



**Wildin Acosta** PHOTO BY ALEX BOERNER

# HOME OF THE BRAVE

*Wildin Acosta's detention shook a community into action. But he and countless others still aren't free.*

BY VICTORIA BOULOUBASIS

**O**n a bright Sunday morning in September, the elusive east Durham cowboys are parading two ponies down a concrete pathway that separates the pupusa trucks at the Green Flea Market. A puppy scurries by before a woman in an oversize pink T-shirt scoops it up and clasps it to her chest.

Wildin Acosta laughs as he knocks back a swig of Coca-Cola.

"I don't understand," he says matter-of-factly. "And I don't mean to be rude. But I've noticed that gringos sometimes like their animals more than people."

He goes on about how much we care for our pets—how we let them sleep in our beds, how we feed them organic food, how we braid ribbons into their manes and tails. There's a subtle irony in his bemused commentary. Because for seven months—until a few weeks ago, in fact—this smiling nineteen-year-old had been in a private immigration jail, treated worse than a pet, treated like a criminal.

Acosta possesses an innate charisma and a razor-sharp memory. He remembers faces and how he's met them. He's kind and gracious, stubborn and unwavering in his opinions. He became a household name in Durham during his incarceration, when "Free Wildin" became a rallying cry. His case sparked urgency in this progressive community he'd called home for three years, marked by confusion about how a teenager who fit so neatly into the American obsession with meritocracy would be treated like a delinquent.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement's intervention—

grabbing him on his way to school, a few months before graduation—felt treacherous and new, coming at the start of an election year that felt like a hate-filled *Twilight Zone*. But members of the immigrant community—Latino and undocumented especially—knew things were finally coming to a head.

“They took one of us,” says Ivan Almonte, a friend of Acosta and a member of Alerta Migratoria NC, a grassroots organization of immigrants and allies fighting to stop the deportations of local residents. “And I’m almost glad it happened to Wildin so publicly, because otherwise people wouldn’t have noticed. This is not something new for us. But something big was happening.”

**M**en in plain clothes approached Acosta outside his home on the way to school one cold January morning. It was about seven thirty a.m. Both the sun and Acosta were making their way into the day when three men surrounded the teen.

As Acosta recalls, they “looked like vagabonds” in ripped jeans and clothes that “looked like they were people who lived on the street.” He didn’t know what to think.

Acosta was frazzled. He was supposed to meet his girlfriend at school at six to finish homework, but he’d overslept. The men caught him off guard. They asked him for his name, and he replied with the middle name his family calls him: David. One of them pulled out a sheet of paper with his photo on it, pointed to it, declared Acosta’s full name, and said, “This is you, isn’t it?” They opened up their jackets to reveal ICE badges and then tightened zip-ties around his wrists and behind his back.

Acosta tried to keep calm. A congenital heart condition has taught him to tame his nerves in tense moments. The agents, he says, asked him to allow them entry to his home. Acosta refused, knowing his undocumented family would be at risk. His father watched from the apartment window, sobbing.

It was over in just three minutes.

The agents guided him into the backseat of an unmarked sedan, a car so unassuming that it could have belonged to anyone in the neighborhood. The officer driving the vehicle looked him in the eye from the rearview mirror. “It’s nothing personal,” he said.

“That’s when I lost it,” Acosta says. “I started crying and I couldn’t stop. How can you say that to someone?”

Soon he was in Cary, where officers took his backpack and photographed him, then shuffled him around to various jails and detention centers where, in each, he spent anywhere from one night to one week: Raleigh, Winston-Salem, and Irwin County, Georgia, before landing at the Stew-

art Detention Center in the small town of Lumpkin, Georgia, two and a half weeks later. Nearly all of the detainees who end up there—87.1 percent—are deported, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. Only 5.2 percent are released on bond. Stewart, run by the private CoreCivic, is what the Marshall Project calls “the black hole of the immigration system” and features America’s toughest immigration court. In 2015, less than 2 percent of detainees who went

ed to study and get a useful job that he could turn into a stable career, but in Honduras, he says, “it’s complicated.” Leaving a rural town to study at a university in a bigger city would make him more of a target for gangs.

