

Undocumented and Unafraid: Tam Tran and Cinthya Felix

The failure of the DREAM Act in the last Congress—by a narrow margin—followed on the untimely deaths of Cinthya Felix and Tam Tran, renowned leaders in the immigrant-rights movement. Two activists and colleagues remember them.



On May 15, 2010, Tam Tran and Cinthya Felix, leaders in the movement to pass the DREAM Act, were killed in a car accident. Their tragic passing has galvanized the movement they left behind.

The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act proposes to grant United States citizenship to undocumented students or those who entered the country while still children.¹ It was first introduced in Congress in 2001 under another name and has been reintroduced several times, most recently in 2010. The effort to get the bill enacted into law has been growing for a decade, and the national campaign for its passage has emerged as one of the most important social-justice movements of this generation. Students who stand to benefit from the law have conducted civil disobedience in the halls of Congress, organized hunger strikes, marched on foot for hundreds of miles from Florida to Washington, DC, as part of the “Trail of DREAMs,” organized a “DREAM Freedom Ride” from Los Angeles to Washington, and held countless press conferences, mock graduation ceremonies, and rallies to advance the cause.

The movement to pass the DREAM Act arose in the hearts and minds of thousands of young immigrants who claim America as their home; it has created powerful bonds among these young activists, who are assuming leadership roles and shaping the nation’s future.

Tam and Cinthya had both grown up in undocumented immigrant families; against the odds, both had graduated from UCLA and entered prestigious graduate schools. Indeed, they were among the very few undocumented immigrant graduate students in the country. Tam was in a PhD program in American civilization at Brown University; Cinthya was in a Master’s program in public health at Columbia University and planned to enter medical school. Both Tam and Cinthya were leading advocates for passage of the DREAM Act, with a national reputation as activists.

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DREAM students are carrying on their work in their honor and memory.

Of the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States, more than 2 million are minors. These young people had no say in the decision to come to this country, but were brought by parents or relatives seeking a better life. The aim of the act is to give them an opportunity to earn legal status by completing two years of higher education or through service in the US military.

DREAM activists like Tam and Cinthya became advocates for their own legal status as part of the broader fight for immigration reform. The rise in visibility of such activists challenged the pejorative labels of “illegal” and “law-breaking” frequently used in congressional and media debates on immigration. Tam and Cinthya, and others like them, showed America a different, more accurate image of undocumented youth that exemplified all that we value and hope for in our children: leadership, courage, articulateness, civic-minded commitment, and professional skills. They epitomized the motto of the DREAM Act movement: “undocumented and unafraid.” By breaking the habit of fear and anonymity to share their stories, they advanced a powerful movement for social justice.

Tam Tran was born to Vietnamese parents in Germany on October 30, 1982. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, her family was forced to flee Vietnam by boat, along with hundreds of thousands of other refugees. While many “boat people” were rescued at sea by Americans and relocated to the US, Tam’s parents were rescued by the German navy. They came to live in Germany, where Tam and her brother, Thien, were born.

The Tran family came to the United States when Tam was six years old to join other family members who had settled in California. Tam’s parents applied for political asylum, but their request was denied (after many years waiting) because they had emigrated from Germany, not directly from Vietnam. The family received a “withholding of deportation” exemption, but their status does not lead to

