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Obama invites UTPA professor to immigration roundtable



UTPA engineering professor Karen Lozano is seen in this 2009 file photo announcing a plan to market a new production process she says will revolutionize nanofiber fabrication.

EDINBURG — Karen Lozano did something she never normally does — answer a call from an unknown number on her cellphone.

“The White House or a white house?” she said with a laugh, recalling what she asked the voice on the other end of the line.

Three days later, she was before President Barack Obama, speaking at a roundtable on immigration reform.

The University of Texas-Pan American professor participated in the White House event alongside eight other business leaders from across the country — some immigrants, all successful in their respective fields.

The U.S. Senate passed its immigration bill Thursday that, in part, includes \$46 billion for border security improvements and a pathway to citizenship.

Now the future of immigration reform lies in the hands of U.S. House of Representatives.

Lozano, a mechanical engineer, said members of the group each shared with the president their personal stories of preserving through struggle and sacrifice to eventually achieve success.

“I told how incredible an experience it was for me,” said Lozano, who is originally from Monterrey. “That I was still pinching myself, that it was true or not.”

She is the chief technology officer of FibeRio Technology Corp., a multi-million dollar Edinburg-based company that manufactures and sells machines capable of spinning nanofiber in greater quantity but in a manner that is less costly.

Nanofiber, which has many applications, is so small scientists like Lozano work with it on a molecular level. It is defined as material smaller than 1 micron — 1 millionth of a meter. UTPA is also a co-founder and equity holder in FibeRio.

“All these business leaders recognize the degree to which immigration is a contributor to growth, a contributor to expansion, a creator of jobs,” Obama said in video from the meeting. “But they also recognize the immigration system that we currently have is broken.”

The group Lozano was part of at the White House included the chief executives of Chobani, a Greek-style yogurt company, and Ethan Allen furniture company.

For her part, she said she concentrates more on developing applications to patent — she’s already applied for 23 with some granted and most licensed — than immigration policy.

“Politics-wise I’m not very well informed about it,” she said. “Honestly, I haven’t read the bill. ... Emotionally you can say something but, educated answer, it’s hard to say if you support it or not support it. I know there are issues.”

One thing she did make clear: People, such as the many immigrants here already, should be free to work.

Of her own story, Lozano said she came to the U.S. when she received a Rice University fellowship. Making only \$1,000 a month then, she said she sacrificed luxuries while living in an apartment furnished only with toys for her son.

Her one splurge: a two-for-one ice cream deal she shared at a McDonald’s restaurant every Saturday for five years with her husband, who is also from Mexico.

“I know what it is to sacrifice,” she said. “And I know you can make it.”

Lozano graduated from Rice in 1999.

Today she has two sons, both U.S. citizens who are 11 and 16 years old. Lozano, whose brought millions in research grants to UTPA and received a National Science Foundation award, said she’s more proud of her students’ success than her own. Many of them have gone on to work for prestigious technology companies.

The professor said she tries act as a role model in the community, but she hopes the honor of being invited to the White House to share her story can help more people.

She said she knows there are concerns that more immigrants will stress the welfare system, but that most people want to work.

“I think when you get things for free you don’t realize they’re actually cutting your wings to fly,” Lozano said. “We all had to struggle to get there, but we made it.”