How one DACA student found his community — and voice — at Berkeley

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Ratu Orisi Lalabalavu, who goes by "Orisi," is a senior double majoring in social welfare and anthropology at UC Berkeley. (UC Berkeley photo by Brittany Hosea-Small)

Growing up in California, UC Berkeley student Ratu Orisi Lalabalavu never thought he could go to college. It wasn't something that his Fijian parents encouraged, or even thought possible.

Maybe he'd go into the military, he thought, or get a job to help his family. But not college. That was a right that U.S. citizens had, not undocumented people from low-income communities. He assumed college was one of the many things that was off limits, along with health insurance, a secure job and a stable life.

So, when his high school English teacher, whom he called Ms. T., asked him if he planned on applying to college, he said, "I can't — because I'm undocumented."

"And she told me, 'That's no reason not to apply.'"

“And I said, ‘Wait, what do you mean?’”

She explained that he could apply for DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a 2012 executive order by President Obama that would give him temporary protection from deportation and work permits.

And through a 2001 state law that allows undocumented California residents to pay in-state tuition and the 2011 California Dream Act, which allows undocumented students to apply for financial aid through the state, Lalabalavu found out that he just might be able to make college a reality.

“That night, I was shaken,” he says. “I was like, ‘Whoa, this is actually a possibility?’ I couldn’t believe it.”

Now, at 22, Lalabalavu is a senior double majoring in anthropology and social welfare at Berkeley. And he’s one of hundreds of DACA students on campus — and some 700,000 young immigrants across the country — living in limbo, after DACA was rescinded in 2017 under the Trump administration.

The University of California was the first university in the country to file suit in federal court, arguing that the Trump administration unconstitutionally violated the rights of the university and its students by ending DACA without offering any valid reason. Five lower courts reviewed and upheld UC’s position, and the ruling was blocked, so current DACA recipients, like Lalabalavu, have been able to renew their applications. No first-time applications, however, have been accepted since 2017.

From left: Meng So, the former director of Berkeley's Undocumented Student Program, Lalabalavu and Liliana Iglesias, the current director of the program. Iglesias says that without DACA, hundreds of Berkeley students would face special hardships. (UC Berkeley photo by Brittany Hosea-Small)

On Nov. 12, UC lawyers will appear before the U.S. Supreme Court to argue that the Trump administration acted capriciously and unlawfully when it rescinded DACA. Although the opening oral arguments are taking place this month, there will not be a decision until spring 2020.

If the Supreme Court votes to end DACA, it would present a special hardship to students, says Liliana Iglesias, director of Berkeley's Undocumented Student Program, which serves the campus's nearly 500 undocumented students.

Without DACA, she says, students would lose their work-study status, leaving big holes in their financial aid packages. And, the possibility of losing DACA has many undocumented students wondering what their next steps should be in their education.

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"With DACA up in the air, I've had students ask, 'If DACA ends, how will I finance my education without being able to work?'" says Iglesias. "Or, 'What will I do after I graduate if I can't use my degree?' 'Should I stop going to school and work as much as I can now, to

support my family?'

"So, we are working with students to meet them where they're at, to help prepare in the short term because policy and circumstances can frequently change in the long run."

"I think our students have been living with uncertainty for a good period of their lives," adds Meng So, former director of the Undocumented Student Program who now directs the Access and Opportunity Programs on campus. "I think the questions in front of the Supreme Court don't just end at legality. They extend to our concept of humanity, and who we are as a country — and who we want to be. We have an intergenerational responsibility to be beacons of belonging and possibility. We're here for our undocumented students. We're not going anywhere."

Lalabalavu says that, for him, it's a chance to step up and be an outspoken advocate for his community.

"Being undocumented is a part of my identity," he says. "It's something I've tried to run away from in the past, but I've learned that it's not something to be afraid of. This is a chance for me to not only give back, but also to create space for those who come after. So, why shouldn't I?"