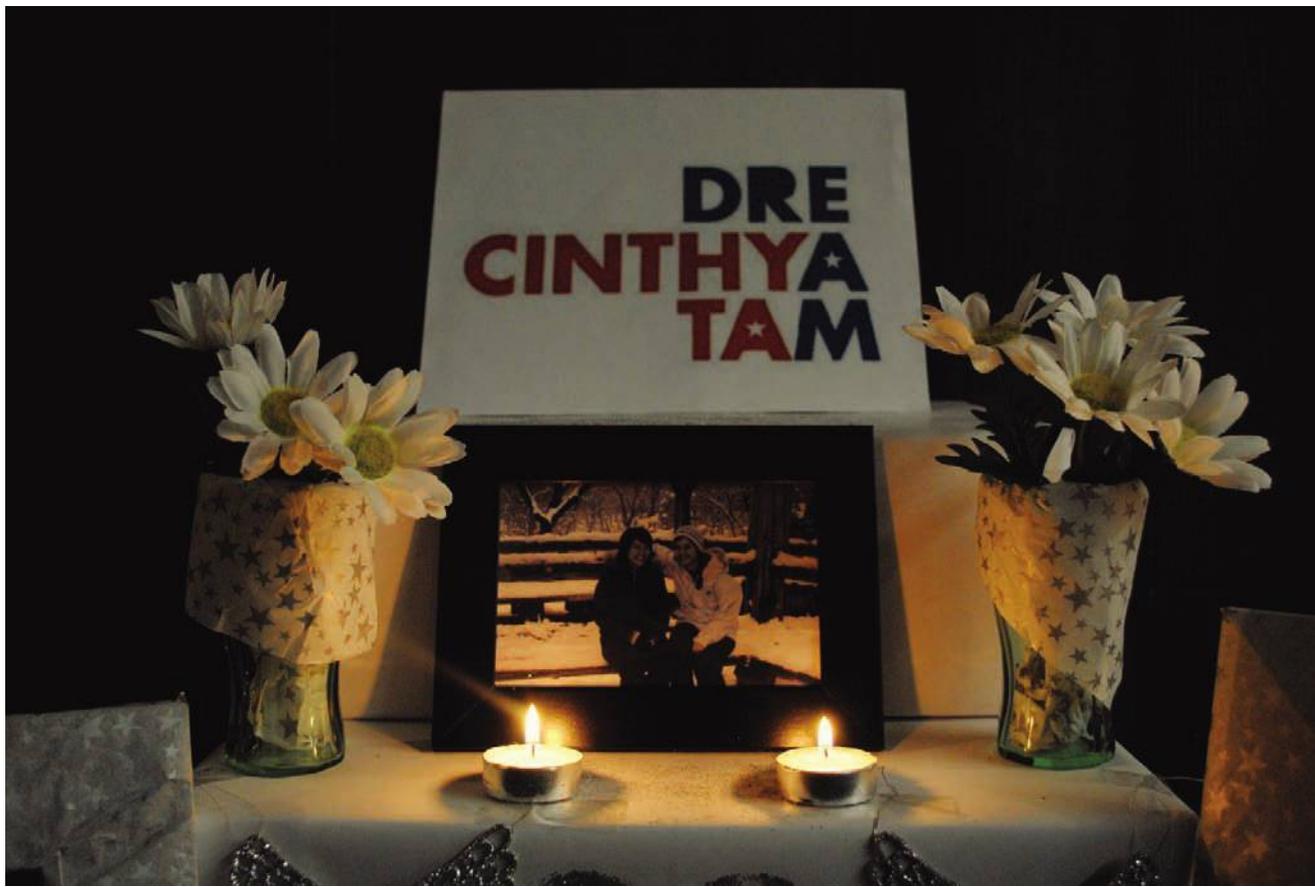


Cinthya Felix, Prema Lal, and Tam Tran demonstrate on behalf of the DREAM Act, Washington, DC, March 4, 2010

legal residency or US citizenship. Tam was Vietnamese, but she had never been to Vietnam and was not a Vietnamese citizen. She was born in Germany, but Germany does not grant citizenship based on birthright. And although Tam subsequently spent more than twenty years in the US, the American government refused to give her legal status. So she was not only undocumented but stateless, trapped in a disgraceful immigration morass.

Tam grew up in Garden Grove, California. She graduated from Santiago High School, attended Santa Ana College, and then transferred to UCLA. She worked multiple jobs while carrying a full course load, and was also a prominent student leader and activist. At UCLA, she found a home with IDEAS (Improving Dreams, Educational Access, and Success), the support organization for undocumented immigrant students. She was a gifted filmmaker who produced acclaimed documentaries that have been screened nationally. The two best-known are *Lost and Found* and *Seattle Underground Railroad* (both 2007). Both capture the stories of undocumented UCLA students and celebrate the struggles and accomplishments of young immigrants. These moving, humorous, and insightful films provide a

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In memoriam: a Day of the Dead altar honoring Cinthya and Tam made by fellow activists Gabriela Monico and Uriel Rivera, 2010.

sharp analysis of oppressive immigration laws and their impact on youth.

Tam graduated from UCLA in 2006 with a bachelor's degree in American literature and culture and with Latin, departmental, and college honors. After graduation, she worked at the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education and as a teaching assistant for the first university course ever offered in the United States on undocumented immigrant students. Her story was featured in *Underground Undergrads: UCLA Undocumented Immigrant Students Speak Out*, a book published by the Center in 2007.²

Tam gave public talks on the DREAM Act, screened her films, and promoted *Underground Undergrads* throughout the country. She made presentations before the national convention of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance in Nevada, the first Asian Pacific Worker Rights Hearing in Washington, DC, the 2009 American Sociological Association conference in San Francisco, the 2009 Asian American Studies conference in Hawaii, and the Ford Foundation

in New York in 2010. Each time, she spoke with eloquence, grace, and power. And each time, she recruited more allies to support the movement of immigrant youth and students.

As a leading national advocate for the DREAM Act, Tam testified before the US Congressional Immigration Subcommittee on May 18, 2007. Given her own undocumented status, this was an act of considerable personal courage. And sure enough, three days later, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents staged a predawn raid on her family's home in Orange County and took her parents and brother into custody. Tam reached out to members of Congress and immigration attorneys and was able to have her family released and to stop their deportation. Throughout this ordeal she kept her focus, remarking, "My family is one of the lucky ones. Most immigrants don't have access to Congress and immigration attorneys, and just disappear."

