

# Montgomery County student wins reprieve from deportation

By [Pamela Constable](#), Published: March 14

Jorge Acuna, 44, was walking his dog early on March 8 when a government van pulled up outside his house in Germantown. His wife, Blanca, and son, Jorge Steven, a senior at Montgomery College, were inside asleep.

Within minutes, all three members of the Acuna family — immigrants from Colombia who had lived in the United States for more than a decade — were under arrest and being transported to a federal detention center on the Eastern Shore to await deportation.

“I would not wish on anyone what we went through,” Acuna, trembling and tearful, told supporters and journalists in Spanish at a rally in Rockville on Wednesday. “I saw my own son manacled by the hands and feet, for no crime other than wanting to be in this country and study.”

The rally, planned by immigrant and student activists to protest the family’s plight, turned into a celebration for Jorge Steven and his parents, who were unexpectedly released from federal custody late Tuesday and granted a one-year reprieve from deportation after a week of growing media and political attention to the case.

Nicole Navas, a spokeswoman for the federal [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#) agency, said immigration officials in Baltimore had decided to exercise special discretion in the case, allowing the family to go home and Jorge Steven to finish out his final year in college.

The Acunas came to the United States in 2000, fleeing from endemic violence in their native country, and applied for political asylum. Their petition was denied in 2005, appealed and denied again in 2006. Ever since, they have been living in Maryland with a pending deportation order bound to catch up with them. Although now free, they could still be deported in the future.

Surrounded by about 100 cheering supporters Wednesday, many of them young Hispanic immigrants like himself, Jorge Steven said he hoped his family’s ordeal would draw attention to the plight of others in similar situations.

“There are many people who are hidden and voiceless, but who still have dreams,” he said in Spanish.

To the immigrant advocates and student groups that supported Acuna, the government’s action Tuesday was a small but dramatic victory for two causes: halting deportations of longtime, otherwise law-abiding immigrants who are not in the country legally, and promoting “Dream Act” legislation that would allow talented students such as Jorge Steven to receive [government tuition discounts](#), even if they do not have [legal immigrant status](#).

“This young man is a poster child, a role model for the potential of our youth,” Nancy Navarro (D-Eastern County), a member of the Montgomery County Council, said at the rally. All nine members of the [council signed a letter](#) to federal authorities last week, expressing concern about the Acuna family and asking the White House and Department of Homeland Security to intervene “in this terrible situation.”

Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) also expressed concern about the family, and on Wednesday he applauded their release, calling it a “fair and humane decision.”

Supporters organized by the immigrant rights group [Casa de Maryland](#) also launched an [online petition drive](#) last week calling for Jorge Steven’s release, gathering more than 4,000 signatures in several days.

The young man, who came to the United States at age 8, was an honors graduate of Northwest High School in Germantown and is now a dean’s list student at Montgomery College who hopes to go to medical school.

The activists said they hoped this case would increase public support for “Dream Act” legislation, which has been stalled at the state and national levels. In Maryland, a bill was passed by legislators last year, but then was suspended after opponents gathered more than 100,000 signatures for an [unprecedented online petition](#) against it. A statewide referendum will be held on the issue this year.

“Jorge was the most dedicated and motivated student I ever met. That’s why I came here today to support him,” said Daniel Esteban, a teacher at Roberto Clemente Middle School in Germantown, who taught him in 2005.

A lawyer now representing the Acuna family, Enid Gonzalez Aleman, said she did not know the details of their asylum petition, but that their original lawyer had mishandled the case. The family declined Wednesday to discuss their asylum claim. Colombia has long been wracked by violence from guerrilla insurgents, paramilitary groups and drug gangs.

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/montgomery-county-student-wins-reprieve-from-deportation/2012/03/14/gIQAFvieCS\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/montgomery-county-student-wins-reprieve-from-deportation/2012/03/14/gIQAFvieCS_story.html)