

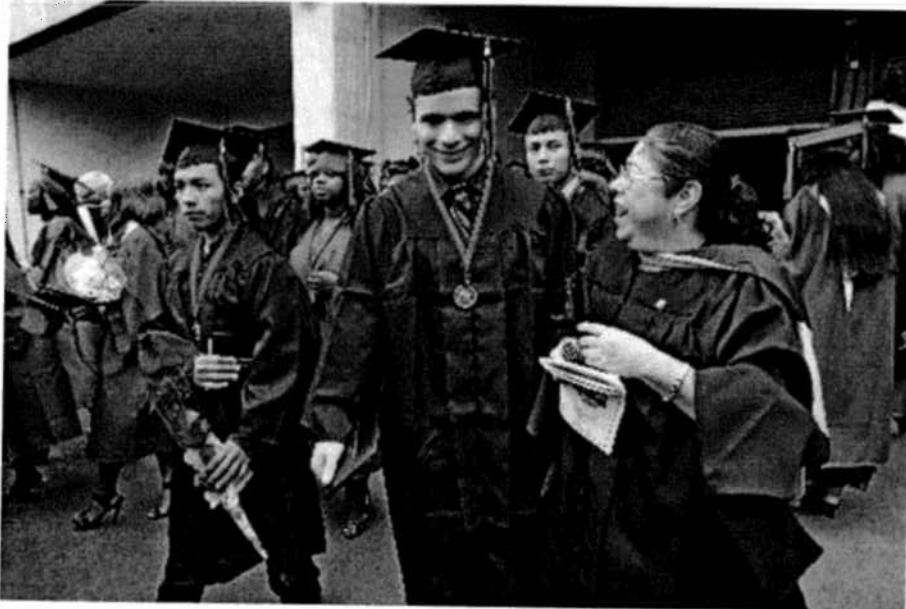
## Trenton teen cherishes freedom after seven months in immigration detention

*Trenton Times*

Posted by nabdou July 04, 2009 19:30PM

He was born on the Fourth of July, an irony he would only appreciate later, during the dark period of his life when liberty and freedom became far more than mere words in his high school history book.

Daniel Guadron has been fighting the odds all his young life, mostly as a happy warrior, winning admirers and supporters at every turn.



Mel Evans/The Associated

Press Daniel Guadron, center, walks with Miriam Mendez, his high school guidance counselor, after his graduation ceremonies from Trenton Central High School in June.

It's not just that he excelled in school: The straight-A student mastered English within months of emigrating from Guatemala at 13, then mastered French. He's aced every math test he has ever taken.

Or that he is blessed with a sunny nature and ever-flashing smile.

Or that he shines on the soccer field and on the wrestling mat.

The handsome young man has always possessed something more, a wisdom that radiates from his deep brown eyes, a thirst for knowledge and self-improvement, a clarity of vision about the nature of the world and what he can achieve in it.

Everyone could see it -- his teachers at Trenton Central High, his coaches, the running buddies who trained with him for his first 10K race, co-workers in the restaurant where he works on weekends, even a lawyer he befriended in the corporate building he cleans. "Mr. Professor," the lawyer dubbed the teen who cheerfully swept floors even as he dreamed of becoming an engineer.

Daniel's guidance counselor called him "everyone's shining star."

And then, one chilly day in April 2008, the 18-year-old star disappeared.

## FROM HIGH SCHOOL STAR TO PRISON UNIFORM

They thundered into the inner-city row house at dawn, shouting and banging doors, their guns as prominent as the letters emblazoned on their windbreakers: ICE.

Daniel was in bed, but he knew who the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents had come for -- his mother, Luisa, who had left for work a short time earlier. He refused to tell them where she was, he said in an Associated Press interview later.

And so, agents handcuffed and shackled him and put him in a van. They drove 52 miles to Elizabeth, to a windowless warehouse on a bleak industrial strip near Newark Liberty International Airport. There, Daniel was handed a drab blue prison uniform and locked up with 300 other immigrants.

"Why am I being treated like a criminal," he thought, "when I have done nothing wrong?"



Mel Evans/The Associated Press Daniel Guadron hugs his sister, Sara, after graduation ceremonies from Trenton Central High School in June.

It didn't take long for him to learn about the otherworldly universe of U.S. detention centers, where every year about 350,000 asylum seekers and illegal immigrants are held indefinitely while the government decides their fate.

Daniel knew that immigrants can be deported if they don't have proper papers. Plenty of illegals live in Trenton and he had heard horror stories about families swept up in ICE raids.

He was aware that his parents, who had separated years earlier, had been working with a lawyer to sort out the family's legal status.

Still, he couldn't understand why he was being punished. After all, he had a Social Security number and legal permission to study and work while the family's case was pending.

His mother sobbed over the phone, promising the lawyer would do everything to free him.

But as the days passed into weeks, Daniel began to despair. He ached for his soccer buddies, his books, his mom. His family couldn't visit because they feared being locked up, too.

Everything about the prison-like setting seemed so dehumanizing, from the thin, wooden board that served as his bed, to the fact that guards called him by his bunk number, not his name.

But what horrified Daniel most was the hopelessness he saw all around -- the haunted, crushed looks of people with nothing to do except fear the future and wonder if they would ever be free.

He yearned for fresh air: The "outdoor recreation" area was nothing more than a large room with a skylight where detainees could exercise for one hour a day. He desperately missed school, especially math. He had been so proud of scoring 96 in honors trigonometry, it made him miserable to think of falling behind.

In H dorm Malcolm Ikolo could see his young bunkmate deteriorating, losing weight, his eyes growing sad and dull. Ikolo, 37, had been in detention for two months, fighting deportation to the Congo.

