

Dear Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee of Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Ruth Fortune, I am a Financial Advisor at Merrill Lynch, a law student at UConn Law School, a resident of Hartford and soon to be a naturalized American. I am a former undocumented immigrant and I stand in support of SB 147.

I worked on President Obama's reelection campaign in Des Moines, IA in 2012. The best training I received as a campaign staffer was on how to effectively tell my story and how to ask for what I want. Today, I hope to tell you a bit more about me and why others like me would greatly benefit from SB 147. In other words, please vote in favor of SB 147!

I spent the first twelve years of my life in Pétion-Ville, a suburb on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, Haiti before my parents gave up their jobs and moved our family to the U.S. In Haiti, we were comfortably middle class. My brother and I attended private Catholic schools and always had birthday parties. Yet being middle class in Haiti meant having electricity unpredictably and only a few hours a day. We ate fresh meat on Sundays but more affordable dried salted codfish, called "morue", the rest of the week. Our two bedroom house did not have indoor plumbing or running water.

My family left Haiti in 2000. We came to the U.S. as tourists and became undocumented immigrants in search of a better future. When we first arrived, eight of us, including my parents and brother, shared one bedroom in my aunt's house. But the house had indoor plumbing, running water and even more importantly, access to the U.S. school system.

I was never able to define specifically what my parents meant by a better future. But I knew it necessarily involved getting an education. My mother always told me my inheritance will be the education that she will allow me to acquire. Even before I started working in wealth management at Merrill Lynch, it resonated with me deeply. I watch how hard my mother works. In her current job at a local meatpacking company, she starts at three in the afternoon and ends whenever they run out of work – six, eight or twelve hours later. She wears a thick full body onesie, provided by the company to keep warm since the space is refrigerated, and stands the entire time, except during her unpaid thirty-minute lunch break.

My family gave up everything so my brother and I can have a better future. Six years after moving to the U.S., I graduated as salutatorian of my high school class in Westbury, NY and enrolled in college at Baruch College in Manhattan, NY. The first day of college for me, a young undocumented immigrant, was not the beginning of a rite of passage like it is for so many, but the beginning of a journey that no one in my family had ever embarked on. It was also a huge leap of faith, but I was determined to have the all American college experience. I had enough money for my first semester of college tuition (which at the time was only \$2,160 a semester) and enough for the first four months of rent for my \$350 sublet. I moved my twin size bed, desk, chair and other personal belongings in the church van the day before freshman orientation. Most of the tuition and rent money came from private scholarships from local businesses and organizations in Long Island, NY which I received it primarily because I was class salutatorian. My mom's coworker and the doctor whose house my mom cleaned also gave me some money. I had 0 access to financial aid – federal or state – and also could not apply for student loans. I looked at a lot of scholarships – one eligibility requirement was often having legal status, which I certainly did not have. I was accepted at some other colleges and universities contingent upon my ability to pay the full tuition out-of-pocket since I could not get any financial aid. Baruch College was my most affordable option.

I made it through college because I was able to pay in-state tuition rate and frankly because I lucked out by getting a good waitressing job during college that allowed me to pay my \$4,000 annual in-state tuition out-of-pocket. Luck and good fortune are not a sound basis for policy or success. SB 147 would ensure a level playing field for institutional financial aid.

I was not the only undocumented student from my high school class in NY. Many CT high schools are graduating very smart, ambitious and determined undocumented students. CT and the US are losing when those bright students can't continue their education.

As a young immigrant, professional and law student, the value of education has only appreciated in my eyes. There's simply no substitute for it. It is the only means through which I was able to turn my hopes for a better future into a reality. SB 147 would take us one step closer by equalizing access to institutional financial aid at Connecticut public universities and colleges to all students regardless of immigration status. Many bright and promising young CT residents who are undocumented will benefit from SB 147.

Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to be heard. I support SB 147 and urge you to vote favorably on SB 147.

Kindly,  
Ruth Fortune  
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