

an american utopia

A young Ukrainian immigrant tells the story of his journey to America and the uncertain future ahead.

WORDS BY SAMANTHA ICKES || PHOTOS BY ANDREA NOALL

Editor's note: the student's name has been changed for confidentiality.

It is dark and quiet as Adriny Hordiyenko, an undocumented immigrant, walks across the parking lot to his car. His phone buzzes with a notification, and he glances at the bright screen. “AP ELECTION ALERT” appears in caps at the top of his screen. Hordiyenko opens the alert to read the Associated Press’ story about Republican candidate Donald Trump winning the election over the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton.

Nov. 8, 2016 marks a day of uncertainty for Hordiyenko. With Trump’s intense focus on reforming immigration laws, he feels unsure about what will happen to him in the coming year. Hordiyenko, a senior journalism student at Kent State, is currently protected under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, known as DACA. Started by President Barack Obama’s administration in June 2012, DACA is an immigration policy that protects eligible undocumented immigrants. In order to be protected by DACA, an individual must have immigrated to the United States prior to their 16th birthday before June 2007 and currently be enrolled in school or a high school graduate.

Since 2013, Hordiyenko has reapplied three times for DACA status, which only lasts two years. His second term ends in March, but Hordiyenko began his reapplication processes in December. In early February, he received a letter confirming he was accepted for another two years. Though he is protected for another two years, Hordiyenko still worries about the

changes Trump may make to the program because an executive order repealing it could end his protected status.

In an interview with ABC News, Trump promises to address the “DREAMers,” a term given to DACA recipients after the original bill proposed titled the DREAM Act, which stands for Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors. Though the DREAM Act and DACA have some differences, their end goals are the same: to give undocumented individuals brought to the U.S. as minors a right to education and work. The term DREAMers stuck, even though the DREAM Act failed to pass in the House of Representatives.

“They are here illegally,” Trump says in the Jan. 25 interview with “World News Tonight” anchor David Muir. “They shouldn’t be very worried. I do have a big heart. We’re going to take care of everybody ... Where you have great people that are here that have done a good job, they should be far less worried.”

According to the Center for American Progress, 665,000 individuals were enrolled in the DACA program as of July 2015—just three years after the program’s approval. A survey conducted by the National Immigration Law Center finds that 96 percent of DACA recipients are either in school or employed.

“There’s a lot of talk, but we’ve also seen that a lot of talk hasn’t lead to a lot of action,” says Michael

Pfahl, an associate counsel at the office of General Counsel who focuses on immigration laws. “People have certainly a right to be concerned, but at the same time this is an argument that has been going on for years. Immigration literally is something we’ve gone through years of promised reform only to see no reform.”

In reaction to Trump’s statements, some Ohio schools gathered together to vow to protect students in the DACA program—these schools are nicknamed “sanctuary campuses” after “sanctuary cities,” a municipality that has adopted a policy of protecting undocumented immigrants. More than 500 college and university presidents nationwide signed a statement calling for the continuation and expansion of the DACA program including 10 Ohio schools. Some of these schools include Denison University, Kenyon College, Ohio State University and Ohio University.

Pfahl says until any action is taken, universities cannot react, but can only be proactive. Many universities, Kent State included, have reached out to ask for support from government officials.

“Students have a very real fear because of the uncertainty associated with being in the country as permitted by the government essentially, and that very real fear of having to uproot their life should that process change,” Pfahl says.

On Dec. 5, Ohio University President Roderick J. McDavis expressed his support of these students

through a letter addressed to Ohio Sen. Rob Portman. He conveys the concerns of the DACA students who fear deportation. In the letter, McDavis asks Portman to remember these concerns when he votes on future DACA legislation.

“These sons and daughters of undocumented immigrants have not broken any laws,” McDavis writes. “They are not just numbers, they are people, and each of them is a valued member of our Bobcat Family.”

Kent State also stands with its DACA students. President Beverly Warren says the university does not track the number of DACA students enrolled at the university. However, she specifies the university will support these students. On Dec. 26, Warren, along with a number of other college and university presidents, signed a letter urging Portman to support the BRIDGE Act. The Bar Removal of Individuals who Dream of Growing our Economy Act—which was proposed Dec. 12 by senators Lindsey Graham, of South Carolina, and Dick Durbin, of Illinois—aims to allow people who are eligible for work authorization or temporary relief of deportation through DACA to continue living in the U.S. The status would last for three years after the law is passed.

