

Riverside community struggles with potential deportation of one of its own

by **Bradley Saacks**
Staff Writer

Imagine the everyday burdens that accompany being a high school student — stress about grades, social anxiety of puberty and college applications.

For many, the idea of returning to high school is cringe-worthy, but not for 19-year-old Wildin Acosta.

Acosta, a senior at Riverside High School on Rose of Sharon Road, is not fighting to make the honor roll or a spot on the soccer team — he is fighting to stay in the country.

U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement officers detained Acosta, a Honduran native, on Jan. 28.

Acosta came to the U.S. when he was 16 with a flood of undocumented Central American minors who were fleeing gang violence.

A recent effort by the federal government has focused on people who overwhelmed border patrol a couple of years ago. According to the Department of Homeland Security, more than 100 individuals like Acosta were arrested in North Carolina, Texas and Georgia in January.

Teachers, friends, family members and local leaders have decried the actions of ICE for targeting teenagers trying to get an education.

“There is a real fear that the raids will continue, and we will lose more members of our school community,” said Ellen Holmes, a Spanish teacher at Riverside who knows Acosta.

The Durham Public Schools system passed a resolution asking for the raids to stop, but cannot offer more protection beyond that, Chief Communications Officer Chrissy Deal said.

The system, Deal said, does not track which students are undocumented.

Acosta came to the country to “achieve the American dream,” Holmes said. “He dreamed of graduation and going to college to become an engineer.”

His removal from Riverside has been difficult on several levels.

“To see the fear in my students’ eyes



The Riverside High School community has been rocked by the arrest and possible deportation of senior Wildin Acosta in January. (Staff photo by Bradley Saacks)

“[Wildin Acosta] dreamed of graduation and going to college to become an engineer,” Ellen Holmes said.

for their friends, family and themselves has been very hard,” Holmes said. Students ask her for updates about Acosta daily, she added.

“Taking away someone’s right to an education, putting them in prison and treating them like they are not a human being is hard to understand as well,” Holmes said. “I feel helpless a lot of the time.”

The increased attention ICE is paying to students has enraged individuals across the country. At several protests after Acosta’s arrest, people chanted for “education not deportation.”

Kristen Gardner, a UNC-Chapel Hill student studying the undocumented population’s access to education, said undocumented individuals should not lose the right to an education.

“A lot of high school counselors are in difficult positions because they need to advise them on the best path for their educational future as well as their

safety,” Gardner said. She created a petition last year for the Morehead-Cain Scholarship at UNC-CH to accept undocumented students’ applications.

There has been increasing support for creating safe avenues for undocumented students to pursue their educational dreams. Several states with large undocumented populations have allowed those students to pay in-state tuition at state colleges.

When visiting UNC-CH last month, new UNC system president Margaret Spellings was asked if a similar policy could be implemented. She conveyed the positive results that this policy has had in her home state, Texas.

But all of this progress means nothing to Acosta’s friends and family while he is detained. U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield, representing North Carolina’s 1st District including Durham, pushed the ICE to postpone Acosta’s deportation until he could appear before a judge.

“It is my hope that he will eventually be granted asylum in the United States,” Butterfield said in a statement.

Acosta is being held at the Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin, Georgia, while he waits for his case to be heard.

“I do not know if I can put into words how hard this whole situation has been for all of us,” Holmes said. “It is so unfair and so unjust.”