner in Iowa City on May 4.

The Robert Mannheimer Youth Advocacy Award was established by the family of the late Des Moines attorney who supported the ACLU of Iowa for more than 50 years as a cooperating attorney, board member, and donor. It is given annually to a young Iowan aged 14 to 19 who has demonstrated a passion and advocacy for civil liberties.

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The ACLU of Iowa is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that fights to advance civil liberties for all. It is the state affiliate of the national American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU prides itself in upholding everyone's civil liberties, no matter who they are or what they believe. We have worked to assure the rights of all Iowans – from atheists to devout Christians, from labor unions to businesspeople and more – to make sure the constitutional rights of all are preserved. For more information, go to www.aclu-ia.org

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