



# A Journalist Discloses His (Legal) Status

June 22, 2011 By [Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.](#)

---

In an [exceptional article](#) to be published in *The New York Times Magazine*, Jose Antonio Vargas comes out twice--as gay and as an undocumented immigrant.

The renowned journalist won a Pulitzer Prize as part of a team of reporters at *The Washington Post* covering the Virginia Tech shootings and wrote a series of articles for that newspaper on the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Washington, DC, which were the basis for the documentary *The Other City*.

He made numerous appearances at screenings to support *The Other City*. [Click here](#) to watch Vargas at one of those screenings and to watch producer Sheila Johnson discuss the making of the documentary.

In 1993 at the age of 12, his mother sent him from the Philippines to live with her parents in San Francisco, who were here legally. Not until he was 16 years old did Vargas find out that he was here illegally.

Vargas says he was inspired to disclose his legal status now by four students who walked from Miami to Washington to lobby for the Dream Act, which would give undocumented young people who have been educated in this country a path to legal permanent residency.

Here's Vargas in his own words:

*On the surface, I've created a good life. I've lived the American dream. But I am still an undocumented immigrant. And that means living a different kind of reality. It means going about my day in fear of being found out ... This is my home. Yet even though I think of myself as an American and consider America my*

*country, my country doesn't think of me as one of its own.*

His sexual orientation complicated things:

*My history class watched a documentary on Harvey Milk, the openly gay San Francisco city official who was assassinated. This was 1999, just six months after Matthew Shepard's body was found tied to a fence in Wyoming. During the discussion, I raised my hand and said something like: "I'm sorry Harvey Milk got killed for being gay. . . . I've been meaning to say this. . . . I'm gay."*

*I hadn't planned on coming out that morning, though I had known that I was gay for several years. With that announcement, I became the only openly gay student at school, and it caused turmoil with my grandparents.*

*Lolo kicked me out of the house for a few weeks. Though we eventually reconciled, I had disappointed him on two fronts. First, as a Catholic, he considered homosexuality a sin and was embarrassed about having*

*"ang apo na bakla" ("a grandson who is gay"). Even worse, I was making matters more difficult for myself, he said. I needed to marry an American woman in order to gain a green card.*

*Tough as it was, coming out about being gay seemed less daunting than coming out about my legal status. I kept my other secret mostly hidden.*

That last sentence should be a revelation to all who read it. Coming out about his legal status was more of a burden to him than coming out about being gay.

Such is the stigma of being undocumented. I felt the same way about [coming out](#) about my HIV-positive status, which was much more difficult for me than coming out about being gay.

I was born in the United States and he wasn't, but here we both are, proudly American. Neither of us had a choice in being born here or coming here. Why should either of us be denied the challenges and opportunities of living in the United States?

Regardless of where you stand on the issue of undocumented immigrants, I can't understand why anyone would stand in the way of the Dream Act.

Vargas may yet face serious consequences for his disclosure, but I'm sure he believes the price of lifting such a heavy burden from his shoulders will be worth it.

*Watch an excerpt from his interview with ABC News:*

In furthering the national conversation about immigration reform, Vargas has launched a new website. Go to [DefineAmerican.org](http://DefineAmerican.org) for more details.