

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

ASPEN IDEAS FESTIVAL WELCOME AND CONVERSATIONS

JOSE ANTONIO VARGAS

Aspen

Sunday, June 26, 2016

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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JOSE ANTONIO VARGAS

MR. VARGAS: Hi. My name is Jose Antonio Vargas. I'm the founder of both Emerging US and Define American. And my big idea is actually also a favor. I need all of you to come out.

Let me explain. I've come out twice in my life. The first time was 1999. I was a high school junior and I was in the closet about two things. I knew that I was here illegally and I knew that I was gay. I had to come out one of the closets. So thankfully my history teacher showed us *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, the documentary. And after the film was shown, I raised my hand and told all my classmates I'm gay.

So that was the first coming out. But the fact is the coming out of LGBT people changed the culture in which we understood gay lives in this country. But it's not just LGBT people who need it and needs to come out. It's straight people, right?

Remember the fact that for many years the number one show in network television was *Will & Grace*. For every Will there's a Grace, right? And that kind of cultural shift led to the political shift that exactly a year ago today was the victory of same sex marriage in the Supreme Court -- exactly a year ago today.

(Applause)

MR. VARGAS: And that is the kind of cultural shift that is much needed in the way we talk about immigration in this country. I'm one of the millions of undocumented immigrants who have benefited from President Obama's executive order on immigration. That executive order would have allowed me to travel outside of the U.S. for the first time in my adult life and to see a mother who I haven't seen since I was 12. So I haven't seen her for 23 years.

But last Thursday the Supreme Court announced a split decision, which was really a non-decision, which meant that millions of us are still in limbo. Five years

ago this month I came out for the second time and that time as an undocumented immigrant. Since I'm not one of the 2 million immigrants that President Obama has deported, I've been keeping busy. I've been traveling around the country engaging Republicans, Democrats, Donald Trump supporters, asking them a really important question, which is: how do you define American? Is it laws -- the same law that happened when we banned Germans and Italians to this country? Is it pieces of papers? Is my being a citizen actually relegated to a piece of paper that I don't have?

And so the bigger question is: why can't we fully come out collectively about the root causes of migration? Why do we put a sign out to the U.S.-Mexico border saying "keeping out," and then 10 yards in what do we say, "job wanted," right?

I need collectively for all of us to come out and be real and be honest about these issues. I mean, you know, over here, you know, we're paying taxes and social security. We know that we mow your lawns and babysit your kids and serve you drinks. You know that we actually go to the same colleges that you do and worship at the same churches that you do. And I'm actually one of the many undocumented business owners. I have an idea for you Mr. Bradley (phonetic). And undocumented people can actually be a business owner.

Now, here is the question: will you help change the culture in which we understand immigration? In this election which American identity itself is at stake, how do you define American? And lastly, will you come out with us and support us? Thank you for having me.

(Applause)

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