



By Erica Hobbs

Hundreds rally for immigration rights outside University of Michigan commencement

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Several hundred people rallied in support of immigration reform at Frisinger Park in Ann Arbor Saturday.

Mark Bialek for AnnArbor.com

From one end of the political spectrum to the other, protesters turned out Saturday to send a message to **President Barack Obama** and to play to a crowd that numbered more than 80,000.

By far, the largest group was made up of supporters of immigration rights. A few hundred members of several local groups concerned about immigration issues rallied at Frisinger Park about a mile from the stadium and later marched there after the commencement ceremony began.

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"This isn't a rally against the president, this is a rally to remind him," Ann Arbor resident Dave DeVarti said. "He made a commitment to us, I'm here to remind him of that commitment."

DeVarti said he gave up his own ticket to hear Obama in order to attend the rally at the park.

But in the end, protesters played a minor role in the day, far outnumbered by crowds of graduates and family members.

Before the ceremony began, a few groups of demonstrators concerned about various issues, including taxes and abortion, protested outside the stadium. Members of the Tea Party, who oppose the president's economic policies, had called for supporters to line South Main Street from Scio Church Road to the Pauline Boulevard. But fewer than 20 were gathered outside the stadium. By the time the graduation crowd made its way through the gates and past security at the football stadium, a few dozen protesters stood outside in relative quiet.

At the park, rally participants carried American flags and signs with sayings like "Stop Ripping Families Apart," "Arizona's Not the Standard," and "Obama Don't Deport My Momma." The demonstrators rallied against Arizona's recent crackdown on illegal immigrants and for the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. The legislation would allow undocumented high school students who have been in the United States for more than five years the chance to earn conditional permanent residency and eventually a path to citizenship after a six-year probationary period.

"We want Obama to know to stop the separation of families," Belleville resident Alberto Torres said.

Just a few weeks ago, a friend of his was arrested in front of his 5-year-old son before being deported back to Mexico, Torres said.

Ypsilanti resident Cassandra Moreno said she also attended the rally to fight to keep her own family together.

Moreno, seven months pregnant, is expecting her fourth child with her husband who is an illegal immigrant.

"We kind of need something to happen so we can keep our family together," she said. "There's no way for him to find a way to become legal."

Concern about keeping families together is what prompted Laura Saunders to co-found the Washtenaw Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights two years ago. Saunders, one of several speakers at the rally, said a local crackdown on immigrants led to many children being separated from their parents and placed into foster care.

"It's become a huge problem for everyone in our community," she said.

Other speakers shared their own stories about growing up as an undocumented citizen.

An 18-year-old woman named Maribel, who wouldn't give her last name for fear of deportation, said she arrived in the U.S. at age 2 and did not even realize she was undocumented until years later when she could not obtain a library card.

She said it hurt her feelings to be denied rights in a country she loved. She said she had always been proud to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

"I always stood tall, because this is my home," she said. "This is everything to me."

The rally finished with the march to the stadium where participants chanted outside as the ceremony got under way.

For Mohammed Abdollahi of Michigan One, the rally was an attempt to grab the president's attention while he was here.

"We want to show Obama, regardless of his failed promises, we haven't forgotten," he said. "We're not going to let him just walk away."

Before the ceremony, a dozen Tea Party members stood on the corner of Main Street and Stadium Boulevard holding signs. Another few walked around outside the stadium. Tim Anthony, of Westland, arrived about 7 a.m. carrying a "don't-tread-on-me" flag. He said weather had kept protesters' numbers low. Others said Tea Party supporters were attending a visit by Sarah Palin in Clarkston today. Anthony said he was there protesting the stimulus package, health care reform, cap and trade energy policies and immigration. "I'm here to protest President Obama's policies pure and simple. We're the silent majority," he said.

Wes Nakagiri, a Tea Party supporter, came alone from from Hartland, and wore his old graduation cap and gown. He carried a sign carrying the golden arches of McDonald's and the title "Obamanomics, PhD." Nakagiri said he was protesting Obama's economic policies of rescuing banks and carmakers.

About 50 protesters with Citizens for a Pro-life Society based in South Lyon stood outside the stadium, some with poster-size signs meant to shock. They were hoping to have a group of more than 200 but rain kept some people away, said Monica Migliorino Miller, who was arrested for trespassing last year when Obama spoke at the Notre Dame University commencement. This time, the group was careful to stay off university property, she said. The protest, she said, was an opportunity to "show tens of thousands of people what abortion really is."

Ed Mahony of Ann Arbor was a one-man protest as he walked up and down South Main Street and Stadium Boulevard carrying a sign calling for an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. "I don't know why there aren't more protesters," he said. "There's a lot of apathy out there." It's still important to protest the wars, even though Obama did not start them, he said. "It doesn't matter who started it. It's got to stop."

Janet Miller contributed to this story.

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Adriana Abundis, a Michigan State University student, cheers during an immigration rally at Frisinger Park before the U-M commencement. Several hundred rallied in support of immigration reform.

Mark Bialek for AnnArbor.com



Nathan Rodriguez of Livonia, Melissa Arreguin of Lansing, and Priscilla Riojas of Lansing march in the immigration rally from Michigan Stadium back to Frisinger Park Saturday.

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Paul Gruchala of Westland protests on South Main Street as people wait in line to enter the stadium.

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