Tam applied to top PhD programs nationwide and was accepted to UCLA, the University of California, Berkeley, University of Michigan, Yale University, and Brown

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University. Although public institutions are legally barred from granting financial assistance to undocumented immigrants, both Yale and Brown, private universities, offered her generous scholarships. Tam entered the PhD program in American civilization at Brown. She joked, “Maybe if I get a PhD in American civilization they will finally let me become an American.”

At Brown, as in California, she swiftly became a leader. She continued to advocate for passage of the DREAM Act, founded the Brown Immigrant Rights Coalition, and helped launch the first statewide network of undocumented immigrant youths and students. She mobilized student contingents for marches in Washington, DC and lobbying visits to the Rhode Island congressional delegation and statehouse. A few weeks after her death, Brown University awarded her a Master’s degree in recognition of her extraordinary achievements.

Cinthya Felix was born in Sinaloa, Mexico on January 23, 1984. At fifteen, she went with her family to Los Angeles for what she thought was a vacation to Disneyland. In reality, it was an economic-survival move by her parents. The Felix family settled in the historic Mexican community of East Los Angeles. In high school Cinthya was a brilliant student as well as an accomplished basketball player. She then matriculated at UCLA, a two-hour commute each way by bus. There, she worked hard, saved money, and bought a car, audaciously giving it the vanity license plate YLLEGAL.

Like other undocumented immigrants, Cinthya was unable to get a driver’s license in California. She understood the contradiction: “The state wants our money, so they let us buy the car, get insurance, and pay for registration. But when it comes to giving us a license, they don’t want to give you one.”³

She could not get a license in California, but she had a plan. She organized a group of students to drive to Washington State, where it is easier for immigrants to obtain a driver’s license. Tam Tran was one of the few students in

IDEAS who had a driver’s license, so she joined the trip and brought her camera to document the experience, producing the film *Seattle Underground Railroad*.

At UCLA, Cinthya was one of the founders of IDEAS, the organization for undocumented immigrant students. IDEAS began as a clandestine support group: undocumented students would gather to share survival tips and assist one another to navigate the frequently unfriendly waters of the big university. As its numbers grew, the group developed into a bold public-advocacy organization that held mock graduation ceremonies on campus, immigrant-youth empowerment conferences that drew hundreds of students to UCLA, and an annual banquet that raised funds for members to complete their education. Cinthya and Tam became leading activists and fast friends. After their death, IDEAS was recognized by the University of California’s president and regents as an outstanding student organization within the university.

Cinthya graduated from college with a degree in English literature and minors in Spanish and Mexican Studies, but her ambition was to have a career in medicine. Fearing that no medical school would accept an applicant without legal status, she instead applied to Master’s programs in public health, eventually choosing that of Columbia University. In graduate school, she conducted research on health-care access within immigrant communities, waiting tables at night to support herself.

Tam and Cinthya were pioneers, undocumented immigrant students who had made it into graduate programs at exclusive private universities. This achievement was not without its share of alienation and isolation. As they had done in California, they relied on one another, and their experience on the East Coast only deepened their friendship. To celebrate the end of the school year, Cinthya and Tam decided to take a road trip to Maine to visit lighthouses, eat lobster, and prepare for summer. As they were returning from their trip, they were killed by a drunk driver who swerved into their lane of traffic.

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Two days later, more than five hundred students gathered at UCLA for a memorial in their honor. Vigils were held in Los Angeles, Orange County, New York, Washington, Rhode Island, and Florida. Students in Arizona made buttons with their image in their memory. Most importantly, students in many areas of the country commemorated their spirit by carrying on their work, staging sit-ins, street closures, civil disobedience, hunger strikes, a national DREAM Freedom Ride, and other activities. Tam and Cinthya's untimely death has been mourned and memorialized by members of Congress, the California state legislature, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, and the Los Angeles City Council. In their memory, DREAM activists reaffirmed their commitment to fight for the DREAM Act.⁴

Although we mourn the passing of Cinthya and Tam, we celebrate their lives. They were sisters; they were kindred spirits, always in sync: planning their next meal, their next act of defiant and optimistic activism, searching for a new adventure, pursuing their next dream. They accomplished

more in their short lives than ever could have been imagined. Their spirit lives on in the hundreds of IDEAS alumni, in the thousands of young immigrants who embraced them as role models, and in the millions of immigrants who will one day be empowered to emerge from the shadows. **B**

Notes

- ¹ The Senate version of the bill in its most recent form (S. 729) is published by the US Government Printing Office and may be found at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-111S729is/pdf/BILLS-111S729is.pdf>, accessed January 6, 2011.
- ² See <http://www.labor.ucla.edu/publications/books/underground.html>, accessed January 6, 2011.
- ³ Film, *Seattle Underground Railroad*, 2007.
- ⁴ In the 111th Congress the bill passed in the House of Representatives but the Senate majority was not large enough to overcome a Republican filibuster, and it died with the end of the legislative session. Activists plan to lobby for it to be revived in the next session of Congress.