



RUNNING **DOWN** ***A*** **DREAM**

A NEW WORLD
Like the child on the signs warning motorists near the Mexican border in San Diego (left), Reyes (right) was brought here as a kid.

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AYDEDREYES is one of California's top collegiate runners and a premed student who wants to represent her country in the Olympics. There's just one catch: In the immigration reform bill it's now debating, Congress must decide which country that is

It

was around 10:30 at night when Ayded Reyes and Arturo Canela pulled into a parking lot next to a playground on the San Diego Bay. For Reyes, it had been a long day of college classes and hard training. The Pacific Coast Athletic Conference Championships were a week away; the 20-year-old's goal was to break 18 minutes in the cross-country event. That race was everything. That race would decide her future.

The couple had met in high school, where they'd both been track runners. On that Thursday night in October 2011, they were arguing about their future together, and Canela, then 19, pulled his dad's red minivan into the park to talk. They'd been sitting just a few minutes when a beam of light flashed in Reyes's face. A policeman walked up to Canela's window.

"What are you doing here? It's past 10:30," he said. The park closed at 10, but neither Reyes nor Canela had realized it as several cars were still parked nearby.

"Oh. We're really sorry. We didn't know," Canela said. "We didn't see a sign." "License and registration," the cop demanded.

Canela handed his over. Reyes passed across her college ID.

"You don't have a California ID?"

"I don't. I'm sorry. I have this other one," she said, fishing out her old high school identification.

"Do you know your Social Security number?"

"Um, no. I don't."

The policeman asked for Reyes's address and wallet. She gave him both, and he disappeared to his car. In a few minutes he was back: "You don't *know* your social security number, or you don't *have* a social security number?"

He's going to keep asking. Maybe I should just tell him the truth. "I don't have one," she finally answered.

"Okay, you guys, get out of the vehicle."



TEAM EFFORT

Clockwise from above: Duro Agbede, Reyes's coach at Southwestern; Reyes at Cal State San Marcos; Jacob Sapochnick, her lawyer; former Congressman Bob Filner (now mayor of San Diego), who supported her release.

AYDED REYES IS an undocumented immigrant. Of the estimated 11 million to 12 million people who live illegally within the United States, about three million are here through no fault or decision of their own, smuggled in as children by relatives. Reyes is one of those kids. In California, where she lives, there are approximately 800,000 others like her, many of whom consider themselves fully American, yet live a sort of half-life, without the permanent ability to work or drive legally, travel

freely, or pursue scholarships for college. One of the goals of immigration reform legislation being debated (at press time) in Congress is to provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, which will give these young people the opportunity to shape their own futures; to become U.S. citizens and give back to the only country they've ever known.

There are millions of stories that illustrate the complexities of immigration reform, and each one can be interpreted

differently. Viewed one way, Reyes's story might reveal the urgency and necessity of reform; viewed another way, it might show how reform seems to pit citizens against noncitizens for a limited pool of resources in the name of opportunity.

Reyes didn't know she wasn't a U.S. citizen until sixth grade, when a friend excitedly told Reyes about getting her documents. "I wasn't born here," her friend explained. Reyes was confused: *Weren't we all born here?* She had never

thought of herself or her friend as any different than their American classmates. Later that night, Reyes asked her mother, and learned that she and her older sister were left in Mexico City with relatives when her parents first snuck across the border. In 1993, when Reyes was 18 months old, her parents returned for the children and again crossed the desert at night to their home in San Diego.

Reyes was the second of six kids (the four youngest were born in the United

States and are all American citizens) in a house where money was always tight. Her mother worked as a cleaner, her father as a gardener. When she was younger, Reyes sometimes helped him out, mowing grass or blowing leaves. While he trimmed bushes, she'd collect and bag the fallen branches. At first, it seemed like fun, but as she got older, Reyes realized how hard it was to log hours of physical labor for low pay. Her father would leave the house at 4:30 in the morning with



Her form needed work, but she was a fighter. "WHEN YOU SEE AN ATHLETE SO COMPETITIVE, THE SKY IS THE LIMIT."