There’s a phrase about his hometown in a song by a Honduran band, Los Plebes de Olancho: “*Olancho/ Entra el que quiere/ Sale el que puede.*” It means, “Enter if you want to. Leave if you can.”

“There are many enigmas like that about



Acosta (right) with Ivan Almonte PHOTO BY ALEX BOERNER

before the court won their cases.

And so what transpired over the next several months to get Acosta released was nearly unprecedented.

**A**costa left his hometown of Olancho, Honduras, at seventeen. His parents were already in North Carolina, earning money that they hoped would provide opportunities for Acosta and his two younger sisters. His father arrived nearly ten years ago, his mother, five.

He misses breakfasts with his grandmother the most: her fresh-baked bread, Honduran coffee served black with a hint of ground cloves, mandarin oranges from the backyard tree. Now his grandparents receive photos from North Carolina, where Acosta is a full-fledged adult. His baby face is filling out, wispy patches of hair sometimes latent on his chin.

Dusty dirt paths in Olancho led to humble yet lush backyards like the Acostas’, with orange and banana trees. Many families farm coffee, the bushes of bright red coffee cherries dotting the landscape. But opportunities for someone like Acosta are scarce. He want-

ed to study and get a useful job that he could turn into a stable career, but in Honduras, he says, “it’s complicated.” Leaving a rural town to study at a university in a bigger city would make him more of a target for gangs.

One afternoon changed his life. A devout evangelical Christian, Acosta began preaching in parks to drug addicts. A gang leader strolled up and told him to leave the men alone. “He told me to leave and that he had it out for me,” Acosta says, “that he was going to find where I lived and search for me until I was killed.”

Threats like these are serious in Honduras. With a homicide rate of 74.6 for every 100,000 people, it’s one of the most murderous countries in the world. Within two hours of the threat, Acosta had decided to join his father in North Carolina.

“I knew nothing about immigration, about bills, about rent,” he says. “I just wanted a better life.”

**A**costa arrived in the United States in June 2014 at age seventeen. He doesn’t talk about the journey from Olancho to the U.S.-Mexico border, other than to say it took nearly four months. This trip is often harrowing for Central American

migrants, who can face violence at the hands of those trying to exploit their vulnerability.

Acosta was apprehended at the U.S. border along with many other unaccompanied minors that summer, the majority fleeing violence in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. By July, the border patrol had apprehended 41,042 minors from Honduras, according to statistics released by U.S. Customs and Border Enforcement last year.

Per procedure, Acosta was given an order to appear in court in March 2015. Due to what he describes as bad legal advice, he skipped his court date, which resulted in a deportation order. His lawyer, Almonte says, scared him into thinking he would be arrested if he went to court.

Ten months later, ICE picked him up.

Acosta’s detainment led to an outpouring of community support, largely led by his teachers at Riverside High School. They followed the lead of Alerta Migratoria NC. It took persistent urging by Alerta members and Riverside students for U.S. Representative G.K. Butterfield to take a stand. But when he did, Butterfield loudly advocated for his “friend Wildin” until Acosta was finally released. Butterfield and U.S. Representative Zoe Lofgren of California, the ranking Democrat on the Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security, petitioned the ICE director to put a hold on Acosta’s deportation order. When Acosta was put in solitary confinement for helping another inmate translate a document, Butterfield wrote another letter and succeeded in getting his stay in solitary reduced from thirty days to nine.

Last August, Acosta was released on a \$10,000 bond and applied for asylum. He has a court date set for this August. He’s still not protected from deportation.

Acosta’s detention occurred at a time when activists who merely pointed out—and challenged—President Obama were met with pushback from mainstream liberals.

Riverside ESL teacher Ellen Holmes, who spearheaded the educators’ efforts, said last summer: “It was said that they were going to target criminals. Please tell me how a student, a child, is a threat to security and how he breaks the law? It just makes me see red. All the children going back to Honduras are being killed. Giving any child a death sentence is inhumane.”