“We value all students, including our DACA students,” Warren says in a meeting with Kent State’s student media. “These students are great, great contributors here in the United States. The fact that we value their opportunity to value an education leads to many of those students remaining and being productive citizens in the United States. I don’t think we’re standing back, but we’re also being very deliberate about the protection that all students deserve.”

Hordiyenko does not wish to stand back in the shadows during these uncertain times. He continually expresses his desire to live in the United States as a Ukrainian immigrant and his desire to pursue the better life his parents wished for him.

On Sept. 22, Hordiyenko stood up and declared his undocumented status in front of his peers during the Poynter KSU Media Ethics Workshop. The room fell silent as the participants listen to him speak:

“I would like to thank you for what you did,” Hordiyenko says to keynote speaker Jose Antonio Vargas, an undocumented journalist and immigrant rights activist. “I would like to take this opportunity to come out myself. I am an undocumented immigrant.”

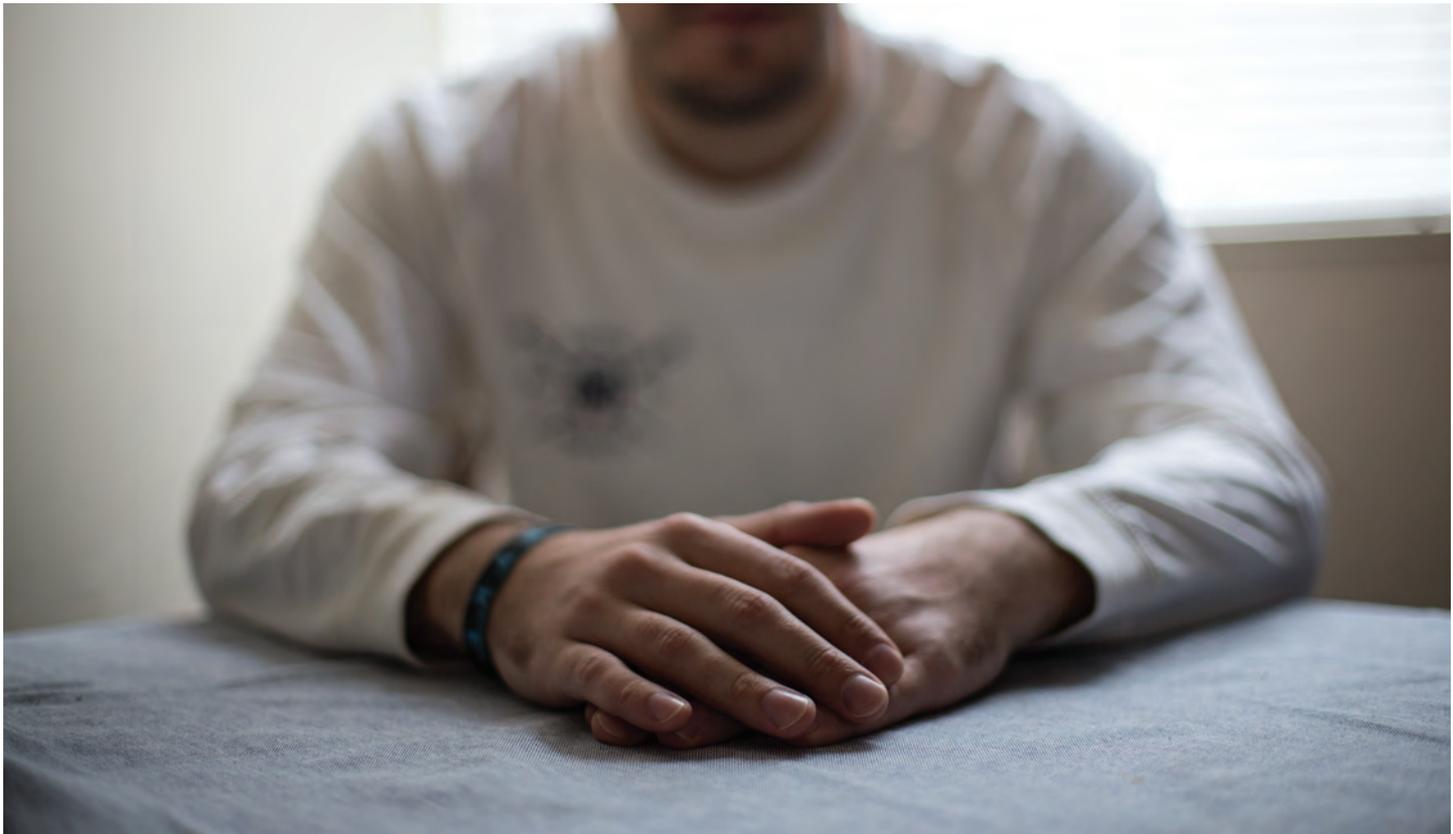
BACK TO HIS ROOTS

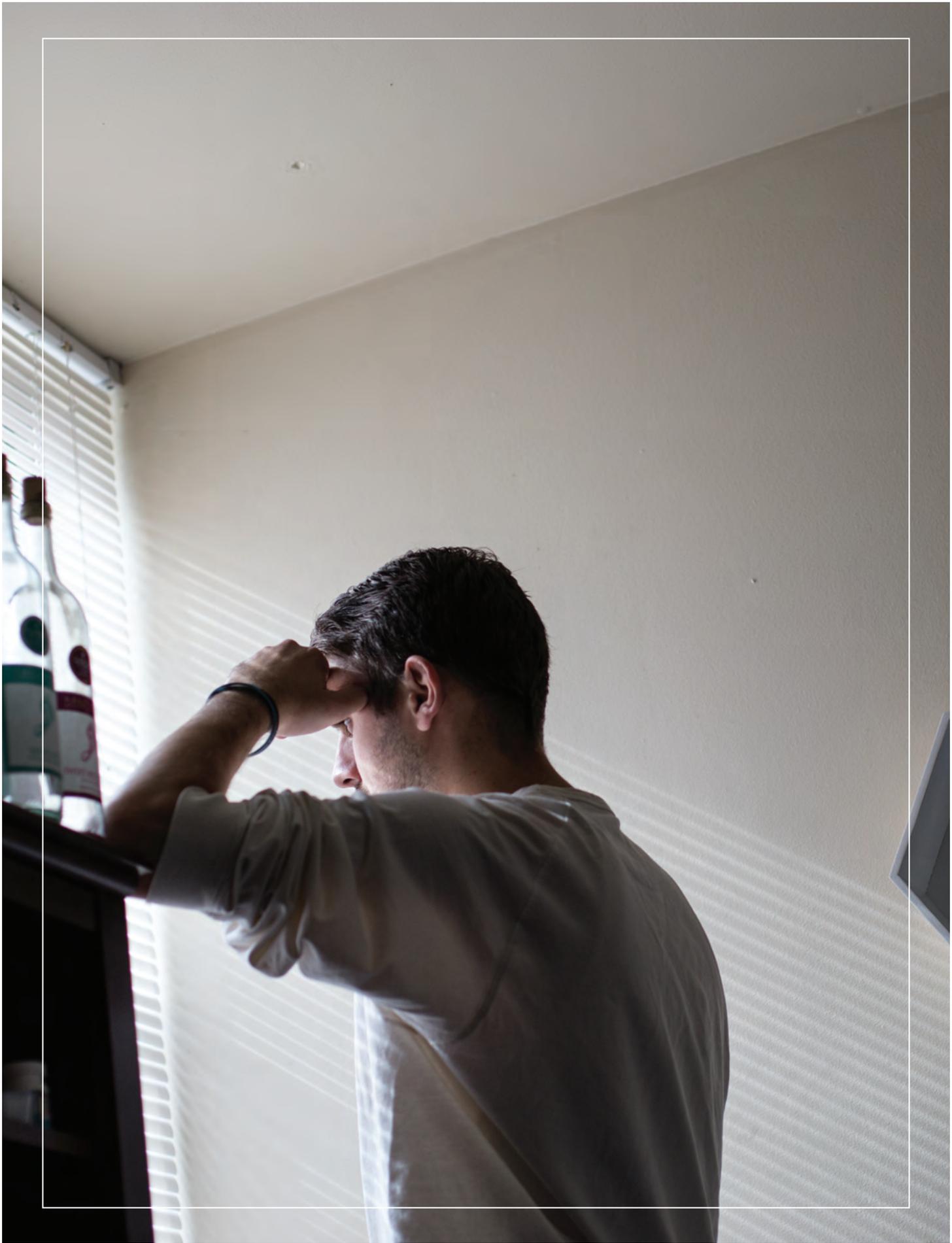
To 13-year-old Hordiyenko, America was made of gold. He believed America to be a perfect utopia unaffected by a harsh economy and the reign of the Soviet Union—a safe haven where life was as extravagant and easy as it looked in the movies. If he and his family could make it to America, they would be set. It was a place where all of their problems would evaporate once they crossed the Atlantic Ocean to American soil.

