

# JOSE ANTONIO VARGAS

b. February 3, 1981

## IMMIGRATION ACTIVIST

*“I am an American. I just don’t have the right papers.”*

**Jose Antonio Vargas is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, a filmmaker and an immigration rights activist.**

Jose Antonio Vargas is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, a filmmaker and an immigration rights activist. He founded Define American, a nonprofit organization dedicated to immigration and citizenship issues, and launched #EmergingUS, a digital platform that focuses on race, immigration and identity.

Born in the Philippines, Vargas came to the United States when he was 12. He revealed his status as an undocumented immigrant in a 2011 essay in The New York Times Magazine, in an effort to promote dialog about the U.S. immigration system and to advocate for the DREAM act.

Vargas took an interest in journalism in high school. Before college he worked as a copy boy for The San Francisco Chronicle, eventually earning a private scholarship after being turned down for financial aid because he was undocumented. He graduated from San Francisco State and for years kept his status secret for fear of being deported.

Vargas came out in high school after seeing a documentary about Harvey Milk, the assassinated openly gay San Francisco politician. He later described the disclosure as “less daunting than coming out about my legal status.”

Vargas’s public immigration advocacy began with his revelatory 2011 essay. The following year, he wrote a cover story on his experience for TIME. He went on to direct a documentary called “Documented,” which premiered at the AFI Docs film festival in 2013. It was released in theaters and broadcast on CNN in 2014. The same year, Vargas was arrested in the border town of McAllen, Texas, after 21 years in the United States. He was questioned for hours, but then released.

In 2015 “Documented” earned an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Documentary and Vargas produced a television special, as part of MTV’s “Look Different” campaign, called “White People. The program examined what it means to be young and white in America.

Vargas has written extensively for publications such as Rolling Stone and The New Yorker and was a senior contributing editor at the Huffington Post. As a Washington Post staffer, his 2006 series on HIV/AIDS in Washington, D.C., inspired the documentary film, “The Other City,” which he wrote and co-produced. It premiered at the 2010 Tribeca Film Festival and aired on Showtime. Vargas was also part of the Washington Post team that won a Pulitzer Prize for reporting on the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech.

Vargas has discussed his experiences as a gay undocumented immigrant on such diverse television shows as “The O’Reilly Factor” and “Real Time with Bill Maher.” He has received numerous honors, including the Freedom to Write Award from the PEN Center.



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