Reyes's mother to help her clean a local restaurant; they'd finish around 7:30, then he'd head to his landscaping jobs. Rarely home before 6 p.m., he would eat, shower, and collapse in bed. "My parents told us ever since we were little, 'You have to go to school if you want to become something and not be poor like us,'" Reyes says. A college degree, her dad insisted, was the key to success. "He would tell me," says Reyes, "If you don't go to school, this is what you are going to do for the rest of your life."

By her sophomore year of high school, Reyes was an honor student, a tutor, a National Honor Society member, and a junior varsity soccer player. On Fridays, her coach had the team run long—15 minutes out and 15 minutes back. When Reyes surprised her coach by beating her, the woman encouraged Reyes to try out for the track team. "I don't like running. It's not my thing," Reyes replied. But she tried out anyway, running the mile in her Chuck Taylor sneakers. The first lap, she was right next to the fastest boy; by the end of the second, she was dead last. She cramped up and didn't finish. "It was horrible," she told her coach. She hated it. But she wanted to see if she could do better.

She ended up making the track team that spring, and ran the 800, 1500, 5000, and 10,000 meters. In the fall of her junior year, she ran cross-country and was the only runner from her high school to make it to the state championships.

As a senior, Reyes applied to the University of California San Diego. She loved science and planned to major in biology before attending med school. She would become an obstetrician—and in helping other people, she would help herself, she would *be* something. "I got admitted to UCSD, and I was like, *Yay!* You know? I was really happy," says Reyes.

But her family couldn't afford it. California law allows undocumented students like Reyes who graduate from California high schools to pay in-state tuition at state universities; UCSD's in-state tuition, however, was more than \$12,000 a year. People were applying for financial aid, says Reyes. "I was ineligible because I didn't have a social security

number." Still, she held out hope that she'd figure out some way to pay for her dream school.

Later that fall, Reyes ran a cross-country meet at San Diego's Morley Field. As she lined up at the start, Dr. Duro Agbede stood in the crowd, watching. Agbede, a Nigerian-born runner and U.S. citizen for 11 years, has coached track and taught health sciences at nearby Southwestern College for 20 years. He watched as Reyes ran from the gun to the finish line, never once letting up. Her form needed work, he noticed. Reyes ran with her head down, and her arm swing was inefficient. But she was a fighter. "She was going against a strong girl, and she was glued to that girl like anything," Agbede

says. "I saw the tenacity, the aggressiveness. When you see an athlete who's so competitive, the sky is the limit."

Reyes won the race, and Agbede approached her as she was cooling down. He wanted her on his team. Southwestern, a community college, didn't have athletic scholarships, but the tuition was less than \$1,000 a semester. Reyes could live at home and take a public bus to the campus. In two years, Agbede said, he could get her a full athletic scholarship to a four-year university where she could finish her education. Reyes told him about her immigration status. Coaches wouldn't care about that, Agbede said—athletic scholarships didn't require proof of citizenship. He'd helped students like her in the past. All that would matter was how she ran. Reyes decided if she couldn't afford her dream, she'd simply have to run her way to where she wanted to be.

And so she did. At Southwestern, running was a passion but also her job, an opportunity, she says, to pay for college. "Sometimes you have days when you want to slack off. I couldn't do that," Reyes says. "It was fun, but it was also a duty for me." To prepare her for a more competitive program and to help her decide in which distance to specialize, Agbede ran Reyes in everything from the 800 meters to the 10,000 to the steeplechase. "In her freshman year, out of nowhere, she came in second in the 10,000 meters at [community college] state championships," Agbede says. Her time of 37:45 set a school record. The next day, she finished third in the 5000 meters in 18:02.

To Agbede, Reyes was a born competitor, one of the most resilient athletes he'd ever coached. She was never injured, and her attitude was always upbeat. "She has what it takes to be a world-class athlete," he says. In fact, he could imagine her as an Olympian. By the fall of her sophomore year at Southwestern College, she was team captain, the fastest runner on the team—and poised to become the fastest woman in the conference.

