

# **Testimony of Laurens van Beek**

**Software Developer, Integrated DNA Technologies**

**Graduate of The University of Iowa, Class of 2019**

**Member of Improve The Dream**

**Before the Senate Budget Committee**

**“Unlocking America's Potential:**

**How Immigration Fuels Economic Growth and Our Competitive Advantage”**

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Chairman Whitehouse, Ranking Member Grassley, Senator Padilla and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my story. My name is Laurens van Beek. I am a software developer with an Iowa based international company, a University of Iowa graduate and lifelong Iowan. I am also a member of Improve The Dream: one of over 250,000 young immigrants, who face constant barriers in our legal immigration system that forces young people who were brought here legally, who were raised and educated here, to leave the country after turning 21.

I am visiting today from Belgium, as I have already been forced out of my home of nearly two decades. Despite going to great lengths to follow every letter of U.S. immigration law, my ability to build a future in the only country I call home is obscured in red tape. And it has happened both as a child who grew up in this country lawfully and also as an adult trying to navigate the employment based immigration system.

I was born in the Netherlands, and when I was 7 years old, in 2005, I moved to the United States with my parents after rising crime in our area made them decide that the United States would give us a better chance at a safer life. When we moved, Iowa was our desired destination as we'd been visiting there almost annually for fishing trips since I was born and long before. We also

had deep roots in Iowa, with my family history in Iowa dating back to shortly after World War II, when my grandmother, at age 16, started a correspondence with students attending a small farm school in Iowa City, sending Christmas packages across Europe in the aftermath of World War II. This connection grew and when my father and his siblings were born they were named after people she wrote. Later when I was born I was also named after one of those people, who I always referred to as Grandpa Bud. We maintained correspondence with the family ever since, with both my father and my uncle making visits to Iowa to help work on their farm as teenagers. The connection that my grandmother forged with the local community was so apparent that she was invited back to Iowa City on September 9, 1997, when the mayor dedicated the day as “Leny van Beek Day” in her honor.

When we settled in Iowa, my dad got the opportunity to start his own small jewelry business in North Liberty. He poured love into each piece of jewelry he handcrafted and formed a bond with the local community. Having grown up watching my parents provide a service and become welcomed members of the Iowa City community made me know that that is where I wanted to stay.

Growing up on Grandpa Bud’s farm, I have fond memories of feeding horses, riding through the corn fields on a four wheeler, picking sweet corn, and attending the Johnson County Fair with my family.

I attended Mark Twain Elementary, where I was a crossing guard, having to make sure to take down and put up the American flag every afternoon and morning with the respect and care it deserves. I was a boy scout when I attended South East Junior High. Then later at Iowa City High School, I represented my school for several years at the annual Iowa Model United Nations conferences in Cedar Falls as well as assisting with the stage design and construction for the school musicals and plays.

When it came time to choose where I would want to go to college, I knew the answer long before I needed to: The University of Iowa. While at the University of Iowa I got my Bachelor’s degree in Computer Science and a minor in Art History. During this time, I also immersed myself in the

typical American campus life activities and student organizations, including being President of one of the largest organizations on campus specializing in video game development and animation.

It was during this time that my first direct hurdle in my immigration status became apparent. To be able to graduate, I would need to switch from my status as a dependent on my parents' E2 small business visa to my own F1 International student visa. This is because the visa status my parents have in the United States allows them to operate a small business, hire American employees, and continuously renew their status, but it does not have an attainable pathway to permanent residence or citizenship. So because they were unable to obtain a green card by the time I turned 21, I aged out and had to find my own way to stay. Causing all of the years I had spent growing up in this country to be rendered useless by our immigration laws and I was treated like a brand new immigrant, a brand new international student coming here for the first time.

When my parents decided to come to the country, they believed their temporary, but renewable status would certainly lead to permanent status by the time I turned 21. They could never have imagined that America's immigration laws would allow them to lawfully build permanent lives in their local communities while forcing their son to face challenges to continue staying in the country as an adult.

After my time at the University of Iowa, I began working full time for Integrated DNA Technologies in Coralville, Iowa under my F1 OPT status, which allows international students to gain work experience. I worked directly on the software which aided the company in the production of DNA assays with a WIDE range of uses including those used during the height of the COVID pandemic which helped save many lives as well as many other applications including medical research.

While on my OPT status, which was available to me for 3 years only due to my STEM degree, my employer attempted to secure a high skilled work visa (H-1B), which was the only attainable employment based visa program that existed for me to continue staying after the expiration of

my OPT. Unfortunately, the odds were not in my favor and I was unable to win the work visa lottery in 3 attempts.

Despite my accomplishments and my deep ties to my community in Iowa, I was one of the thousands of STEM professionals who were not selected by this random lottery. This meant that when my OPT expired in July 2022, I had to self deport or risk being in the United States with an expired status. This meant having to sell my car, condense a lot of my life down to just two suitcases, leave my friends, coworkers, community and family behind to leave the country that I love and go back to the Netherlands, a place I had not even visited in the 17 years since leaving. It was not my home. On July 6th, 2022, I saw the turmoil weigh on our family as it was split apart when my parents waved me, their only child, off at the airport.

I told my dad that I am going to make the best of the situation. However, deep down I knew that things could never be the same. It felt as if my life had turned upside down and started over.

Two months after I was forced to leave, my father was diagnosed with kidney cancer. I felt disheartened that I could not be with him in the time he needed me the most. Imagine being their only son and not being able to be there for your parents when they have dedicated their entire life for the betterment of your American Dream.