It's a bold statement coming from someone who learned, as a young child, to stay quiet — that if he said too much, it could put his family in danger.

Leaving family in Fiji for a new life in California

As a young child in Fiji, Lalabalavu was never alone.

"I was always surrounded by family," he says. "We shared everything. In a Pacific Islander community, nothing is yours."

If he went to McDonald's for a Happy Meal, he'd have to eat it all right there. If he took anything to go and ran into a relative on his walk home, the leftovers would be gone in minutes. Lalabalavu also knew that whenever he needed anything — a ride somewhere or help with school — someone would always there, ready to help.

"I think growing up with that perspective really humbled me," says Lalabalavu. "In Western culture, it's easy to get caught up in, 'Oh, it's just me.' We forget about how so many people put their love into us."

Making a living in Fiji, however, wasn't easy. With a lot of family members to support and few career opportunities, not to mention a poor school system, Lalabalavu's parents decided to immigrate to the United States to see if they could build a better life.

But they didn't plan on bringing Lalabalavu.

He was too young to make the move, they thought, at just 4 years old. They decided that they would take their two older children with them, and that Lalabalavu would stay behind with relatives in Fiji. They didn't have enough money to bring all three of their children.

Lalabalavu, at age 4, right after he moved with his family from Fiji to California. (Photo courtesy of Ratu Orisi Lalabalavu)

In 2000, Lalabalavu's family — plus all his aunts, uncles and cousins — drove to the airport. They went to McDonald's and got one last meal together. Lalabalavu was joking around, while the rest of the family quietly ate.

That's when Lalabalavu's brother, Peceli, then 18, did something Lalabalavu will always be grateful for: He gave him his airline ticket to California.

"I didn't realize what he was doing at the time," says Lalabalavu. "I was just wiping away his tears, telling him not to cry."

Peceli decided to stay back in Fiji, where he still lives today and, instead, give his little brother the chance to make a life in the U.S.

"It's a sacrifice that I'll always be grateful for," says Lalabalavu. "It's why I try not to waste opportunities I've been given. My family has sacrificed so much for me. It's such a privilege."

The family settled in East San Jose, California, where they lived with 12 relatives in a small two-bedroom apartment. Lalabalvu's parents worked long hours — his dad as a security guard and his mom as an in-home caregiver at a nursing facility. That left Lalabalavu and his sister, Asinate, on their own a lot.

Starting when Lalabalavu was in first grade, his sister, who was four years older, would wake him up, make breakfast and walk him to school. When other kids would cry when their parents dropped them off, reaching for them to stay, Lalabalavu would wave goodbye to his 10-year-old sister.

Lalabalavu, 5, poses with his sister, Asinate, 9, in San Jose. (Photo courtesy of Ratu Orisi Lalabalavu)

Unlike his sister, who was quiet and reserved, Lalabalavu would talk to anyone. “My parents were always scared to leave me alone because I would talk to random strangers, asking them questions,” he says.

His parents worried that if he said the wrong thing to the wrong person, it could put them all in danger of being deported.

Lalabalavu quickly learned what he could and couldn’t talk about. Church and everyday things were OK. But stuff about his family’s personal life — that he and his sister were alone most of the time, that they didn’t have health insurance or anything about their immigration status — was off limits.

When Lalabalavu was in middle school, his family moved to Sacramento, where his dad became a pastor and started a church. Although helping at the church seemed like another chore to Lalabalavu at the time, he now realizes it was a precious opportunity for his family to be together.

“As a kid, it was just another day,” he says. “I didn’t run my schedule; my parents did. But looking back, it means so much that we had that time together.”

In high school, Lalabalavu struggled to find a place he fit in. Without health insurance, he couldn’t play sports, like his U.S.-born cousins. “It was part of the identity that Pacific Islanders held — that playing sports is how we made it,” he says. “I was frustrated that I couldn’t fit that mold.”

