

## 'I am from here, too'; an immigrant's life in Alamance

"E" is a high school senior. She plays soccer, participates in an Asian culture club and loves art. She's applying to college much like other seniors across the country. She has friends and two younger siblings she loves just as fiercely as she fights with them. She works to keep her grades up and worries over her college applications. E is by all means a regular high school student.

E and her family didn't go to the state fair this year. They haven't been to the beach. Her soccer games have been unattended by her parents. Before this year, at least one of them found time from their busy schedules to be there. The only time they are out as a family is when absolutely necessary: when E acts as the translator during parent-teacher conferences or to go to work, the grocery and then back home as quickly as possible. Her family is from Mexico.

E's full name won't be included due to her parents' undocumented status.

A few months ago, the California branch of her family was deported. E and her family's only source of contact is through Whatsapp and social media. Her parents watch out for operations like "Freaky Friday" or "Charlotte's Web." When considering what she wants to study at university, she thinks first about how she hopes to support her parents before she considers what she'd like to pursue. This is what life in Alamance county is to her.

E has great admiration for her parents. She spoke of her quinceañera. She was given the choice between the party or a car. She thinks about how fun it was, and what it was like to dance with a boy for the first time. She thinks about what her parents sacrificed so that she would have that experience.

Her mom came here out of necessity. E's grandfather didn't allow her mother a higher education, pushing her instead to move with him at 17 for work. Her dad's story is similar.

Her parents work blue collar jobs. Their immigration status prevents them from being hired for higher paying less laborious work. E has never been to Mexico, where her parents emigrated from.

She knows of Mexico through the stories of her parents, not her own memories. It is a place that is home to her parents but one she has never seen. Her parents have never been able to return.

Her dad hasn't seen his parents since he left over 25 years ago. Her grandfather has since passed away, a barrier far more permanent than the border.

"He passed away and that's really sad, because he never got to see him again," said E.  
"Hopefully my grandma stays alive longer, and hopefully I can see her too."

Her voice caught slightly as she spoke, revealing the quiet grief that runs through her family, a grief made heavier by distance and the impossibility of closure.

### **Life in Alamance**

This is a familiar story. It's one that is echoed in many other homes in Alamance. With the return of the Trump administration and the passage of North Carolina's Senate Bill 153 (SB 153), requiring local agencies to cooperate more closely with federal immigration authorities, tensions are high.

Families like E's feel those policy shifts immediately. Sometimes it is subtle: fewer outings, more whispered conversations, and an unspoken rule that every knock at the door is something to fear before it can be anything else.

Provisions in the bill require state agencies to ensure that undocumented people are not benefitting from public benefits beyond what is already required by federal law, waive governmental immunity for local governments that fail to comply with anti-sanctuary ordinances and prohibit UNC institutions from adopting any type of sanctuary policy.

According to the North Carolina General Assembly, the bill's sponsors argue it promotes consistency in public safety policy. At the same time civil rights groups like the American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina (ACLU-NC) warn that it risks racial profiling and could deter immigrants from reporting crimes. SB 153 was passed despite the governor vetoing the original bill due to the supermajority in both the house and senate as well as a democratic representative from Charlotte, Carla Cunningham, voting with the republican party.

Cunningham argued that the U.S. has been “exploited and abused by the different tactics to gain citizenship in America” and that immigrants should “assimilate.”

Alamance, with its long history of immigration enforcement, has never been an easy place for immigrants to live.

It became a flashpoint for immigration enforcement in the early 2000s, when the sheriff's office joined the federal 287(g) program, allowing local deputies to act as border patrol agents.

The political climate around immigration has intensified since President Trump's return to office in 2025. In his first week, he signed Executive Order 14159, expanding expedited deportations and cutting funding to “sanctuary” jurisdictions, according to a White House summary and reporting by The Washington Post.

Between 2010 and 2020 the Hispanic population in Alamance has grown by 40%, reshaping neighborhoods, school classrooms, and downtown businesses. Today, nearly 14 percent of the county's residents identify as Hispanic —more than double the share from two decades ago.

That growth isn't just visible in census data — it's felt in the pulse of the community: in storefronts painted with Spanish signs, in the language you hear spoken on the streets and most

vividly, in the annual Día de los Muertos festival. This festival is hosted by *Valores*, which has become a cornerstone for many Hispanic families seeking connection and opportunity in Alamance County.

## **Day of the Dead**

Día de los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead, is a holiday built on the belief that, for a brief moment each year, the barrier between the living and the dead grows thin enough for families to feel close to those that they have lost. It's a day in which E's father can feel closer to his own despite 25 years lost. Ofrendas, or altars are crowded with marigolds, the golden petals scattering with every breeze, half melted candles dripping down, and photographs both crisp and shiny as well as those that have faded and worn down with the years, all intended to guide loved ones home as families celebrate their lives.

The festival was bustling with vendors, visitors and performers. The park felt transformed — not just by decorations, but by the collective presence of people who, despite everything, chose celebration over silence.