Due to other barriers in our immigration laws restricting travel, my mother was not able to attend her mother's funeral in the Netherlands in August 2022. Luckily I was able to attend my grandmother's funeral and hold the camera for my mother to still be there digitally. This is a fear that my father has had to deal with too, as his mother is now 93 years old. My parents have been U.S. residents for 18 years, have done everything lawfully, and still face neverending uncertainty with their visas and ability to stay. I was forced to self-deport, and I spent my paternal grandmother's birthday with her in December, but that was the first birthday that I'd gotten to spend physically with her since I was 7 years old. The U.S. immigration laws have separated my family in many ways, even though, again, we have done nothing wrong.

Throughout all of this, my employer is still actively working on avenues to be able to bring me back to the United States permanently. That is where I want to be, and that's where my employer wants me to be. But the fact that I am coming here today from Belgium demonstrates that our system has failed. It failed me, my family, my community, my employer, and the United States. It failed the United States because the taxpayer investment into my elementary through high school education went down the drain by allowing my taxes to go to another country. I still do the same work but earn a salary, pay taxes, and spend my money in Belgium now. And I can't see my family and my true home (Iowa) nearly enough. This is not what the Founders intended for America to be. I am an American who wants to stay in America and contribute to America, not any other country.

My story isn't unique to me, every year another 10,000 individuals like me, who grow up in this country with lawful status are forced to leave. We are America's children. On top of this, thousands of other talented individuals are forced to take their talents and potential to other countries, who are happily welcoming them to grow their economy.

Roughly 90 percent of us who are aging out of their dependent status are pursuing degrees in STEM.<sup>1</sup> Many of these people in my situation achieve remarkable things at an early age. For example, in 2016, 30 of the 40 finalists in the Intel Science Talent search--the leading science competition for high schoolers--were children of long term visa holders.<sup>2</sup>

But oftentimes these achievements aren't enough to spare us from self deportation, and staying in the country that raised us literally becomes a gamble as we try to find an employer to sponsor us for the high skilled work visa lottery. Last year, only 15 percent of lottery applicants were selected.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Improve The Dream, "Improve The Dream survey," 2023, available at [ImproveTheDream.org](https://www.improvethe-dream.org/).

<sup>2</sup> National Foundation for American Policy, "The Contributions of The Children of Immigrants to Science in America," 2017, available at <https://nfap.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Children-of-Immigrants-in-Science.NFAP-Policy-Brief.March-2017.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> USCIS, "H-1B Electronic Registration Process," 2023, available at <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/temporary-workers/h-1b-specialty-occupations-and-fashion-models/h-1b-electronic-registration-process#:~:text=For%20FY%202021%2C%20we%20received,volume%20from%20the%20initial%20selection>

My family has spent \$130,000 since 2005 on visa renewals and lawyers. My family has employed more than 30 Americans in their time in America. Regardless of what they do to stay lawfully and obtain permanence, constantly they have run into red tape.

Because our immigration system is so bureaucratic and complex, my parents didn't foresee this situation happening when they decided to move to America. And with more of us aging out, countless immigrants who work in health care, have started businesses, and work across professions that American communities rely on are considering leaving their careers in America behind to accompany their children back to their country of birth. According to a survey of over 1,000 engineers, medical specialists, and other professionals on work visas cited their aging out children as a reason why they're considering leaving the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

And as countries like Canada streamline their systems to attract new foreign talent, America can't even retain the thousands of kids it raised and educated. This is a blow to U.S. competitiveness, given that roughly 87% of us have specialized in critical STEM and healthcare fields including biomedical engineering and artificial intelligence.

Last year, in my home state of Iowa, a lung doctor who had lived here since 2006 left his job for a company in India because his daughter was at risk of self deporting. Because of this senseless gap in our system, he was forced to do what he thought was best for his daughter and leave his job and community behind, disrupting the lives of thousands of Iowans who depended on him for care. Two years ago, a nursing graduate was forced to self deport from Florida in the height of the pandemic, because she aged out and her hospital was unable to successfully navigate our immigration system. Her family left their communities and small business of two decades to move back to England with her. Thousands of other families will be forced to leave their communities behind if Congress fails to fix this loophole in our system. One of them could be Merry Joseph, a medical student from Utah who delivers care to rural patients in Utah. Her father happens to be an experienced semiconductor engineer, an industry where we face a shortage of over 24,000 skilled professionals. If Merry is forced to self deport, her father may leave with her. Another person at risk of self deporting is Aneesh Komanduri, who is currently earning his Ph.D.

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<sup>4</sup> Vijayakumar, P. B., & Cunningham, C. J. L. (2019). The impact of green card waiting time on the life of highly skilled Indian immigrants in the United States of America. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology Translational Research and Working Papers*. <https://scholar.utc.edu/iopsy/2>

researching artificial intelligence at the University of Arkansas and wants to use his skills to start his own small business in Arkansas.

Without congressional action that creates a clear, attainable pathway for people like me to obtain permanent residency, our country will continue to waste its investments, by forcing thousands of American raised and educated children to leave every year. There are bipartisan solutions such as the *America's Children Act*, led by Senator Padilla and Senator Rand Paul. This bill would permanently end the problem of aging out and ensure that children like me who are raised and educated with a documented status receive a clear opportunity to apply for permanent residency. This legislation would create the reality that most Americans assume already exists.

Moreover, addressing the root causes that lead to aging out, including the green card backlog and the flaws in our broken immigration system that allow for families to be lawful long-term residents of the country with no clear pathway to citizenship will make America more prosperous. Additionally, without action to address the shortcomings of work based visa programs, the United States will continue to lose out on talents that the American economy, businesses and communities depend on.

For the United States to continue as a global leader, we cannot afford to squander the talents of people like me, who have been shaped by American values and are ready to give back to the country that raised us. I am, and will always be, an American at heart—even if the paperwork tells a different story.