

# SERMON STARTERS



## Herta Llusho



### The Power of Community

Herta Llusho came to the United States from Albania when she was 11. She and her mother settled in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. Herta and her mother came to the United States legally. Shortly after arriving, Herta's mother filed an application to stay in the United States.

Herta quickly thrived in school. She graduated from Grosse Pointe South High School with a 4.05 grade point average. In high school, she was a member of the varsity track team, won an Advanced Placement Scholar Award, and was a member of the National Honor Society.

Herta is currently a junior at the University of Detroit Mercy, where she is an honors student. Herta is studying to be an electrical engineer. She has a grade point average of 3.98 and has completed two internships at engineering companies.

In addition, Herta is also very involved in her community, volunteering at homeless shelters, tutoring programs, and as well as her church, where she spends hours tutoring kids and volunteering with the junior high Sunday school class. It's a joy to watch so many children run up to her at church because of the love they receive when they are with her.

Despite Herta's success in school, her community and her church, in 2009, after nine years of legal proceedings, the government placed Herta and her mother in deportation proceedings. Herta said:

"I was shocked. My friends are here, my education is here, my community is here. All of a sudden, I was asked to leave behind everything I know and go back to a country I barely know. When I lived there, I was little, so I don't remember it much and I barely speak Albanian anymore."

Herta's community has risen to support and even defend her. Thousands of people signed an online petition to stop her deportation. Due to their perseverance, last year, the Department of Homeland Security granted Herta a one year stay of deportation. There are thousands of more students like Herta waiting for thousands of communities to come along side to support and defend.

As Herta recently said, "I'm a typical story. There's thousands of stories out there just like mine. Please support the DREAM Act so students like me don't have to leave. We are worth it. This is the country we have come to love."

*Suggested texts: Joshua 2; Acts 2:37-47; Acts 4:32-37*

## Juan Gomez

### The Power of Friendship



Juan Gomez came to the United States from Colombia in 1990, when he was 2 years old. Juan is an academic star. At Killian Senior High School in Miami, he earned close to two years of college credit with high scores on 13 Advanced Placement exams. He scored a 1410 out of 1600 on the SAT, and he finished in the top 20 of his class. His economics teacher nicknamed him “President Gomez” and said he is “one of the best students ever to graduate from Killian.”

Despite his success, in 2007, during Juan’s senior year in high school, he was placed in deportation proceedings. What happened next was American democracy at work. Scott Elfenbein was the student body president at Juan’s high school and Juan’s best friend. Scott started a Facebook page devoted to stopping Juan’s deportation. On the Facebook page, he wrote, “We need your help in saving Juan from being sent to Colombia – a country he doesn’t even remember. For those of you who know Juan, he is the smartest and most dedicated kid you ever met. He deserves more than to just be deported. Many of us owe him. I know he helped everyone one way or another in school. It’s the least we can do for him.”

Within one week, over 2000 people joined Juan’s Facebook page. Then, Juan’s friends came to Capitol Hill to lobby on his behalf. They persuaded Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL) and then Senator Chris Dodd (D-CT) to introduce a bill to stop Juan’s deportation. Rep. Diaz Balart is a Republican and he is a lead cosponsor of the DREAM Act in the House of Representatives. Former Senator Chris Dodd is a Democrat.

After his deportation was stayed, Juan was admitted to Georgetown University on a full scholarship. Juan is going to graduate from Georgetown in May. He has been offered a job at a top financial services firm in New York City. Although his deportation order is stayed, only the DREAM Act will give Juan a permanent solution. It would give Juan, and thousands like him, a chance to contribute their skills to the country they love. It would also give thousands of friends, like the ones Juan has, the opportunity to know someone like Juan in their high school and college.

*Suggested Texts: John 15:12-17*

## Ola Kaso

### Blessed to be a Blessing



Ola Kaso came to the United States from Albania in 1998, when she was 5. Ola has excelled in school in Warren, Michigan where she took every Advanced Placement class offered, graduated with a 4.4 grade point average, was on the varsity cross country and tennis teams, was a Treasurer of the Student Council and National Honor Society, and even tutored other students who learning English for the first time.

Thankfully, though she was scheduled to be deported the Department of Homeland Security granted a year long stay of deportation to Ola. This will give her a chance to continue her education.