“The question of ‘Why can’t Wildin graduate?’ became a rallying cry here and in the community,” says Riverside journalism teacher Bryan Christopher. “Wildin was detained the final semester of his senior year. At a certain point, immigration and education policies intersected. Students were missing school out of fear of arrest or deportation.”

“I noticed how scared many of my friends

# SAFE SPACES

The day after the presidential election, Mark Bailey, director of Durham's Maureen Joy Charter School, greeted worried students as they got off the bus.

"I had kids that morning who were like, 'All the moms and dads have to go back now. Is it true that we're going to be deported?'" he says.

Under ICE policy, schools are supposed to be "sensitive locations" where immigration action should be avoided if possible. But the Trump administration's expansion of who is considered a priority for deportation has cast doubt on whether schools are really safe spaces for undocumented students.

It's a concern that hits close to home in the Triangle. Just last month, a Durham County Sheriff's Office checkpoint set up near a school sparked suspicion about the real motive of the stop (officials said it was to catch speeders). The public opposition may have contributed to the Durham Police Department's decision to halt DPD-initiated checkpoints altogether.

Durham, Wake, Orange, and Chapel Hill-Carrboro schools do not ask for a student's immigration status upon enrollment. (After all, they can't share information with immigration officials that they don't have.) According to the Pew Research Center, 8.7 percent of North Carolina students have a parent who is undocumented.

Law enforcement should seek permission before entering Durham Public Schools and are expected to interview students about nonschool matters away from school. Wake County schools also instruct law enforcement to conduct interviews off-campus, while Orange County says interviews should happen in the principal's office. Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools law enforcement policy does not give specific instructions.

Durham Public Schools, where about 28 percent of students are Latino, recently doubled down on a resolution it passed after Wildin Acosta's detention, calling for law enforcement to honor the sensitive-

locations policy. A group of activists also recently asked Wake County schools to adopt a safe-zone policy.

Chapel Hill-Carrboro and Orange County schools have sent out letters addressing concerns about immigration enforcement. About 16 percent of CHCCS students are Latino, but the proportion is higher at some schools, including Frank Porter Graham, a bilingual elementary school where staff are being trained on immigration history and policy.

"We have students at our school who are worried about their friends being deported, for example," says FPG principal Emily Bivins. "I would say there has been an increase in the number of kids who are worried about this and the amount of time counselors and teachers are spending talking about these concerns."

Maureen Joy, where 55 percent of students are Latino, was already reaching out to the immigrant community before the election. Last summer, people slept in the school parking lot to get Faith IDs, an alternative to a government-issued ID. Last month, the school partnered with El Centro for an information session that packed the school's auditorium.

"After the election, we told our kids not to worry, that they were safe. And now we need to be very careful in saying that," says Bela Kussin, the school's equity and community facilitator.

The school has focused on being a resource for immigrant parents, helping teachers address students' anxiety, and countering rhetoric that students hear outside school. Students seem more concerned about the safety of their parents than themselves, Bailey says, while the risk of getting pulled over has deterred some parents from attending school events.

"We feel powerless sometimes because you're unable to just fix it or make it go away," Bailey says. "I think that's the part that feels so foreign to us. We don't have the ability as we normally would to personally impact and change that situation."

—Sarah Willets

got," says Morgan Whithaus, a senior during Acosta's incarceration. "Just seeing how scared they were completely broke my heart. No person should have to feel that way and have to fear losing their families."

Whithaus penned an open letter to Homeland Security Director Jeh Johnson in the *Huffington Post*: "Let me remind you, Secretary Johnson, some laws, even though they had good intentions when they were passed, are not morally right. Slavery was

once allowed by law, followed by Jim Crow, and right now, taking students away from their high school education in the name of immigration is law. But not all laws are right."

Whithaus also traveled with Holmes and fellow students to speak to Congress last May. They met privately with Education Secretary John King.

"It was a frustrating meeting," Whithaus says. "He said his hands were tied and there was nothing he could do. That really bothered

me. It's something directly impacting schools, and he should do something about it."