At least that was his perception of the United States as a teenager living in a small Ukrainian town in 1998.

Hordiyenko was far more concerned with playing soccer in the street with his friends after school than worrying about the economic climate of his country. As a recently sovereign country, Ukraine struggled to overcome hyperinflation and establish a stable economy after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. As a result, many individuals were left without work.

Hordiyenko’s father remained unemployed and struggled to find work, and his mother’s job at the small grocery store in town brought in far less money than needed to support the family.





“I started reading and hearing certain politicians speaking out about immigrants or undocumented immigrants as if we were less than human beings—as if we were something else—**calling us illegals or calling us aliens.** Calling a human being illegal,” Hordiyenko pauses and looked down at the ground, “That should never happen. **No human being is illegal.**”

—Adriny Hordiyenko

Employment opportunities continued to diminish. As many of their friends and neighbors left Ukraine in hopes of finding more luck elsewhere, Hordiyenko’s parents felt there was only one option left: America.

“As cliché as it sounds, we came to pursue the American Dream,” Hordiyenko says. “America is the land of opportunity. I believe for people from developing countries, coming to the United States seems like a beacon of hope. Opportunities, a chance of survival [and] a better life—that’s what awaits you in the United States.”

When Hordiyenko’s parents told him they would be moving to America, he says it felt like “hitting the lottery.” When he told his friends he was going to America, Hordiyenko says he was viewed as the “cool kid in school.”

Hordiyenko and his family traveled to America under tourist visas with the intent to stay and make a life in the land of freedom. His parents attempted to renew their tourist visa a second time but were denied. Though under the U.S. immigration law Hordiyenko and his family should have left and returned to Ukraine, they knew there was no place for them back in their homeland. For the first time in years, their family was financially stable. Hordiyenko was already enrolled in an American middle school and a new life as an immigrant family living in America was underway.

Hordiyenko’s parents decided to stay in America with the hopes that in three or four years they would have the opportunity to apply for citizenship. They didn’t know the legislation regarding immigration, but were hopeful new legislation would be enacted to pave a path to citizenship

for their family. Hordiyenko says at the time, they had no idea what they were getting themselves into—they had no idea they would be spending the next 18 years in the shadows.

At first, Hordiyenko did not want to stay in America. When they arrived, they settled in Florida, but made their way to Northeast Ohio to be near a Ukrainian community. Making friends was difficult because Hordiyenko didn’t speak much English, and what little he did know is difficult to understand beneath his thick accent. Despite the culture shock Hordiyenko endured during his first few months in the United States, as an adult, he now knows the decision was made for the better.

“My parents made the decision: We were going to stay,” Hordiyenko says, remembering how they wanted him to have access to an American education. “We just decided to overstay our visas. That’s kind of how we became undocumented.”

Hordiyenko’s parents are able to support the family by working under-the-table jobs that many Americans would never consider doing. His father is placed in jobs by temporary employment agencies for less than minimum wage and with no benefits, but he does what he needs to make a better life for his family. He worked for a cleaning service, switching to different hotels and businesses. At times, he worked long and crazy hours and had to drive more than an hour for work. Some weeks the paycheck was less than he expected, but as an undocumented worker he couldn’t complain.

“There are opportunities everywhere—whether that means an opportunity to improve your life or just opportunities to find jobs under the table,”

Hordiyenko says. “I assume that’s how many undocumented immigrants survived. They work jobs that most Americans will not even think about doing.”

A TASTE OF CITIZENSHIP

In 2003, Hordiyenko graduated from high school. He watched as, one by one, his friends left for college to pursue their careers and dreams. Hordiyenko continued to work for temp agencies and do odd jobs for extra cash as a method of employment. He jumped to different jobs every few months—mainly working in the kitchens of various restaurants and cleaning hotel rooms. Because he was undocumented, he had no social security number, birth certificate or driver’s license. College was not an option for him. Getting a decent job was not an option for him. He felt stuck.

For years before the DACA program, Hordiyenko worked for low wages. He didn’t question his employer or if what he is doing was within the boundaries of the law. He did what he needed to do to put food on the table.

“Here I am wanting to do these things, and I can’t,” Hordiyenko says with a sigh. Questions run through his mind. *Why am I being treated this way? Why am I different? What makes me worse than everybody else?*

As an undocumented immigrant living in America, Hordiyenko began to follow immigration policy that may affect him. He read about the politicians who spoke about these matters.

