



Advocates for the Dream Act hold a candlelight vigil at House Speaker Paul Ryan's home in Janesville, Wisconsin, Nov. 9, 2017. (Courtesy of Voces de la Frontera/Joe Brusky)



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Wisconsin immigration activists supporting Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) recipients are not ruling out further protests outside Sunday Mass at St. John Vianney Church in Janesville, even though the object of those protests, House Speaker Paul Ryan, has announced he will retire from Congress at the end of this legislative session.

The church, whose members include Ryan, was the site of protests in August 2017, when more than two dozen activists picketed outside Mass. Ryan was not in attendance at the time.

Among the protestors was DACA recipient Valeria Ruiz Lira of Racine, Wisconsin. DACA offers certain young immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children without permission work permits and protection from deportation, and DACA recipients are sometimes referred to as "Dreamers."

The goal of the demonstrations, Lira told NCR, is "to call out Paul Ryan and his failure to bring the [Dream Act](#) to a vote." Even though Ryan is retiring, "He is still the speaker. He still has one of the most powerful positions in the U.S. He can bring this to a vote."

Ryan, at the urging of some Republicans, has prevented the Dream Act from reaching a vote, even though the expectation is that it would pass, with the vast majority of Democratic support combined with votes from some Republicans.

Lira, 21, came to Wisconsin from Mexico with her parents when she was 3 years old. Her parents came without documentation. She has a younger sister who was born in the United States (and is therefore a U.S. citizen).

She has protested Ryan in New York, where he spoke at the 2017 annual Al Smith Dinner sponsored by the New York archdiocese. She has also participated in protests outside Ryan's home in Janesville, Wisconsin, as well as his district office in Racine.

Activists argue that legislative action is needed to prevent the possible deportation of hundreds of thousands of young immigrants covered by DACA.

Ryan's district office in Racine was the site of civil disobedience protests on March 5, when a dozen people were arrested as they blocked the streets. Ryan's Janesville home was also picketed in November by the Milwaukee-based [Voces de la Frontera](#), an immigrant rights organization which has organized the Wisconsin Dreamer

protests. Lira works for the organization.

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The demonstrations will continue, Elliott Magers, director of [Youth Empowered in the Struggle](#) (YES), an arm of Voces de la Frontera, told NCR.

President Donald Trump [rescinded Barack Obama's executive order in September 2017](#) and called upon Congress to enact a legislative solution. No agreement has been reached. Ryan has in the past voiced sympathy for Dreamers but has prevented legislation that would remedy their status.

Almost all Democrats in Congress support a "clean" (single-issue) Dreamers bill that would allow DACA recipients to stay and work in the country. They have been joined by some Republicans, while others in Ryan's caucus want to use DACA to extract concessions on other immigration issues. Trump has run the gamut from public support for DACA, opposing it, or linking it to what he describes as enhanced border security, including a proposed wall on the Mexican border.

In Wisconsin, Dreamer protests might in the future include St. John Vianney Church, even though the previous protest generated pushback from some religious Dreamer supporters uncomfortable with using a church as a backdrop for a protest.

"It's on the table," said Magers. "We're trying to be creative and not make it predictable." Magers said that before becoming speaker, Ryan would meet with immigration activists. He hasn't since being elected speaker in 2015.

Ryan, a Catholic, has forged connections with Wisconsin bishops. The 2017 Al Smith Dinner in New York, was hosted by Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who formerly served as archbishop of Milwaukee. Dolan has described Ryan as "a man of deep principles and sincere Catholic faith."

Ryan's First Wisconsin District is in the Madison Diocese. Madison Bishop Robert Morlino has praised Ryan's Catholicism, including during his 2012 vice presidential run, when some Catholic activists questioned his budget votes as unfair to the poor. Ryan is "a brother in faith," Morlino said at the time.



Snowplows outside of St. John Vianney Church in Janesville, Wisconsin, Aug. 20, 2017 (Courtesy of Voces de la Frontera/Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association/Joe Brusky)

Like most other U.S. bishops, Dolan has voiced support for the Dreamers, stating in a September 2017 gathering at New York's City Hall that Trump's decision to rescind DACA was unjust. "As a pastor, I can tell you these Dreamers are not criminals, aliens ... intruders ... they are us, they are our people," he said. "To demonize them as threats or terrorists contradicts the Bible, America, New York and common decency."

Morlino joined in a statement issued by the Wisconsin Catholic bishops in support of DACA but otherwise has said little about the issue.

Before the 2017 protest at the Janesville parish, DACA supporters talked with Fr. Paul Ugo Arinze, the pastor of St. John Vianney. Magers said that Arinze, himself a Nigerian immigrant, was supportive of the Dreamers. At the church protest, held on a summer day, the church was surrounded by snowplows, placed there by police as

a security measure.

Arinze told NCR that he had spoken to Ryan, but those discussions were confidential. He said that he could not comment on the DACA issue because the Madison Diocese forbade it.

For Lira, the struggle is personal. "I want to stay in the only country I know," she said, noting that her activism began in the struggle to push Obama to create DACA. Court rulings have allowed her to renew her DACA status, which is up again in November. But she still feels anxiety, particularly when encountering police, knowing that at some point she could be deported with the help of the information she volunteered to the government in applying for the program.

Ryan could only enhance his legacy by following the lead of the U.S. bishops and allowing for the Dream Act to come to a vote, said Magers. "To exit on a clear Catholic issue, to be a champion of immigrant rights will change the public narrative of him," he said.

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