

# City College High School students push for change

By Elizabeth Doerr  
Baltimore City Paper • Last Updated: May 25, 2016 at 3:00 am



Jinette Minaya, a junior at Baltimore City College High School (Tanya Garcia/for City Paper)

**On a cold and sunny Saturday in early February**, a group of young people gathered in the basement community room at the Enoch Pratt Free Library's Patterson Park branch. They were busily arranging construction paper table tents with words drawn in colorful markers and adorned with stars, exclamation points, blocky hand-written fonts. They read: "Know Your Rights," "CASA Hotline & Safe Spaces," "Being Proactive & Recognizing ICE," and "Real vs. Fake Warrants."

The teenagers greeted each person enthusiastically as they arrived, giving them an agenda for the two-hour event. This meeting, "Youth Empowering the Community," was convened by a group of students from Baltimore City College High School called Students Organizing a Multicultural Open Society (SOMOS). The majority of the SOMOS students were Latino—representing most of the Latino population at City College as a whole, in fact—and thus were all affected by a recent uptick in immigration enforcement in their community as U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) conducted a slew of raids across the country. That national crackdown, beginning in January, was SOMOS' catalyst to activism.

The event was SOMOS' first interactive Know Your Rights discussion. The group worked with CASA de Maryland, Baltimore Polytechnic Institute's El Club de la Cultura Hispana, and City

Bloc, a social justice group from City, to host the event which drew around 20 people, many of them students. "Our goal is to create a coalition, to have one voice as youth," Heymi Maldonado, a City College senior, said to the group. "We'll create a list of demands for [then-Baltimore City Public Schools CEO], Dr. Thornton."

Participants broke into small groups to discuss how to keep themselves, their families, and their communities safe from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). They brainstormed a list of demands centered around education for Latino students in Baltimore with SOMOS students leading each discussion as their teachers and club advisors, Connie Sanabria, Franca Muller Paz, and Edwin Perez, circulated the room.

Demands ranged from increasing financial support for Latino and other cultural student organizations at city schools to transforming school curriculum to be more culturally diverse. While many items on the list came out of challenges Latino youth experience or see their peers struggle with on a day-to-day basis, they also encompassed concerns that any voiceless or minority group would have. Not only do they want a culturally aware curriculum to reflect their Latino culture and heritage, the students said, but also a curriculum that represents their peers from the African-American and Asian communities.

This was only the beginning of their work. The teens hoped to engage their peers, not only in a discussion, but also to work toward change for immigrant communities in Baltimore and the state of Maryland.

### **Turning Fear into Action**

Many Baltimore immigrant teens and children exist in a legal limbo. They themselves have some protection under a policy called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that gives "prosecutorial discretion" to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement for young people who were brought here as children and who've grown up here. But their parents don't have that protection and remain at risk of deportation.

In November 2014, President Barack Obama issued an executive order expanding some of the protections under DACA and introducing a policy of Deferred Action for Parental Accountability (DAPA) that would offer limited protections to parents. But some states, like Texas, challenged

<https://www.baltimoresun.com/citypaper/bcp-052516-feature-somos-20160525-story.html>

the policy in the courts. It is currently on hold, having traveled all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court, which heard oral arguments in April and is expected to soon rule on its legalities. Meanwhile, the president also announced a crackdown on immigrants who arrived in the U.S. after Jan. 1, 2014.

The U.S. Supreme Court is set to listen to arguments on the President's executive actions—including DAPA and DACA—before the 2016 elections. But many of the immigrant families in Maryland and around the nation face uncertain futures.

When reports of immigration raids by ICE started circulating in early January, Baltimore's SOMOS students and their communities were already in a heightened state of alert. Several City College students expressed fear about Donald Trump and his supporters with their anti-immigrant rhetoric. The Baltimore high school students, who had started their organization as a kind of cultural club, were suddenly facing adult-sized issues surrounding immigration policy, enforcement, and political backlash.

The SOMOS students responded by expanding the organization's focus, determined to educate their community about their rights, to change perspectives on immigrants, and to push for change.

"First, we want to show the community that you can be activists and do it peacefully and you can also be underage and do it," said Jinette Minaya, a 17-year-old junior. "And you can also be minorities within a community and still achieve the same thing that anybody else would be able to achieve."

Maldonado, 18, said SOMOS's activism overlaps with issues that other students face. "A lot of the struggles that African-Americans are facing are the struggles that Latinos are facing," she said. "They're not the same, but they're similar. So one thing I want to do with SOMOS is to unite the Latino community with the African-American community. One 'dicho' [saying] I learned in Spanish class goes, 'el pueblo unido, jamás será vencido,' or 'a town together will never be defeated.'...If we work together, we're more powerful to bring bigger change to the United States and to society."

### **SOMOS at the Beginning**

When Maldonado—a veteran SOMOS club member and an outspoken and unofficial leader of the group—was a freshman, she was one of only six or seven Latino students at City College. "I

felt isolated," she said. "A year later, with the help of other students, SOMOS was launched. I didn't intend for it to become this."

"When we first started out, we didn't really think of activism as much," said City College junior Yaslin Machuca, 17. "For example, this year, we did an event for Hispanic Heritage Month, like we did a piñata workshop and things like that. Also another event, we all got to share our stories as an immigrant and what it is like coming from your native country to a foreign country and just have others in school listen to our stories and understand why we're here in this country."

The other SOMOS students echo Machuca's excitement about sharing their stories with the school at large. Many SOMOS students came with their families by land through the same treacherous journeys that Ana (see p. 17) and Mauricio (see p. 19) took. They were lucky to have traveled with others. But the experiences still impact them today.