A corner stage, lit up the evening with massive full screens flashing ads between performers who danced or sang or both. It was a bright, cheerful scene. A semi-circle of food trucks took up another corner with everything from fried ice-cream to street tacos. Vendor stands lined the grass, selling the goods of small local businesses. Marigolds, papel picados, sugar skulls and candles, transformed the park into a bright, breathing homage to memory.

The air was filled with sound and smell, spilling out of the food trucks that were frying and grilling, shouting orders back and forth. Teenagers milled in groups, snacking and watching their friends attempt skateboarding tricks, cheering and laughing at each attempt. Fathers walked with their little girls, hand in hand, pointing out the colorful decorations. Volunteers handed out fliers for upcoming events and community gatherings.

Despite, perhaps never feeling quite welcome in their home, the hispanic community had shown up as vibrant as the decorations used to commemorate the dead.

## **Valores**

*Valores*, the host, is a latin led non-profit that works with the hispanic community to host events, close generational gaps, and work to inform the community of need-to-knows. The man at the forefront is Alejandro Garcia.

Sitting in one of the aging chairs in May Memorial Library, Alejandro Garcia, 35, is unassuming for all that he has managed to accomplish since Covid. Now an American citizen, he immigrated from Mexico at age 8. His end goal was always to return to his home country, the country of his birth. After having moved so many times, nowhere felt like home, certainly not Alamance County.

Moving takes a toll, regardless of how positive someone can be. Year after year of changing schools, meeting new people, and memorizing new faces, Garcia called nowhere home.

It wasn't until 2020, stuck at home under covid restrictions that he started to work with non-profits, ultimately leading to his decision to stay here and start a Latino led grassroots movement. Why? There wasn't one.

“All of a sudden, this kid hugged me, right? And I was like, okay, well I do belong here. I am from here. I am an immigrant. I am from there and I always will be, but I’m from here too, I have roots here,” said Garcia.

This was the first moment Garcia recalls feeling as though Alamance was home. Valores, his non-profit, has made great strides since 2020, often without any grants or funding.

One event Valores hosts is new. It is an answer to the flood of anti-immigrant sentiment in the country, a Know Your Rights informational meeting.

### **Know Your Rights**

The people who gathered came as they were. Some were in canvas pants and work boots, others walked in with their school clothes and backpacks still on, still more had on sweats, their infants clinging tightly. As families arrived and parked outside the church, there was no hint that in a backroom sat 25 to 30 people waiting for a presentation. There were no flyers or social media announcements for the event, it was entirely marketed word of mouth.

The event was meant to teach them what to do in the scenario that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) were to show up at their doorstep –or possibly their workplace. These people are workers, mothers, grandfathers, with different lives and backgrounds.

The event is meant to teach them about how to correctly handle being detained or questioned, what information should be given and when a lawyer is needed.

Walking up to the church, attendees were greeted by two women who directed each person to the appropriate room. After signing in, people milled about and settled in as they waited for the presentation to begin. Dinner was provided by the organizers, and despite the somber purpose of the event, steady conversation filled the space before the program started.

The entire presentation was delivered in Spanish, but even for those who did not speak the language, the central message was unmistakable. If ICE appears at a residence, permission to enter should not be granted; agents may enter legally only with a warrant. If ICE arrives at a workplace, it is important to understand what areas are considered public access and which are designated as private within a restaurant or office building.

For anyone detained, knowing one's rights and obtaining an attorney as quickly as possible is essential. Families were also encouraged to ensure children understand what to do if they are ever stopped and questioned.

These were just some of the key points attendees carried with them as they left. In a nearby room, teenagers watched over younger children while parents attended the meeting. Events like these are not isolated occurrences; they are being held across the country as communities grow increasingly anxious about ongoing immigration crackdowns.

The Catholic church the meeting was hosted in, stands on a street corner, the steeple rising high over other buildings, its intricate carvings towering over participants..

A sense of foreboding overshadows the vitality the people normally bring to such community events but it does not quite subdue them. People still go. The older kids take care of the young. There is chatter, if a bit quieter. People were alert and attentive. A crying baby was hushed quickly. Some scribbled notes while others raised their hands asking about specific situations.

Amongst those in attendance were E and her family. A rare outing for her parents, the importance of knowing this information overshadowed safety concerns. E was one of the big kids who watched over the smaller children, whose parents were also in attendance.

These fears are well founded. Data from the Vera Institute of Justice reports that there were more than 61,000 people in ICE custody in August 2025, a figure exceeding the record peaks of President Donald Trump's previous administration. In North Carolina, there are 14 facilities that ICE has used to hold people in immigration custody. One is the Alamance County Detention Facility. A facility in the center of Graham. The facility, located between streets of picturesque brunch spots and vintage boutiques, stands out as a constant ominous warning.

Garcia sent an email during the meeting warning parents of a new operation, "Freaky Friday." This was a nationwide operation launched by ICE in early October to target unaccompanied children 14 and older. According to this email, children were meant to be the newest victims of scare tactics in hopes that more immigrants would self-deport.

“ Children will be offered \$2,500 to return to their countries of origin.”