"IF SOMETHING HAPPENS to me, call Coach Duro," Reyes whispered to Canela as the couple sat in the dark on the concrete



SHAPING THE FUTURE

Steve Scott, a former Olympian and Reyes's coach at Cal State San Marcos, has focused her training on the steeplechase.

sidewalk. Minutes later, a van pulled into the parking lot. Reyes recognized the unmarked white van—the vehicles were something she'd long tried to both avoid and ignore. She was petrified. "Oh my God, what am I going to do? Arturo, they're here for me. They're *here*."

Border Patrol officers led her to the rear of the van, and told her to sit inside while Canela stayed on the sidewalk. The rear doors of the van were open, and she could hear the officers talking with the cops. Reyes was more scared than she'd ever been. *Should I just run? I could just take off.* She could probably outrun them all.

But they knew her name; they knew her address. *They're going to see that I'm a good person.* She'd never broken a law. *They're not going to kick me out.*

The van doors slammed closed. There were no windows, and it was dark. It felt like she was being kidnapped—she didn't know where she was going, or for how long. They hadn't told her she could call anyone. Reyes knew other undocument-

ed immigrants, but she'd never known anybody who had been arrested like this. Would they just drive her to Mexico and toss her over the border? *Oh my God, where are they going to take me? What am I going to do?* She started thinking about her family. *What if they take my parents?*

It didn't take long to reach the Border Patrol station. Two officers sat her down and slapped some papers in front of her. In high school, Reyes had a teacher she'd confided in about her status who'd given her one emphatic piece of advice: Don't sign *anything*. The officers tried convincing her that signing deportation papers was her best option; in 10 years, she could petition to return as a legal immigrant.

"Are you serious?" Reyes said. "I don't have 10 years. I have a race in a week!" How she ran at the cross-country conference championships would determine whether or not four-year universities came calling with scholarship offers. If she didn't run that race, there would be no offers, no scholarship, no shot at

medical school. The future she'd been running so hard to create would vanish.

The first form was an acceptance of immediate deportation. The second was a request for a jury trial. She chose the latter. "You want to go to trial?" one of the officers laughed. "I've seen so many people sign that paper, wait here for six months and when they go to court, they get deported. They're not going to care about you. You're just like everybody else. You're not supposed to be here."

They locked her in a cell with another woman. The cell had one mat for a bed and one blanket, and the AC was pumped up. Reyes was freezing. The toilet was behind a barrier that rose a few feet from the floor. "You go to the bathroom while they're pretty much looking at your face," Reyes says. "The sink was on top of the toilet, and we were supposed to drink water out of there. It was disgusting."

Reyes wasn't allowed to call her mom, or her coach. *If I start crying, I'm going to start losing my mind and I won't be able to think. I'm not gonna cry. I'm not gonna cry. I'm not going to let them see me cry.*



Locked up, she couldn't sleep or train. She was losing everything. "I DIDN'T HAVE CONTROL OVER MY LIFE AT ALL."

AGBEDE WAS in the middle of a lecture on Friday morning when his cell phone rang. He stepped out into the hall. It was Reyes's mother: Border Patrol officials had taken her daughter. Could he help? Agbede felt his body go numb. Several years before, two boys in his cross-country program had been arrested and deported. It had happened over the holiday break, and he hadn't known anything about it until they were gone. He never heard from them again. Agbede called his dean, the head of the college's governing board, and then he called Democratic Congressman Bob Filner. The congressman had spoken several times at the college, and Agbede knew he was an avid supporter of immigrant rights.

By noon, Agbede heard back from Filner's assistant: Reyes would be moved from the Border Patrol station in Imperial Beach to San Ysidro, closer to the border. Agbede started shaking. Once you get to San Ysidro, he'd heard, you're done. The next stop was Mexico. He dialed the Imperial Beach station. It took several tries before he got someone who would listen. He felt desperate. "The office of Congressman Filner is behind her," he said. "She can't be deported!"

That Friday afternoon, a sympathetic immigration officer moved Reyes into a room with a phone, and told her to use it—quickly. At the sound of her mother's voice, Reyes began to cry. "I don't want to leave; this is my home." Her mother tried comforting her, told her that her coach and teachers—even the Congressman—were involved. "You're getting a lot of help," her mother told her. "Don't worry, my love." Reyes wanted to believe her mother, but how could her teachers help?

