

DACA Recipients: Dreams Realized and Deferred – A profile of filmmaker and I-RISE staff member, Edgar Aquino Huerta

Submitted by Deb Convery – Communications Manager

In September 2024 Edgar Aquino Huerta received word from the Kaleidoscope Binational Short Film Contest and Festival that he'd been awarded the Grand Prize, finally propelling his short film "Made in America" into the spotlight after a 3 ½ year wait to have his film shown to the film going public. As one reviewer describes it: **"Made in America" tells the story of an undocumented student who is in college, but his Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) hasn't been renewed**, thus he finds himself in the middle of an immigration raid at his job. It aims to give a voice to those who have gone through similar experiences."

Edgar, 28 years old, has been the Community Outreach & Education Consultant for Interfaith RISE in the Vineland, NJ office since 2022. About the bond he develops with his Spanish speaking clients, he says "I always feel very blessed because every time we say 'bye', they don't want me to leave, or they ask me to come back the next day".



The Migrant Experience

Edgar's family never planned to stay in the US; they hoped to make enough money so they could go back to Mexico and build their house. They started out as migrant farm workers in south Jersey. Edgar's brother and sister were born in the US, but he wasn't (he came to the US when he was 2) and so saw the difference when it came to necessities like health care that were available to them but not to him. **The realities became even more apparent when he turned 16 and could not do things like apply for a drivers permit and start applying for part-time jobs.**

He was 14 when his mother, who also lacked access to health care, had to go back to Mexico to try and find medical help for a life-threatening chronic illness. Edgar's father and older brother could not work, due to various challenges, so he had to work in the

fields in the Summers to send money back to Mexico to help his mom. **“So, in a way, I became the dad”**, he says. Because of the 10-year re-entry bar, coupled with Covid and other challenges, Edgar has not seen his mom in 14 years (the hope is that she can finally return in 2025, with sponsorship by Edgar’s older brother).

The Road to Graduation

Edgar, a graduate of Rowan University, was not eligible for loans, and so paid for his entire tuition out of his own pocket. Working in a greenhouse where family members already worked, **“I was blessed to be working in the same department as my uncles, so I guess I was kind of a “nepo baby” there**, which benefitted me because my boss allowed me to work and go to college at the same time. Working, going to class, going back to work in any given day”

He worked 12-hour shifts, 7 days a week. Since he couldn’t miss a day of work, if he



had film assignments for his classes, he used his co-workers as subjects and highlighted the farm workers and the immigrant community experience. “I liked focusing on these topics because the media shows you what they assume but they don’t really show you what’s actually going on and they dehumanize us and make us seem like we are these victims without a voice, and we need a savior. But I wanted to

change it up, I wanted to change the narrative and show the human side of my community. So, I already had a mission to uplift these voices.”

The Budding Filmmaker

In his short film **“You, Too, Are Essential”**, Edgar quotes Edward R. Murrow from the 1960 Thanksgiving documentary, **“Harvest of Shame”**: “Were it not for the labor of the people you are going to meet [in this documentary], you might not starve, but your table would not be laden with the luxuries that we have all come to regard as essentials”. I asked Edgar **what has changed regarding agricultural working conditions since the making of that documentary and what remains the same?**

Most farm workers are now undocumented migrants as opposed to poor black and white American citizens, **“but not much has changed, really”** he says. “Poor housing

conditions, poor pay; farm workers are excluded from federal minimum wage requirements. They don't receive overtime pay." Only some farm owners allow for shade breaks in extreme heat.

He was part of an advocacy campaign this past Summer for legislation that would provide essentials like shade breaks and paid days off during heat waves and was stunned by the number of people who were against this legislation as he testified in Trenton.

When starting to write the script for [Made in America](#), he tried not to focus on his own story because **"I didn't think I had a story, but then I realized I *do* have a story.** In 2017 I was at a rally in Philly and that's when they made an announcement that DACA had been rescinded. I started to worry, what if my expired work permit triggers something in the system and they came looking for me. Where would I hide? What would I do? That evening, I went to my first screen writing class at Rowan, and we were given our assignment for making a short film, so that's when I started writing the script about a student whose DACA expires."



Two days before they were to start filming, the actor who was to play the protagonist got sick with Covid. Edgar's team of fellow students strongly encouraged him to take over the part (even though he was already the director and producer), so reluctantly he ended up starring in his own film.

Edgar says the biggest door to open for him since winning the award was being invited to the film festival in Mexico, but because of his immigration status, he could not attend.

The Dream Continues.....

Edgar is currently writing a script for a horror film. It centers around 2 community organizers who do an outreach visit at a farm and while they're visiting with the farmers,

they discover the farm is haunted by an entity that has been terrorizing the workers at night.

He'd like to make all kinds of films, including musicals, horror films, and dramas. He'd also like to do a TV series that focuses on an immigration law firm.

As for the looming challenges coming in 2025 with the new Administration in D.C., "I don't feel like there's a strong argument for people who want to take DACA away. They haven't been successful in the past and I don't think they'll be successful in completely removing the program in 2025. But if they *do* remove it, I hope that's because they want to give us a permanent solution. **I tell DACA recipients that, if DACA ends, always remember that your social security is always going to be your social security; it never goes away.** There's ways to survive – you can open up your own business, work as an independent contractor, you just have to pay your taxes at the end of the year. There's ways to survive for a while, but I know that it's not ok, and we do need a permanent solution."

What keeps Edgar going? One source of strength comes from his mother. Before his mom went back to Mexico 14 years ago, she told him "Son, always try to do your best because, remember, what you plant today will come to harvest later".

Be sure to check out Edgar's autobiographical short film ["My American Dream"](#) and other film projects [on his YouTube page](#)