Pam Gonzalez, a Dreamer who was a senior at Riverside last year, also took the trip to Washington. She used to tutor Acosta in math. She and Whithaus organized the activist movement at Riverside. They hosted information sessions during lunch hour, passing out white wristbands to show support for Acosta. On graduation day, Whithaus says, the entire student body raised their wrists in solidarity for Acosta.

"A lot of students started questioning and realizing that it wasn't fair," Gonzalez says. "My teachers and friends knew I was undocumented, but I didn't necessarily come out and tell people. Afterwards and now, I'm more comfortable talking about it than I was before."

Acosta's mother, Dilsia, controlled the reins of her son's campaign. She kept her composure even when she cried in public, her resolve rooted in a faith that she passed on to her son. She spoke up and built her courage in front of English-speaking audiences. She learned that the freedom of speech permissible here can still be met with the stifling silence of authority.

"The most powerful moment—when I saw Dilsia with fear, but also with a lot of faith—was when she was praying at the immigration office," says Almonte. A group had traveled to the ICE office in Charlotte to submit an application for a stay of removal. Dilsia prayed and sang in the lobby, flanked by community and ICE agents. "Here she was, in front of the authorities, a strong woman fighting for her son. She was never afraid to say, 'I'm undocumented,' or for *la migra* to come after her. She stood by the idea that 'This is my son, I brought him here for a better life, I'm fighting for him.'"

Acosta's case is among at least six in North Carolina involving high-school-age immigrants who could qualify as refugees but instead were detained by ICE last spring at Stewart. All have been released and are in the process of seeking asylum, except for one—Santos Padilla Gúzman of Raleigh. According to the local *Qué Pasa* newspaper, gangs in El Salvador threatened to kill him for not joining. He's still locked up in Stewart.

And just weeks prior to Acosta's detainment, a student from El Salvador who had been at Riverside for a few months was detained and quickly deported. She had fled death threats in her home country; after she disappeared, no one, not even her high school boyfriend, heard from her again.

Acosta says that while he was in detention he was looking for answers. He'd preach to his fellow detainees, young

men like himself from all over the South.

"Even when I read the Bible, I'd cry," he says. "We would go outside sometimes and see the street on the other side of the fence. And we'd ask ourselves, 'What does it feel like to be free?' Freedom was so close, but felt so far away."

In the seven months he's been back in Durham, Acosta has been adjusting slowly. He says he feels OK, though the weight of helping support his family and achieve his own goals is burdensome. Almonte has encouraged him to see a therapist, though they haven't been able to find one available on weekends.

"Missing a day of work means a lot of money lost, so for him, it's not a priority," says Almonte. "He doesn't recognize that after being detained for seven months, he has to expect anxiety. I think he has a lot of depression as well. He was different before he was detained. He was happy all the time. I think that his self-esteem was stronger before."

Acosta quietly finished his high school coursework in January, which he says is a dream fulfilled. He'll walk in the June graduation ceremony.

"He did a pretty good job of trying to fall back into life as a student," says Catherine Sebring, a Riverside counselor. "I don't think that was easy for him, given the media coverage and publicity that his story has driven, not to mention the experiences he had at Stewart. He has become a strong voice in the community."

As bold and as affirmative as his declarations are, a gentle fatigue sometimes creeps into Acosta's voice. He's been in the spotlight since his detention, but sometimes, he says, "I just want to act like a normal young guy." Being detained led to a steep drop in his GPA, which is now below 2.0. He's working on raising both his score and the funds to begin college courses for electrical engineering. Acosta currently works twelve-hour days in construction.

Since the election, undocumented communities have been on high alert. But following Acosta's case, student activists have been pushing for louder advocacy with no fear.

"The way I see it, [President] Trump's whole campaign is basically trying to scare us," says Gonzalez, now a first-year student at Meredith College. "That's what they want, and I don't want to give them that. I'm not scared."

Acosta, as usual, tries to see the silver lining in the dark cloud.

"If it weren't for Trump, there wouldn't be a unified immigrant voice," he says. "They left a lot in the hands of Obama. If they were united like they are now, maybe we'd already have immigration reform."

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