By Saturday, they hadn't. Reyes was put on a bus for San Ysidro—the last stop before Mexico—the only woman among two dozen men. But when she arrived there, authorities told Reyes they didn't have the right paperwork and sent her to another detention center. She was put in a cell with bunk beds, a shower, and 10 women. A woman from Jamaica told Reyes she'd been there for a month.

Reyes was barely eating—every meal was bean burritos—or drinking. By Sun-

day she was beginning to lose hope. She'd been at practice just hours before her arrest. "Coach Duro and I had just talked about my times. I was going to break 18 minutes," she says. "I was really in good shape and I was ready." Now she couldn't sleep, and she couldn't train. "I was worried that I was going to miss my race," Reyes says. "I thought that I was going to lose all my scholarship opportunities. I was losing everything. I didn't have control over my life at all." She worried about how she'd make her way alone in a foreign country, and whether she'd ever be with her family again.

On Monday, the women were allowed outside in the yard to get some sun. Reyes was sitting on the ground, in the same

clothes she'd worn to class on Thursday night, when an officer appeared.

"Reyes!" he yelled. "You're getting out. You're going home."

The political pressure had worked. Congressman Filner's office had convinced immigration authorities to grant Reyes's release. A court date would be scheduled, but until then, she was free. Officers told her to call her parents to pick her up, but there was no way she was letting her mother or father near the detention center. Instead, she took the train to downtown San Diego where her mother was waiting for her. When they saw each other, they broke down. "She was so close to losing a child," Reyes says. "I wouldn't want her to go to Mexico just because of me. I would want her to stay for the rest of the children." As they left the station, Reyes wondered if they were being followed. "Once I got home I realized I still have to worry," she says. "It's not over." She told her parents that maybe they should move.

It was three days before the biggest race of her life.

AGBEDE WAS running a team meeting Tuesday afternoon when he saw Reyes approach from across the field. She looked so thin.

"When I saw Coach Duro, I didn't know what to say," says Reyes. "I was like, 'Thank you, Coach, thank you. I'm always going to be thankful to you.'" Reyes started hugging her teammates. Most of them had no idea what had happened, no idea Reyes wasn't an American citizen.

Agbede embraced her. "Ayded, you need to rest."

"No, Coach, I can do this," she insisted. The cross-country conference championships were in two days. Southwestern had dominated the competition for the past nine years straight. Reyes was the team captain, and the school's strongest female runner. If she didn't run, Reyes knew, her team wouldn't have a chance.

After the campus newspaper covered Reyes's story, the media descended on the college—Fox News, ESPN, NBC. "She became the face of the immigration debate," says Tonie Campbell, Southwestern's



ANOTHER HURDLE
Reyes is a long shot to make the Olympics in the steeplechase, but becoming a citizen of the United States may be even harder.

head track and field coach, who, with Agbede, helped coach Reyes. "You couldn't have picked a better person to carry that banner.

She's an amazing athlete, student, and team member who cares about her community." In Campbell's mind, there was no question that Reyes belonged at his school, and in the country. "She's a San Diegan and an American," he says. "She deserves to be here."

Not everyone agrees.

"A lot of states have encouraged illegal immigration," says Roy Beck, head of NumbersUSA, which lobbies for lower immigration rates and stricter enforcement policies. "Parents come to the United States and get a job in a state where they know their kid not only gets free, public-paid education in high school, but goes to college on public subsidies." In Beck's opinion, crossing the border ille-

gally is not a victimless crime. "There are 20 million Americans who want a full-time job and can't find one. It's a sign of great injustice for a college or a state to offer benefits—of any kind—to people who have broken the law."

Congressman Filner takes a radically different view of the situation. The reality, Filner says, is that there are 11 million people here without papers, and they're not all going to be deported. "If you're not going to deport them, give them a pathway to citizenship—especially younger people," Filner says. "Give them citizenship so they can get scholarships and be contributors to our country. That's what this is all about. Let her make the contribution she can to our society."

EARLY ON THURSDAY afternoon at Balboa Park, Reyes shook out her legs, took a

deep breath, and lined up for the women's cross-country race. She knew these trails well. The park was an oasis of rolling hills near the center of San Diego, and just a few minutes from her family's apartment. But she was nervous. She'd run just once since the previous Thursday—an easy, 45-minute run on Tuesday—and she didn't feel great. "I was dehydrated and not healthy," she says.