"Work," he urged Daniel. "Read, exercise, pray. You are young and you are smart. You will survive if you keep your mind busy and your body strong."

And so Daniel began working out with Ikolo, sometimes doing push-ups and calisthenics for hours. He practiced his French, becoming a favorite of other detainees for his willingness to translate documents and letters for them. He practiced yoga. He learned to breakdance, delighting dormmates with his efforts to spin and drop and slide.

Even the staff were drawn to their youngest detainee, who won coveted jobs in the kitchen and the warehouse. Everyone knew it was wrong -- the student missing school, the son paying the price for his parents.

In the evenings Daniel would join the "storytime" sessions in the dorm, when men from Africa and India and China would sip tea and share tales of their countries and their families and their dreams.

My dream is to go to college, he told them. I want to become an engineer -- a great engineer. I want to design bridges so exotic that people will look at them and say, ah, that's a Guadron bridge.

Daniel told them of growing up in Guatemala, and of his initial excitement at landing in America. He described how shocked he had been by the rundown streets of Trenton, how overjoyed by the blessing of school.

"I look strong here," he was fond of saying, flexing his biceps. Then he would tap his forehead. "But up here is where I am really strong."

## **THE WORD SPREADS**

Back in Trenton, word spread quickly: "They've taken Daniel."

In her second-floor classroom, English as a second language teacher Iseult Leger, choked back tears

thinking of the teenager who had captivated her from the moment he arrived.

In her chaotic office, bursting with students and files and snacks, guidance counselor Miriam Mendez felt suddenly helpless and lost. In 23 years of teaching and counseling, Mendez had rarely met anyone as deserving of a great education and a happy life. Now what would become her star, the one destined to graduate among the best in his class?

In the office building Daniel cleaned, lawyer Robert Lytle's heart sank when he thought of his "Mr. Professor" behind bars. How could this happen, he thought, to a kid bursting with such personality and promise?

In fact, immigration lawyers say it happens all the time, young people swept up in raids and locked up because their parents brought them into the country illegally. According to the American Immigration Lawyers Association, teenagers are routinely deported back to countries and cultures they barely know.

ICE defends the practice, blaming the parents for poor choices.

"The parents made a decision when he was a child," spokeswoman Pat Reilly said. "The Department of Homeland Security did not make that decision."

But even Keith Sklar, the lawyer representing the Guadron family, was outraged. What on earth was the government thinking, warehousing a high school senior?

At the Elizabeth detention center, he learned that Daniel's arrest was apparently the result of some paperwork confusion; ICE said the family had missed a scheduled court appearance and were therefore considered deportable and a flight risk.

Sklar had been trying to win the family legal status under the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act, which provides relief for families from certain Central American countries if a family member had been living here for years, as Daniel's father had. (A final decision in the case is scheduled for October 2009).

Be patient, Sklar urged Daniel when he visited Elizabeth.

But some days were so dark that Daniel broke down and cried.

There was July 4, his 19th birthday, when bunkmates sang "Happy Birthday." And the day his grandmother came to see him, the only family member who dared because she was legally visiting from Guatemala. Seeing her grandson behind a dirty glass partition, unable to hug him, permitted only to talk by phone, she wept.

But the blackest day was Sept. 7, the first day of school. Daniel couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. He lay on his bunk tormented by images of his classmates filing into classrooms. How would he ever catch up? Would he even graduate?

**REMEMBER US, DANIEL**

"Pack your things," the guard said. "You are getting out."

As other detainees realized what was happening -- that Daniel was being paroled -- the dorms erupted in cheers. "Good luck, Daniel!" they shouted. "Remember us, Daniel!"

At 7:30 p.m., Oct. 30, 2008, after nearly seven months in detention, Daniel stepped into the parking lot. His sister Sara was waiting. She had spent the day signing paperwork and collecting donations from relatives to pay for his \$3,000 bail. Sklar had managed to reopen the family's case and secure Daniel's release.

When he strode into Trenton Central High the next morning it seemed like the corridors were ringing with his name. Classmates shrieked and clapped, teachers wrapped him in hugs. "It was like I was a rock star," he says, laughing.

But his joy was quickly tempered by a grim reality: Because Daniel had missed nearly two quarters, his usual straight-A's had been replaced by zeros. His place in graduation would be affected, along with his prospects for college.

Worse, the one college he had set his heart on -- the New Jersey Institute of Technology -- couldn't even process his financial aid application because he was not a permanent resident. At Mercer County Community College he was told that he would have to pay full tuition, \$3,824 a semester, unless he had a green card.

Daniel's heart sank. How could he possibly raise nearly \$4,000?

What about my dreams of becoming an engineer, he asked Sara, despondently.

"Daniel," she said, "People find ways to pay for their dreams."

## **THE COMEBACK**

Detention changed Daniel; everyone could see it. Sara jokes that it made him "nicer," more considerate. Others marveled at how his spirit had not been extinguished and how his determination was as strong as ever.

At school Daniel quickly caught up, earning A's in every subject. He began training for his first marathon. He started a breakdancing group with friends. With the help of Mendez, he secured three small scholarships, covering about half his tuition costs for Mercer. He hopes that by next year he will have a green card and can transfer to NJIT.

On June 24, Daniel Humbarto Guadron donned a black cap and, to the thundering applause of several thousand onlookers in a downtown stadium, he was awarded his high school diploma. He had graduated 63rd in a class of 456. It was the happiest moment of his life.

Outside, Daniel's mother and grandmother and sister engulfed him in hugs. Teachers congratulated him. Daniel beamed, thanking everyone, promising them that he would not disappoint them and that one day, "the world is going to know the name Daniel Guadron."