Ola was recently accepted into the honors program at the University of Michigan, where she will be a pre-med student. She aspires to ultimately become a surgical oncologist, but more importantly, she intends to work for patients that cannot afford the astronomical fees accompanying life saving surgeries, patients that are denied the medical treatment they deserve. Her goal is not to increase use her opportunity to increase her bank account; her goal is to decrease preventable deaths. She wants to remain in this country to make a difference. She has been blessed and wants to remain and be a blessing to others.

*Suggested texts: Genesis 12:1-3; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15*

## Elier Lara

### Dream Big



Elier Lara's parents came to the United States in 1994, when he was four.

Elier is a computer whiz. In high school, he won awards for outstanding achievement in science and information technology. He graduated in the top 5% of his high school class and was named Tech Prep Student of the Year in Cincinnati. He even started a computer repair business.

Now, Elier is a 19-year-old honors student at the University of Cincinnati. He is majoring in Information Technology and has a 3.8 GPA. One of his professors said, "I have worked with thousands of students over the past 30 years, and Elier Lara is that student who comes along every 10 years or so who makes your heart sing."

For Elier, technology and computers is where he wants to spend the rest of his life. He wants to be at the forefront of the technological frontier, implementing and discovering the new technologies of the future. He has said, "I am dreaming big and will continue to do so."

Elier is waiting to utilize his gifts to benefit the country he loves. Throughout U.S. history, immigrants have founded ground-breaking technological companies like Google, Yahoo, Intel, and E-Bay. That could be Elier's and America's future.

*Suggested texts: Genesis 28:10-22; Matthew 1:20-25*

## **Gaby Pacheco**

### **Overcoming Fear; Reaching Out in Love**



Gaby Pacheco's parents came to this country from Ecuador when she was 7. Gaby witnessed her parents and her sisters taken away from her during a raid in her home by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. It was the most frightening moment in her life.

Despite this tragedy, Gaby has excelled, particularly in positions of leadership. She was the highest ranked Junior R.O.T.C. student in her high school, and she received the highest score on the military's aptitude test. The Air Force tried to recruit Gaby but she was unable to enlist because she did not have legal status.

Since then, Gaby has earned two associates degrees in education and a BA in special education. Gaby has also served as the president of her student government and the president of Florida's Junior Community College Student Government Association. Gaby's dream is to teach autistic children.

Gaby is also one of four students who walked all the way from Miami, Florida, to Washington, D.C. – 1,500 miles – in order to build support for the DREAM Act in 2010. Along the way, these four students were joined by hundreds of supporters. They called their trip the Trail of Dreams. Along the Trail the four walkers encountered some people who treated them with hatred and disrespect, but they never retreated in fear, and were clear that the work they are doing, while sometimes confrontational, is all about love. When the students met with Sherriff Joe Arpaio, notorious for the ways he has criminalized and targeted immigrants as Sherriff of Maricopa County in Arizona, Gaby ended their meeting with a hug. When asked why she did it, Gaby said:

*I hugged him because I wanted him to feel the pain that our community has been feeling. But also to tell him that as a human being I don't fear him. I told him with tears coming down that in his heart he has good, and that he has the ability to come back, you know. He was astray and doing these horrible things to our community, but he has the power in his heart to come back and fight with us against these unjust laws.*

*Suggested texts: Ruth, Philemon, Ephesians 3:14-19, Romans 8:12-17*

## Pedro Pedroza

### Perseverance



Pedro Pedroza came to Chicago from Mexico when he was 5.

Pedro graduated from St. Agnes Catholic School in Little Village and was an honors student at St. Ignatius College Prep. He is now a student at Cornell University, a prestigious college in Ithaca, New York where Pedro is studying to be a teacher.

Unfortunately, Pedro is in deportation proceedings. He was riding a bus from Chicago back to school in Ithaca New York when Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents arrested him. If deported, he will be forced to return to a country he doesn't know anymore, and leaving the U.S. means leaving everything and everyone he knows. But even if he is forced to leave he has promised to do all he can to adjust his status and return to the only place he considers home – the United States of America.