"Just give it all you have," Agbede had told her. "Be positive. You have fresh legs. Just think about it this way—you have fresh legs!"

On the starting line, Reyes repeated in her head: *I have fresh legs. I have fresh legs.*

"Do this for the people who helped you," Agbede had said.

I want to do this for them.

The gun went off. For the first mile the lead runners stayed together. "After we hit a mile and a half, I started booking it," Reyes says. She couldn't afford for the race

to be close. The course was hilly, and while Agbede had trained her for the hills, her lungs burned, and her turnover slowed. She was hurting. But she pushed and eventually the other runners fell behind. Reyes crossed the finish line in 21:07, far off her goal of sub-18. Still, she won the conference championship, was named MVP in cross-country for 2011, and just like Agbede had promised, the four-year colleges came calling.

Well-known schools like the University of California Santa Barbara, UC Riverside, and a number of out-of-state universities all offered Reyes scholarships. But she went with Cal State San Marcos, a university about 40 minutes north of San Diego. She chose it because of Steve Scott, an Olympian and celebrated miler who, in 1981, was the first American to break 3:50 in the mile, a record that stood for 25 years. After retiring from professional running, Scott spent a half-dozen years in sports marketing before signing on as track coach for San Marcos in 1999.

Scott had heard about Reyes from the coaches at Southwestern, and went to a couple of her meets to watch her run. He liked what he saw. “You look for the aggressiveness,” he says. “Obviously, you look at results, what times they’ve run, their consistency, do they get injured a lot. Ayded is as durable as they come.” In her last semester at Southwestern, Reyes had done well in distance events—she’d won the community college state championship in the 10,000 meters—but to Scott, her most impressive performance that spring was at the Southern California Championships in the 3000-meter steeplechase, in which she’d had little training. She won the race in 11:03.25, and set a school record. “Everything that she had been through—that all happened in the same year that she won the steeple and was in the top five in both the 5000 and 10,000 meters. You can’t do all that unless you’re tough,” Scott says. With intensive training, he thought, she could win the steeple in the championships of his university’s more competitive division.

Reyes knew that Scott would push her hard as a runner. She also knew he was concerned about not overextending his

athletes, and for Reyes, that was critical. If an injury kept her from running, she could lose her athletic scholarship—and with it, her best shot to become a doctor.

Reyes arrived at San Marcos with yet another dream. In her first days on campus, she approached Scott in his office. “You might think I’m crazy, but I want to make it to the Olympics. I really do,” she told him. While running for Southwestern, she’d lived at home, where she often had to care for her little brothers as well as focus on her schoolwork, and she’d taken a 90-minute bus ride to and from campus each day. It had been hard to get in as much practice as her teammates and yet she had been at—or above—their level. She still felt like a relatively new runner, and now that she was at San Marcos and living close to campus, she could give training her all.

Reyes will have to shave almost a minute off her current steeple PR to qualify for the Olympic Trials. It’s a tall challenge—though neither she nor Scott will call it impossible. What may be impossible for Reyes, however, is realizing her full dream: Becoming an Olympian who is representing the United States.

IN FEBRUARY 2012, four months after Reyes was detained, her case was dismissed. Her lawyer, Jacob Sapochnick, a San Diego immigration attorney who had been alerted to Reyes’s case shortly after her release and represented her pro bono, had gotten her case shelved through “prosecutorial discretion”—essentially, the state’s lawyer agreed there was no benefit to pursuing deportation.

Sapochnick’s legal team had collected records of her academic and athletic achievements and letters of support from coaches and teammates. Congressman Filner—who has since been elected mayor of San Diego—introduced a private federal bill for Reyes’s release and the team submitted text of that legislation to the prosecutor, along with supportive media coverage. The threat of more negative publicity almost certainly played a role in the prosecutor’s decision, Sapochnick says. “If she wasn’t as prominent as she was, if Bob Filner hadn’t backed her,

it would have been very difficult to get her what we were able to get.” What she got was essentially a get-out-of-jail-free card—a document that Reyes now carries that says her case has been heard and she’s been granted prosecutorial discretion. If she’s confronted by immigration officials again, she should be able to show them the paper and be left alone. Her file is now frozen, and she is no longer a priority for removal, says Sapochnick.

