T
he road less taken has, sadly, not many takers.
All the more reason to champion Allegra Love,
creator of the Santa Fe Dreamers Project.
Charismatic, full of life, with energy to spare, she arrived
in Santa Fe 12 years ago, a recent college graduate, eager
to join the other teachers in their bilingual, bicultural
Southside elementary school. She was that rare kind of
teacher whose love not only reached out and embraced
her kids, but their whole families, as well. Over the next
three years, she watched with increasing heartbreak as
numbers of immigrant families, many undocumented,
struggled to work and put down roots while being
dangerously vulnerable to deportation. Feeling the fear
haunting her 8-year-olds, Allegra felt hamstrung. She
was just a teacher—how could she help?
Feeling ineffectual galvanized her into taking the LSAT exam and
entering the University of New Mexico’s law school. This had never
previously been her plan. But like Jimmy Stewart’s
character in Mr. Smith Goes To Washington, helping
those less fortunate stand up for themselves is who
Allegra is. Throughout the
three-year program, she
pursued immigration law
with focus. Afterward, she
refused the law firm track,
even as her professors said
she needed that experience.
Without a next step, she
suddenly got word from the
teachers at her old school
about an opening for a
sixth grade teacher. This
felt right, even though to everyone else, “that seemed like a fail.” But out of that, Santa Fe Public Schools’
Adelante Program hired her as their lawyer, where she worked with students who were applying for Deferred
Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Those were the Dreamers, and this became the impetus for the
creation of her nonprofit a few years later.
All the legal services offered by the Santa Fe Dreamers Project are free of charge. Since 2015, the number
of deferred-action filings that Allegra and her staff have overseen has broken 1,000, which is quite a feat.
The staff also represents immigrants facing deportation; they regularly visit a family detention center; they
conduct two weekly DACA clinics. And recently, Allegra expanded their legal service outreach with Dreams
on Wheels, a mobile office establishing a presence throughout rural areas, giving undocumented residents all
over New Mexico access to that safety net.
Of course, now it’s all changed. “What we do was so much clearer before,” Allegra says. “We were able
to design our services to each individual. A DACA student from Capitol High could have resources designed
specifically for him—high school graduation, a job, degrees, economic stability. We could make sure a
woman could leave an abusive relationship because now she has economic independence so she can move the

“The most unrealistic person in the world is the
cynic, not the dreamer.”

-Paul Hawken
dial out of poverty, buy a home.” She pauses. “I always pictured myself behind my immigration client, pushing them forward. Now I’m standing between them and the government. We’re back to square one, in a way. Too many immigrants are being criminalized, when the real story is they are incredibly resourceful and talented.”

In the Dreamers Stories video on the nonprofit’s website, four students brought here from Mexico as young children describe the difference that DACA has made for them. “An undocumented immigrant means… wage theft, doing jobs that don’t necessarily pay what they’re supposed to pay,” says one 21-year-old. “A lot of these families are low-income. They’re people of color; they’re taken advantage of and discriminated against.” Matter-of-factly she relays how hopeless she felt after graduating from high school, with so many doors closed to her—college, work, getting a social security card, even getting a loan. Taking the only opportunity open to her, she’d almost completed her associate’s degree at the community college when she learned about DACA. After qualifying, she says of her life, “It was almost like some internal fear was gone. It was like peace.” Her voice breaks. “I was able to apply my associate’s to a bachelor’s degree and work at something I actually wanted to do!” As a result, although “the thought had never before entered my mind,” she says, “I’m thinking of becoming a doctor before the age of 30.”

With guidance from the SF Dreamers staff, “DACA gives us an opportunity to start shifting the status of the kids in the community,” Allegra says. “In Santa Fe, there’s a 60-percent graduation rate; the Dreamers I worked with had a 90-percent graduation rate! Maybe these kids aren’t at-risk at all. Maybe they just didn’t have the right tools.”

In her March 28 blog post, Allegra quotes someone who wrote on her Facebook page, “I totally stand with immigrants, just not the illegal ones. If they want to be here, they have every opportunity to do it the right way.” With exquisite patience, Allegra explains the process of legalization. Just “getting in line,” she says, is not the way it works. There are two ways to become a legal resident. The employment way is one very few immigrants qualify for—“it’s an extraordinarily long and complicated process that rewards people who have degrees, technical skills and cash,” along with requiring “an employer to petition for the foreign worker.” The family way requires a child, parent, spouse or sibling who’s already a U.S. citizen. The majority of people have no blood relatives here and so, for them, “there is no choice but to do it legally.”

And even for those with an actual blood relative, there are confusing hoops...
LIVING IN EPIC TIMES

Dreamers to jump, including length of wait. “Two U.S. citizen parents, for example, want to petition for their daughter from El Salvador, . . . the most violent country in the world.” The daughter’s wait is seven years. “Contemplate seven years if your daughter was living in a country where women are raped and left in dumpsters.”

Acknowledging that breaking the law is a moral choice, Allegra writes, “We have 65 million displaced people in the world right now. These are rational people. Wars and regimes and economic and environmental disasters have made staying in certain places intolerable and even impossible. Perhaps they can wait six months or a year or two—but decades for the chance to move legally? . . . Most [Americans] know nothing of the conditions that cause a person to abandon home and country and family and history and all that they know and love.”

Immigration is a broken system in which “the right way is complicated and the wrong way sometimes is the only feasible way to feed your family or keep yourself alive or to have a chance at the kind of life so many of us take for granted every second we are alive in this country.”

The new policy for arrest, detention and removal is tricky. It involves people who’ve violated US immigration laws and don’t have permission to be here. “The policy could very well be immoral, inhumane and stupid, but it isn’t illegal under the current structure of our immigration laws. This is meaningful because it doesn’t leave someone like me with a legal toolbox to stop it.” It’s also, Allegra adds, a colossal waste. “I can help someone learn how to survive a law enforcement encounter but I want them to focus on that degree. Be your best! That’s going to be the brave act that’s going to eventually change policy in the U.S. It’s the Dreamers!”

For Allegra, the significance of Santa Fe’s official sanctuary status is that it disrupts federal law enforcement at the local level. “But in my view, the truest form of sanctuary is when a family has the freedom to work and to be essential to a community or an economy.” None of us, she says, is safe from the impact we’ll see when these removal policies gain traction “and our immigrant community becomes intimidated, silenced or disappeared.”

What can we do to help? Paying $200 toward someone’s legal services qualifying them for DACA “could give them far greater economic capacity than the initial $200 in hand would have done. This gives the person the ability to go to college, to save money, to get their children off food stamps, to have a job with benefits, to work without fear in a career that impacts the community.” For those of us with white privilege, this is the chance “to be a little bit courageous, to use creative imagination” for ways to employ it. Why wouldn’t a mother, Allegra asks, identify on a personal level with immigrant mothers as she watches their babies being taken from them? “It’s the most primal thing.” The deportation policy, she says, “is an assault on motherhood.”

We can also, she adds, “promote the incredible stories that immigrants are creating with their lives.” Following her own advice, Allegra posted not long ago on Facebook: “My job has been bumming me out lately but today I went and ran out legal clinic. I am the opposite of bummed out now. Dreamers are so awesome. We did about 50 consultations today. . . . It was all a much needed reminder of what this incredible group of young folks is accomplishing and how essential they are to the town I love! It also reminded me to have courage.”

For more insight into the Santa Fe Dreamers Project go to santafeDreamersProject.org