Danny, an 18-year-old boy in a smart suit and tie, is standing on the steps of a west London Town Hall, poised between two lives. Where he stands now is in the shadows, an existence with no passport or papers, which he describes as “shameful and sad”. In less than an hour, he will be a citizen of the United Kingdom – the country he has lived in since before he can remember.

“I love Britain,” he tells me, his thin hands shaking. “Some of my British friends say bad things about their country, but to me it’s the best country in the world. I look at their lives and I just wish I could be a real person like they are.” He looks at his dad, and they walk in together into the Town Hall and to the possibility of a new life.

Last week, President Obama made a sweeping overhaul to laws governing undocumented people in the US. “You can come out of the shadows,” he told four million people. Under a new amnesty, undocumented parents of children who are US citizens or legal residents will be able to apply for work permits lasting three years. This is estimated to be around half of the US undocumented population, which is around 11.4 million people.

The same day, Britain was also convulsed with the subject of immigration, with red and white flags on houses and the election of anti-migrant UKIP’s second MP to the UK parliament. As political discourse lurches to the right, Britain’s undocumented people are rarely acknowledged, and are extremely unlikely to be reprieved. Yet there are believed to be around 600,000 people with irregular immigration status in the UK, around 120,000 of whom are children. Experts estimate around half of those children were born in the UK.
There are many ways children come to live in the shadows of the UK, but Danny’s story is a common one. He came to the UK at the age of three with Trinidadian parents who overstayed tourist visas. His mum was deported when he was a child, snatched from the street. Afterwards Danny, left alone by the police, hid in a park, terrified. His dad, who works cash in hand as a painter and decorator, and to whom he is very close, has raised him in the shadows.

“All this time at school, I could never invite anyone home,” says Danny, who is softly spoken with a shy smile. “They would say why are you sharing a room with your dad? Why are there cockroaches all over your flat? I have had to hide myself away, not tell people anything. It affected my confidence in school, my ability to concentrate. I couldn’t explain my situation to teachers in case they changed their view of me.

“Without a passport I could never go on a school trip or have free school meals. That’s why my dad has had to work to feed us.” In his younger years, Danny says this was more manageable. But at 18 he is suddenly unable to enjoy any of the new freedoms of his friends. He has no ID and can’t go to a bar, he can’t get a driving license or go on holiday. He is not eligible for a student loan and for a home student fee that would help him go to university. Once social services became aware of his situation he was offered emergency housing, the tiny bedsit with cockroaches. “They get into the fridge and into our food, but we can’t complain – we will be evicted and be on the streets,” he says. He also gets food vouchers for a supermarket that he shares with his dad who is entitled to nothing.

In the summer, Danny was offered an incredible opportunity to go to one of the best drama schools in the country. Acting is his whole life, an expression of all the things he cannot say. But when he explained about his immigration situation, the invitation to attend
was cancelled. Then, social services told him that he would be evicted from the flat on his 18th birthday.

A social worker referred him to Ealing Law Centre, where immigration specialist Solange Valdez and author and academic Carol Bohmer had set up the Project for the Registration of Children as British Citizens (PRCBC).

“It’s a very wonderful place,” Danny says quietly. “They give you some kind of hope.”

He and his dad couldn’t possibly have afforded the £669 fee for the citizenship application or the £500 for a DNA test to prove he was his father’s son. Valdez and Bohmer raised it from Facebook. “Sometimes you have to,” Valdez says. “When Danny came to us he was effectively homeless. At 18 he lost all the protection that had been afforded to him as a child. He couldn’t get a job, but he wasn’t entitled to benefits or education. He would have had trouble even receiving NHS care.”

The PRCBC offices at Ealing Law Centre are bursting with families. Children are playing in the waiting room, kids sitting on her floor while she talks to their parent delivering bad news and good.

Valdez explains their legal work focuses on the British Nationality Act 1981, which provides for registration of children as British citizens. This can be “by entitlement” or at the discretion of the Home Secretary.

“Until 2008, migrant children who had spent seven years in the UK could apply for indefinite leave to remain and then register as British citizens,” Valdez says. “But the Home Office’s policy and practice law have since changed. At the same time government austerity policies mean there is less help for migrant children and
for children born to migrant parents, and communities find it harder to support them.”

In Ealing I meet Hannah, originally from Ghana, who was brought to the UK by an aunt who used her as a slave. She ended up pregnant to a man who violently abused her. She is trying to get her son registered as his father is British.

“I just want to live a normal life,” Hannah, 35, says. “It is very hard to support myself. I am constantly panicking on the street, thinking I will bump into immigration, thinking they are going to deport us.”

After her boyfriend attacked her, police referred her to Valdez. “I was so shocked that they helped me,” she says. “But this is a wonderful place.”

I meet Dana whose passport was stolen while she was here on a student visa and her life has been a nightmare ever since - and Maggie, who is living with five children under eight in one bedroom.

Then we meet Jemima, a woman from Cameroon who has a son with multiple physical and learning disabilities. She was trafficked to the UK and is clearly terrified. After she confided in a woman at her church, she gave them a room in her house. It is tiny but she feels safe. “She is so kind this English woman,” she says. Her story is bleak, but Valdez has good news for her. Jemima’s son was born in the UK to a British father, and she is convinced she can win her case.

Valdez and Bohmer set up the project after a case they worked on involving three siblings. Two of the children – who had severe learning difficulties and had suffered emotional trauma – were born in the UK but were unlawfully removed despite a pending
family court hearing and being on the child protection register. Their father had abused their mother for over five years in the UK. The Home Office initially refused the children’s claim for registration. After judicial review proceedings were initiated, the Home Office agreed to register two of the children. In the end, the Centre also won registration for the third child.

Valdez points out this work is about getting much more than just regularising these children’s stay in the UK. “Becoming a British citizen is a significant life event,” she says. “Apart from allowing a child to apply for a British citizen passport, British citizenship gives them the opportunity to participate more fully in the life of their local community as they grow up. That’s a quote from the Home Office's own guidelines”.

Home Secretary Teresa May could have used discretionary powers to grant Danny citizenship. When May turned down his application, Valdez made a challenge in the High Court. Danny tells me that his court case was the first time he was truthful about his status with his friends. Valdez suggested he ask them to submit letters of support for his court case. They were full of emotion that Danny had never expected.

When he comes back out through the wooden doors of the Town Hall, out of the citizenship ceremony, in which he swore an oath of allegiance to the monarch and sang God Save The Queen, Danny is smiling widely, but fidgeting with the thought of everything he needs to do.

He wants to go to the post office immediately for a passport and driving license forms and to the bank for an account. He wants to start a legal application for his dad, his best friend, who is looking at him with an anxious pride, holding his son’s shoulder through his suit. It’s as if Danny feels all these rights could be taken away at any moment, and there’s no time to lose.
“Now I can work and save up and go to Jamaica and see my mum,” he says. “After five years. I can reapply for drama school. I have a life. I am a person. I’m a British citizen and I’m going to make this country really proud.”

Some names and details in this article have been changed.

Ends