“If children do not comply with the “offer”, the letter indicates, their parents/family living in the US will be arrested.”

“ It is possible that the age threshold for this threat letter may be lowered to youth 10 years old and older.”

These were just a few takeaways from the email sent out by Garcia. The American Immigration Lawyer’s Association was tipped off to this operation from several sources.

On November 16, 2025, the Alamance County Sheriff’s office ended its agreement with ICE. This comes with the passage of House Bill 307 (Iryna’s Law) restricting the sheriff’s office’s ability to house and transport ICE detainees.

### **Alejandro Garcia**

Garcia, the face of *Valores* and the prime organizer of the event, was a familiar face to most as he moved through the meeting. His kindness was clear, explaining things more thoroughly, encouraging people to eat, and ensuring everyone’s questions were heard.

Garcia delved deeper into his own immigration story, one that paralleled E's parents and certainly her experience in school. Garcia first traveled to the U.S. with his mom, using a tourist visa. They first lived in Texas before moving to North Carolina. Garcia's life has been to constantly move.

Going to school in the U.S. he quickly learned how to best adapt. He understood the advantages and disadvantages that came with being the new kid. Surviving is something Garcia learned from a very early age. It has been a constant in his life.

Garcia has never known a time of true peace. He's not known a life beyond work and survival. The part of him that still yearns for Mexico is the same part that wishes for a day that he can stop surviving and start living.

Starting in middle school, he worked anything from construction to service jobs. High school was a struggle, not because of the academics, which he had always done well in, but because of work. Garcia worked to support his family, often getting too few hours of sleep.

"I've worked since I was 12, I didn't really get to see my paycheck till I was 18. Everything went to the household."

He hopes for a time of healing, not just for himself but for those in his community. He has never had a moment to himself, something many can relate to. Politics and the current president may

seem like major factors in their lives, but the truth is, regardless of who is in power, building a life in the U.S. has always been a struggle.

### **Life in Alamance**

For decades, Alamance County has stood at the intersection of small-town Southern life and America's ever-evolving immigration story. Once known mainly for its textile mills and tobacco fields, the county's population began shifting in the 1990s as Latinx families arrived to fill jobs in agriculture, construction, and manufacturing.

In the early 2010s, Alamance County drew national attention for its participation in the federal 287(g) immigration enforcement program, which allowed local deputies to check the immigration status of people arrested. According to a 2012 U.S. Department of Justice report, the county's sheriff's office was investigated for alleged discriminatory policing practices against Latino residents.

Although the case was ultimately dismissed by a federal judge in 2015, according to *The News & Observer* and *WRAL*, the controversy left a deep divide between law enforcement and immigrant communities. Despite the history, the immigrant community has continued to grow. According to the North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management, the county's foreign-born population has doubled since 2000. Latinx-owned small businesses have expanded in Burlington bringing with them food, art, and language.

### **Charlotte's Web**

Plaza Latina is usually bustling around noon. Moms are in the bakery buying their daily bread and construction workers are lined up waiting to order on their lunch break. The space is colorful and filled with specialty items and baked goods.

This Wednesday, a day in late November, the doors are locked, a sign in Spanish states that they are closed due to the lack of staff. The taco truck behind Biscuitville is also silent, a stark difference from the usual bustling crowds. Over 30,000 students were absent Monday, November 17 from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. ICE had just touched down in Charlotte and Raleigh. North Carolina is the third state to have ICE overtake their cities.

Los Angeles and Chicago have already been shaken by Immigration's presence. Unlike California and Illinois, North Carolina stands out as a battleground state. A stark turn in the Trump Administration's previous policy. Republicans in North Carolina fear the repercussions. Edwin Peacock III, a former Charlotte City Council Member, told the New York Times, "I can assure you that it's not going to be a good night for anyone in the Republican Party if this kind of activity continues to haunt American cities."

Ricky Hurtado, the first Latino democrat to be elected into the North Carolina legislature, called the raids unlawful, a strategy to take focus off of a failing economy.

“This operation isn't really about the rule of law or immigration, it's about politics and creating a culture of fear across communities and making sure that they are acting on Trump's agenda, which has always been about aggression and fear.”

The targets of these raids have been in predominantly blue states, if the top priority was truly undocumented immigrants, Texas, a border state, or Florida, a state with one of the largest hispanic populations in the country, would be larger targets.

The disappearance of immigrants will not be invisible. Communities will be impacted on multiple levels.

“Whether you like it or not, North Carolina, like the rest of the nation, depends on immigrant labor, which means that we have immigrant communities all across North Carolina that have settled here and that are part of our lives. They work in our restaurants, they work in our hospitals and clinics. They work all over our communities.”

The story of immigration is one of resilience and survival. The journey to the U.S. is not an easy one and not one chosen lightly. Only extraordinary forces push one to leave a home they have known all their life for the chance of something better. Many leave families behind, ones that they will only ever see again on Dia de los Muertos. Despite this, E will continue to strive for the things so many want to deny her and Garcia will keep uplifting his community one program and festival at a time.