"I just want to lay out that every story, however you came—well, we call it 'la Niña'—whether by car or through the desert, it's really important," said sophomore Diana Morales, 15, before she tells her own story.

At six years old, Morales's mother woke her up in the middle of the night in their Mexico home asking if she wanted to see her sister. "It turns out I ended up crossing the whole desert to North Carolina to see her," Morales said. She relayed each step of the journey, occasionally grabbing for the Spanish term "we got into the autobus" and "we were instructed by the coyote," who she described as a blond and blue-eyed guy who her family paid to lead them to and across the border and told them they'd be on the other side in three hours. "But we ended up spending a week in the desert," she said.

She was young, but she remembered very specifically a woman in their group who got stuck in a hole and how they helped her out of it. She remembered the sadness and exhaustion that permeated the trip. Other details remained vague. "Somehow we ended up crossing the border," she said, simply.

While Morales spoke, sophomore Luis, 17, who preferred not to use his last name, held her arm as she choked up talking about her mother's sacrifice. Luis also shared his "la Niña" story, when his mother brought him from Mexico to the U.S. for opportunity that they weren't afforded in their rural hometown. And then Maldonado described her flight. Each of the stories had different elements; the students remembered some aspects clearly and precisely, others more

generally. But the stories are linked and part of a larger narrative of contemporary migration to the U.S.

Many of the SOMOS students don't personally fear deportation because they are covered under DACA, and while the policy doesn't give these teens a path to citizenship, it does give them a temporary peace of mind that they can continue to go to school and live their lives without the threat of deportation. But they worry about their parents.

Machuca, for example, came to the U.S. with her mom on a visa when she was six, but they aren't currently documented. "We never thought that my mom would end up having a child that was born here," she said, referring to her now seven-year-old sister. "What was difficult about that recently, with the immigration raids going on, is that we worried what would happen if my parents got deported and my sister and I stayed here by ourselves," she said through tears. Her friends next to her, Christian Arrue-Cisneros and Jinette Minaya, consoled her with their hands rested on her arm and shoulder as she spoke, haltingly, to get through her story.

"It was something that we thought about every day and it really scared us because I've been with my parents all my life. My sister is so young...we were just scared and we just wanted to feel safe," Machuca continued. She was able to apply for DACA, and so has legal status. She hopes her parents will one day qualify for DAPA and so no longer be at risk of deportation. "That's why I think, for me [the activism we're doing is] important...I'm glad that we're trying to make changes."

### **Seizing the Moment for "La Causa"**

The February meeting was only the beginning of the students' activism. Since then, SOMOS has been working with students from Poly's Club de la Cultura Hispana and Patterson's Pa'lante Club to narrow down their demands and represent Latino immigrant students citywide. "Major points include additional ESOL services for students and translation resources for parents at schools where they are lacking, and mental health resources for students recovering from trauma," said Muller Paz, one of the teacher-advisors.

Maldonado and Christian Arrue-Cisneros, 17, a junior who has taken on the official public relations role for the group, were invited along with Muller Paz to a meeting with the Maryland Commission for Civil Rights in February. "We were the only student immigration organization to be a part of this," Maldonado said.

Most of the meeting focused on immigrant detention centers, but SOMOS representatives spoke up regarding inadequate resources for Latino students in Baltimore, said Arrue-Cisneros, who also manages "SOMOS la Voz" (meaning "we are the voice" in Spanish) the group's official PR arm (you can find SOMOS on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SOMOSCityKnight).

They haven't stopped there. On March 21, the group hosted a mayoral forum at City where representatives from City College, Poly, and Patterson High School moderated the discussion. SOMOS sees this as the beginning of coalition building between the schools, which will also include Benjamin Franklin High School with the goal of uniting Latino students across Baltimore. SOMOS is also teaming up with the City College's Gender Sexuality Alliance and City Bloc, the social justice advocacy group that helped with the February event. Together, the three groups held a series of "Youth Silenced" workshops in April that focused on giving voice to the youth that are typically silenced in politics and society. This capped off with an April 15th Day of Silence and then an April 27th Day of Remembrance and service for Freddie Gray on the anniversary of the Baltimore Uprisings.

These students don't intend to stop at the end of their school year. They are planning to send SOMOS juniors to visit universities in Florida, North Carolina, and Georgia. They'll continue to volunteer with Creative Alliance and CASA de Maryland on advocacy and educational events over the summer, and they plan to build on their collaborative momentum with Poly and Patterson and narrow down their demands and organize additional summertime events.

Watching the students rattle off the ever-growing list of events and activities that they're working on, their advisors stood quietly on the sidelines—and then interjected.

"What I think is so incredible is that before the ICE raids, you [SOMOS students] have been building your community of SOMOS and strengthening your relationships with each other and trying to bridge the gap between other students...I think it was perfect," Muller Paz says. "So, this momentous thing happens when all of a sudden deportations are back in the news...and we were ready. And to quote Beyoncé, we were in 'Formation' and you could rise to la causa." She told the students she was proud of them. "So let's seize the moment, let's seize the day."

Nodding in agreement, one of their other teacher-advisors, Edwin Perez chimes in, noting that this was the perfect time for the teens to take action. "So let's seize the moment," he says as a kind of rallying cry, "let's seize the day."

Originally Published: May 24, 2016 at 7:53 pm

<https://www.baltimoresun.com/citypaper/bcp-052516-feature-somos-20160525-story.html>