“I started reading and hearing certain politicians speaking out about immigrants or undocumented

edmented immigrants as if we were less than human beings—as if we were something else—calling us illegals or calling us aliens. Calling a human being illegal,” Hordiyenko pauses and looked down at the ground, “that should never happen. No human being is illegal.”

Hordiyenko began to question his self-worth. The word “illegal” bounced around in his head. Listening to these politicians made him feel as if his life amounted to nothing because he was not legally living in the United States. He felt as if people viewed undocumented families as “less than dirt.” Hordiyenko found himself sinking into depression: *Am I worth less than my friends because I am not a natural-born American? Is my life worth less than theirs?*

But Hordiyenko’s life changed June 15, 2012, when the Secretary of Homeland Security announced DACA. Under the DACA program, Hordiyenko received a social security number, a driver’s license, the chance to get a better job and the right to higher education.

Hordiyenko quickly worked to get his driver’s license because he finally had two forms of identification to present to the BMV. The day he received his license was one of the happiest days of his life. He eagerly sent snapchats and texts of his license to his friends, showing that finally, at 28, he could legally drive.

Though DACA did not grant citizenship to the individuals enrolled in the program, it did give them a sense of what it was like to live an American life. Hordiyenko compared it to a bakery that has bits of pastries on a plate with wooden toothpicks in them to give people a taste of what the full item is like.

“In my mind, that’s what DACA is,” Hordiyenko says. “It gives me a taste of what it’s like to be an American citizen, or an equal member of society, which I didn’t feel like I was for more than a decade.”

THE UNCLEAR FUTURE

When Hordiyenko realizes Trump has a serious chance of winning the election, old fears resur-

face and questions run through his mind. He worries Obama’s executive order will be repealed by Trump, leaving him in “no man’s land.” Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric stirs up the old question that haunted him prior to the DACA program: *Why does being undocumented make me less of a person?* Though Hordiyenko acknowledges that most of Trump’s statements are directed at Mexicans, he feels offended by Trump’s negative focus on “illegal” or undocumented immigrants.

Hordiyenko worries the most about the safety of his parents. While they are not a top priority for deportation, he says they are in a much worse situation because they came to the U.S. as adults and are not protected under the DACA program.

A month into his presidency, Trump had not terminated the DACA program despite his promise to deal with it within the first four weeks. He addresses it during a speech Feb. 18, and it seems as though Trump’s views of the program have shifted as he says DACA is a “very, very difficult subject for me.” He refers to the DREAMers as “some absolutely incredible kids,” and a new beacon of hope emerges for Hordiyenko.

“There’s been positive rhetoric recently from him regarding it,” Hordiyenko says. “However, he has said in the past that he will end it, so no one knows where he really stands.”

An executive order to end the DACA program was drafted in late January, according to the Los Angeles Times. However, Trump now shows an unwillingness to sign the document, which the LA Times suspects is because of the public backing of the DACA recipients. This backing was displayed when a 23-year-old DACA recipient from Washington state was detained, and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents threatened to deport the DREAMer, causing a public outcry.

Trump’s position on DACA is critical because of the two groups he has to appease—those who supported his key campaign stance on strong immigration laws and the 750,000 individuals who are protected by DACA. However, Trump’s senior advisers are holding steady on the goal of

strengthening immigration enforcement and are looking for alternative solutions to shield the president from any blowback that may occur if DACA is repealed.

Despite these uncertainties, Hordiyenko refuses to focus on the negative. The world is still open to him because, at 32-years-old, Hordiyenko has a long life still ahead of him to reap the benefits of a higher education in the U.S. One day he made the decision to stop giving into fear and live in the moment.

“I used to be afraid,” he says. “Whatever happens, happens. Worrying about it is not going to do anything. I look to the positives of my experience here. I got to learn the language. I got to experience a different culture. No matter where I am, whether it’s the United States or back home or another part of the world, I’ll always be able to look at things from two different perspectives.”

Though Hordiyenko’s status is uncertain until Trump makes a decision on whether or not to continue the DACA program, Hordiyenko says he will always value the education he received in the United States.

Obama’s belief in what undocumented immigrants can do sparked hope in Hordiyenko, and in these uncertain times, he clings to this hope. He remembers the reason he originally came to America: opportunity.

“It’s something I’ll forever be grateful for to President Barack Obama,” Hordiyenko says. “Whenever he mentioned that he wanted to do something for individuals like myself, it was kind of [encouraging]. It was like a beacon of hope—like the light at the end of the tunnel. There’s a possibility—you start believing in good. You start believing in yourself again.” B