*Suggested texts: Romans 5:1-5, Hebrews 12:1-2, James 1:2-4*

## Minchul Suk

### Second Chances



Minchul Suk came to the U.S. from South Korea with his parents in 1991, when he was 9. Minchul graduated from high school with a 4.2 GPA. He graduated from UCLA with a degree in Microbiology, Immunology, and Molecular Genetics. With the support of the Korean-American community, Minchul was able to graduate from dental school. He has passed the national boards and licensure exam but cannot obtain a license and fulfill his dream of becoming a dentist because he is undocumented.

He says that he is “willing to accept whatever punishment is deemed fitting for that crime” of being brought here as a child without paper. The one request he makes is for a second chance without having to go back to his country of origin that he barely remembers.

“I am begging for a chance to prove to everyone that I am not a waste of a human being, that I am not a criminal set on leeching off taxpayers' money. Please give me the chance to serve my community as a dentist, to be a giver rather than a receiver, to be able to become someone who would be able to shine light and help those around me like people have done for me when I was down in my darkest hours.”

*Suggested texts: Matthew 15:21-28; Luke 19:1-10; Acts 9:10-21*

## Oscar Vazquez

### Risk



Oscar Vazquez was brought to Phoenix, Arizona, by his parents when he was a child.

He spent his high school years in Junior R.O.T.C. He dreamed of enlisting in the military. However, at the end of his junior year, a recruiting officer told Oscar that he was ineligible for military service because he was undocumented.

Oscar found another outlet for his talent. He entered a college-level robot competition sponsored by NASA. Oscar and three other DREAM Act students worked for months in a storage room in their high school. They were competing against students from MIT and other top universities, but Oscar's team won first place.

In 2009, Oscar graduated from Arizona State University with a degree in Mechanical Engineering. He was one of the top three students in his class.

Following his graduation, Oscar took a brave step. He voluntarily returned to Mexico, a country where he hadn't lived since he was a child. Oscar said, "I decided to take a gamble and do the right thing."

Last year, the Obama Administration granted Oscar a waiver to reenter the United States. Without this waiver, Oscar would have been barred from returning to the United States for at least ten years. He would have been separated from his wife Karla and their two-year-old daughter Samantha, who are both American citizens.

When Oscar returned to the United States last year, he did two things. First, he applied for citizenship. Then, he enlisted in the Army. Oscar is in basic training now. His goal is to pilot an Apache helicopter. In June, Oscar will complete basic training, and he will be sworn in as an American citizen.

*Suggested texts: Matthew 13:44-46*

## Additional Sermon Resources

Sermon Resources on Immigration, A Project by Sojourners:

[http://faithandimmigration.org/sites/default/files/tmp/080402\\_Serman\\_Booklet.pdf](http://faithandimmigration.org/sites/default/files/tmp/080402_Serman_Booklet.pdf)

Rabbi Charles Feinberg

July 20<sup>th</sup> 2010

DREAM Act Mock Graduation

Washington, DC

*Friends:*

*As we gather together to give our support the Development, Relief, and Education For Minors Act, otherwise known as the Dream Act, I ask you to recall a young man who was a dreamer in a strange land. This young man was the favorite of his father, a very capable young man with big dreams for himself and his family. Yet, this young man fell on hard times. His brothers sold him into slavery and he*

*became an illegal in a strange land. Because God had blessed with insight and intuition, he was able not only to dream but also he was capable of interpreting dreams. Because he was so adept at dream interpretation, he became the second most powerful man in his adopted land. This young man's genius, his capability, his great skill, along with God's watchful care, helped him to realize his dreams. With*

*God's help, this young man's ability and character overcame the prejudice and hostility that people in his adopted land had for the people of his native land. Ultimately, he became a source of blessing for his family and for the people he served.*

*Friends, let the memory of the biblical Joseph inspire us to help the thousands of young people in our midst who have become trapped and who are on the verge of exile because of fear and prejudice. Let us remember how "the illegal" Joseph helped save ancient Egypt from years of disastrous famine. Let us realize how much these young people love our country and want to be productive and responsible*

*citizens in our country. We must make for them a path that will lead to citizenship and allow them to live and create without fear of deportation to a land they do not know.*

*O God, please help our elected leaders to attain the insight and muster the courage to help the thousands of young people who want to become loyal citizens of these United States of America. Help us to overcome the fear that grips so many in our country. Give them the insight to realize that by extending a welcoming hand to young people raised in this country, we can only help ourselves. Amen.*