Then, in 10th grade, Lalabalavu met Ms. T., and everything changed. “She became my second mom,” he says. “She was the first person who believed in me.”

Lalabalavu's high school English teacher, Ms. T., stands on Berkeley's Sproul Plaza during a campus visit with Lalabalavu in 2015. "She became my second mom," says Lalabalavu. "She was the first person who believed in me." (Photo courtesy of Ratu Orisi Lalabalavu)

When Ms. T. learned that Lalabalavu was living by himself — his sister was away at community college by then, and his dad lived in San Jose during the week — she decided to give him extra support. She turned her classroom into a safe haven — a place where he and 11 other students would come during breaks or after class when they needed somewhere to go. She would tutor them, feed them dinner, even throw movie parties for them.

"She was basically taking all these kids from the 'hood and having them help out in the classroom, trying to help us, feeding us, even though we were ungrateful," he laughs. "They became my band of family."

When Ms. T. told Lalabalavu that he was eligible for college, he applied to a long list of California universities — including all of the UCs. But when he got into Berkeley, he and Ms. T. were surprised. He had applied on a whim, and neither of them thought that he would be accepted. Nevertheless, Ms. T. said they should visit to see if he liked it.

So, in 2015, the two went to Cal Day, the campus's annual open house. It was there that Lalabalavu first met Meng So, then the director of Berkeley's Undocumented Student Program, who would become Lalabalavu's biggest supporter on campus as he struggled with self-acceptance, his health and what Lalabalvu calls his "death experience" — a moment that would snap his life into focus in a way that nothing else had.

Lalabalavu says that when he came to Berkeley in 2015, So became his biggest supporter. “Whenever I had a question, I would go to Meng first,” he says. (UC Berkeley photo by Brittany Hosea-Small)

Finding his footing at Berkeley

When Lalabalavu came to Berkeley at 17, he felt out of place, like he didn’t belong. Being undocumented and one of less than a dozen other Pacific Islander students admitted in fall 2015, making up about 0.01% of the student population, he didn’t see how he could thrive in higher education.

“I was the outlier of the outliers, a minority within the minorities,” says Lalabalavu. “I used to go around and pity myself, like, ‘This is horrible.’”

But, remembering his brother’s sacrifice, Lalabalavu began to realize he had been given opportunities that he’d never had before, and that it was his responsibility not to waste them.

First, he had the Undocumented Student Program, which is dedicated to supporting a student’s immigration identity and the complex issues that come with it. With DACA, Lalabalavu was protected from being deported and could work on and off campus, making money to support his education and life in the Bay Area. He had medical and dental insurance. And he could take classes that challenged him, that taught him how to take a deeper look at the sociocultural reasons for why he was the way he was — and to appreciate the unique perspective he brings to every situation.

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> Being undocumented is part of my identity … This is a chance for me to not only give back, but also to create a space for those who come after.

“Sociocultural anthropology really opened my mind,” says Lalabalavu. “Coming to Berkeley, I didn’t like my Pacific Islander identity or my undocumented identity. Those were two identities I hated. But, learning about how these identities that I’ve been trying to run from for the majority of my life have shaped the way I look at life, without my realizing it, has given me a sense of gratitude.”

While Lalabalavu enjoyed his classes, he couldn’t focus and often felt exhausted, even though he was getting eight hours of sleep a night. He worried that his professors thought he was just being lazy.

“I was like, ‘I’m so sorry, I just can’t stay awake,’” he says.

Then, he talked to So, who referred him to the Tang Center to be tested for sleep apnea. It’s something Lalabalavu had been told he’d had throughout his life, but he hadn’t been able or willing to get tested for it until then.

When Lalabalavu got back his test results, he was shocked.

“I found out that I had died in my sleep,” he said. “My heart had stopped beating for several minutes.”

It was at that moment that Lalabalavu decided to turn his life around. It meant not only exploring and mending his physical ailments, but also embracing what had been holding him back emotionally and spiritually.