Reyes trains even harder these days, and thinks more about the little things. “What you eat, how much rest you get, all that stuff matters,” she says. Several days a week, she does a two- to four-mile morning run followed by a longer run in the afternoon. In meets, she sticks mostly to the steeple rather than doubling up on events like she did at Southwestern.

At first, she lived in an apartment close to campus, but her roommates stayed up late drinking and talking. Now she lives a few miles away in a well-manicured neighborhood of double-wide trailers paying \$350 a month to share a bright-aqua mobile home with three housemates. It’s quiet, a good spot to study. (Reyes is on a premed track, majoring in biology.) From her trailer, it’s a 25-minute ride on a public bus to a local 99-cent store, where she works about 15 hours a week stocking shelves. It’s her first legal, tax-paying job. In June 2012, President Obama issued an executive order granting two-year work permits to immigrants like Reyes—young people 30 and under who were brought to the U.S. illegally as children, have no criminal record, and are currently in school or in the military. For the first time, people like Reyes are eligible to get a legal job, a social security number, and, in most states (including California), a driver’s license.

But unlike the proposed immigration reform bill, Obama’s executive order—which is known as “deferred action”—is not a path to citizenship. It is a Band-Aid—and one that could easily be ripped off by a future president with different politics. Until and unless immigration reform passes, her fate is still up in the air.

To state the obvious, that reform faces stiff opposition.

Obama’s executive order granted work permits to people like Reyes. BUT IT’S NOT A PATH TO CITIZENSHIP. IT’S A BAND-AID.



“The current bill is awful—it gives amnesty to all 11 million [undocumented immigrants], it gives work permits and legal status before doing anything about enforcement,” says Beck of NumbersUSA. “I realize kids [like Reyes] are only technically lawbreakers—their parents are the lawbreakers. But if you’re going to allow the kids to become citizens, you have to fix the problem. Amnesty has to be accompanied by mandatory workplace enforcement and an improvement on the border. For kids brought here, there is a case for mercy. Not for 11 million people, not for their parents, just for them.”

One thing most supporters and detractors of reform can agree on is that something must be done about illegal immigration. It’s possible that in the months ahead some compromise will be reached. If and when that happens, Reyes may at last set foot on a clear path to citizenship.

IT’S JUST AFTER eight on a misty spring evening at a Los Angeles track, and run-

ners are sprawled across the infield’s floodlit Astroturf, stretching calves and quads. Small groups are jogging together to cool down. They’re several hours into an early-season meet at Occidental College, a liberal arts school perhaps best known as the place Barack Obama began his college career.

Reyes walks to the starting line with 13 other athletes for the 3000-meter steeplechase. Her black hair is pulled into a long ponytail, and she wears a bright blue tank and shorts. She shakes out her legs, and falls into line. From the infield, she can hear the voice of Coach Scott. It’s her first steeple of the spring track season, and she knows the girls are the fastest she’s ever raced against.

The gun goes off and the pack shoots forward. As they approach the first barrier, several of the girls step onto the top, propelling themselves forward in a jerky motion, but Reyes launches cleanly over it. Soon, there is daylight between her and her closest competitors. “Come on,

Ayded! Go, Ayded!” her teammates bellow as she splashes through the water jump, landing with just one foot ankle-deep in the graded pool, just as she’s been practicing. She can’t control the politics that nearly stopped her from coming this far. She can’t control the debate that will determine her future. But when she runs, she is in control. When she runs, she gets closer to her dream.

The announcer’s words boom through the stadium: “Ayded Reyes is beginning to open up a gap as they’re going into the water jump.” Reyes clears the hurdle, but botches the landing. Her leg twists to the side, and the top-ranked runner shoots ahead and stays there. Reyes crosses the finish line in second place, two seconds off her PR. She pauses with her hands on her knees to catch her breath, then stands and smiles. Her race wasn’t perfect, but Ayded Reyes is happy.

She’s not where she wants to be, not yet. But she won’t quit until she gets there. **▣**