Lalabalavu got a sleep apnea machine, then went back to Tang, where he tested positive for ADHD and got medication to treat it. He started eating healthier and lost 100 pounds. And he began to embrace his Pacific Islander and undocumented identities, which he had always seen as weaknesses instead of strengths, as he sees them as today.

Lalabalavu and K.L. Parker, a senior majoring in anthropology, are co-founders of the student-run Pacific Islander Initiative on campus, along with Thomas Mangloña (not pictured). (UC Berkeley photo by Brittany Hosea-Small)

To create a community of Pacific Islanders on campus, he and two other students, K.L. Parker and Thomas Mangloña, started the student-run Pacific Islander Initiative at Berkeley that now has 22 members and one half-time staff member.

And he's stepped into the spotlight with his undocumented community — something he could never have imagined doing as a new student four years ago.

So says it's been incredible watching Lalabalavu's transformation over the past four years.

"Orisi has been reimagining his understanding of his immigration identity — how it has been a source of pain and trauma, but also a source of strength and connection and togetherness," says So. "It's really a reflection of his own inner light. It's been transformative, not only for him, but also for his larger community."

Lalabalavu says his experiences — the good and the bad — have made him who he is. Without them, he adds, he wouldn't be able to work with youth with the deep level of understanding and empathy that he brings to his work today.

Lalabalavu is taking a class this semester called Intro to Social Work Practice, taught by field faculty member Denicia Carlay. (UC Berkeley photo by Brittany Hosea-Small)

The power of mentorship

Now in his fifth year at Berkeley, Lalabalavu has dedicated himself to helping others. Without mentors in his life, he says, he would never be where he is today.

“I’ve been blessed with having had so many people invest in me,” he says. “Now, it’s my turn to give back.”

He works as a program coordinator at Margot’s Community Center in Oakland, where first-generation, low-income and system-impacted youth and young adults ages 15 to 24 learn entry-level automotive skills, plus job readiness and life preparedness.

At the center, where he leads rehabilitation circles, creates workshops and connects youth with community resources, Lalabalavu says it’s important that he meets everyone where they’re at, never assuming he knows what’s best for them.

“I basically help them talk about their trauma,” says Lalabalavu. “They talk about how their experiences have shaped their life views. They teach me how to really emphasize their needs and concerns, so they feel ready to go out into the world.”

This semester, Lalabalavu is taking a class called Intro to Social Work Practice, taught by field faculty member Denicia Carlay. The class teaches students how to understand all the different layers of being a social worker, and what it means to impart social justice and equity in the neighborhoods and communities that they'd be working in after they graduate. Lalabalavu says the class has helped him apply theory and his personal experiences to his work with youth.

Lalabalavu and members of his church dressed up like superheroes and threw a Halloween party for elementary school kids this year. (Photo courtesy of Ratu Orisi Lalabalavu)

"I really appreciate students like Orisi," says Carlay. "He came into the class with so much lived experience. He's already in the community, doing the work. S ometimes the students don't recognize how much knowledge they have. This class helps put into words the tangible skillset they already have, then translates it into best practice."

Lalabalavu is also part of a church in Alameda, Gracepoint Ministries, where he and his congregation organize community events for Oakland elementary school students. For Halloween, they dressed up like superheroes — Lalabalavu was the Incredible Hulk — and threw a party at the church. And for Christmas, they're teaching kids a dance that they'll perform for their parents during the holidays.

Without DACA, says Lalabalavu, he would miss working with the youth at Margot's Community Center. It hasn't been easy living with not knowing if and when DACA will end. But, he says, he's ready to be an advocate in solidarity with his community.

"I've been running away, thinking I don't need to be an advocate alongside them," says Lalabalavu. "But I want to be there when my community needs me. They're part of my family, and you don't leave family behind."

Lalabalavu says after years of running from his undocumented identity, he's ready to step into the spotlight with his community and be an advocate alongside them. (UC Berkeley photo by Brittany Hosea-Small)