MET JESÚS on July 2, 2011. He was standing in a parking lot in downtown Atlanta, clothed in a white undershirt and faded denim jeans, and he was not happy.

ON APRIL 14, 2011, the Georgia legislature approved H.B. 87, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Enforcement Act. Signed into law the following month by Governor Nathan Deal, Georgia H.B. 87 became the third in a series of copycat bills, following Utah and Indiana, designed to mimic provisions of Arizona’s controversial S.B. 1070, which was known at the time as the nation’s most expansive restrictionist law. Notably, H.B. 87 was only the first of many comprehensive restrictionist bills to pass that year in the Southeast.

Georgia’s new law empowered state and local law enforcement officers to verify a person’s immigration and citizenship status in the course of routine traffic stops, mandated that private and public employers use the federal E-Verify database to confirm the status of employees, and established criminal penalties for those who knowingly “harbored” or transported unauthorized immigrants in Georgia. “It’s a great day for Georgia,” said state representative Matt Ramsey, one of the bill’s sponsors. “We think we have done our job . . . to address the costs and the social consequences that have been visited upon our state by the federal government’s failure to secure our nation’s borders” (quoted in Redmon 2011).

Not all Georgians agreed.
In June, a coalition of civil and immigrant rights groups, represented by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Georgia, the Asian Law Caucus, the National Immigrant Law Center (NILC), and the Southern Poverty Law Center, filed a lawsuit against H.B. 87.

July 1, the day that H.B. 87 went into effect, was declared un día de in-cumplimiento: a day of noncompliance. The Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR), a grassroots immigrant rights organization, encouraged immigrants and allies to stay home from work, to close their businesses, to buy nothing. Adelina Nicholls, executive director of GLAHR, urged: “No buying, no doing, no caring for their children, no cooking in their restaurants. This is the commitment we make. The first of July will be a day of noncompliance precisely so that they know that the Latino community está presente!” In a statement released to the press, Southerners on New Ground (SONG)—a Queer Liberation organization—elaborated, “We will show our economic power by not working or shopping on July 1st and [we] will demon-strate our people power by marching on July 2nd. Those who thought this law would break apart our communities have awakened a movement.”

And so, on July 2, we marched.

MONTHS EARLIER, before we knew for certain that H.B. 87 would pass the Georgia legislature, I committed to organizing an affinity group from my city—Knoxville, Tennessee—and driving to Atlanta to stand with Georgians against the law. Upon the law’s implementation, our small group quickly doubled and then tripled in size. We rented a fifteen-passenger van, and I was volunteered to captain our trip to the demonstration. Although only two passengers were undocumented, our group felt like moving targets as we drove the white, unmarked van down Interstate 75 into downtown Atlanta.

The forecast for the day predicted temperatures in the nineties. Still, the combination of a midday rally and thousands of marchers packed onto the concrete of Atlanta’s shadeless downtown streets made it seem much hotter. We sweated through the pre-march gathering, as group after group of demonstrators trickled in and claimed space in front of the capitol building. People amassed everywhere—standing in the road, sitting on sidewalks, leaning against sides of buildings. Lightweight metal fencing had been installed to keep us from treading on the capitol lawn, but a daring few had jumped the fences to spread out on the cool grass beneath shade trees as they awaited the start of the march. All around, people were putting the finishing touches on homemade signs: “Legalización ahora,” “No racial profiling,” “Immigration reform now!” Some used templates to spray-paint “No H.B. 87” in bold print on poster board, the o in No designed like a Georgia peach. Others carried vinyl banners, their messages echoing similar themes in English and Spanish: “Marcha por la Justicia,” “Justice for All.”
We sweated as demonstrators piled onto the narrow downtown streets, swarming tightly around a circle of people singing resistance songs and playing drums. A group of DREAMers stood in the center, waving flags and chanting, in call-and-response fashion, “UNDOCUMENTED . . . UNAFRAID!” Around them stood people of all ages: toddlers holding their mothers’ hands, old women playing trumpets, young fathers pushing strollers. Families. The music and chanting continued, and we sweated as we listened, and sang, and waited, over what seemed like hours, to take our first steps.

Crammed in so tightly, it was impossible to tell that the march had begun until those immediately in front of us moved forward. And then we were off, singing and chanting for miles as the sun bore down. Those marching around me, mostly Latinx people, roared exuberantly, “Se ve, se siente, el pueblo está presente!” (You hear it, you feel it, the people are here!). Ahead, we heard bursts of cheers and applause rumble up from the crowd in regular intervals. It was not until we turned a corner and found ourselves standing at the top of a long sloping hill that we realized why: in front of us, as far as the eye could see, was a sea of white T-shirts. Behind us, the same. Announcements for the march urged demonstrators to wear white, and we did. Looking back at photos from that day, what stands out most is how the mass of people occupying the streets of downtown Atlanta on July 2, 2011, of varied immigration histories and racial and ethnic backgrounds, had been remade into a single undulating white line. We, too, cheered.
AT THE END OF THE MARCH, the crowd assembled to listen to speakers testify about their fears of the law, its impact on their communities, and their vows to resist. The testimonies were punctuated by spontaneous, prolonged outbursts of “¡Sí se puede! ¡Sí se puede! ¡Sí se puede!” (Yes, we can!).

It was, reportedly, one of the largest marches Atlanta had seen in decades. The sight of so many people was both amazing and overwhelming, and the sheer number of people packed into those city streets, chanting and clapping and singing, seemed to suck all of the oxygen from the air. Gasping for breath and exhausted by the unrelenting heat, I stepped away from the crowd and trudged back to our van, in search of a moment of peace and a bottle of cold water.

It was in the parking lot that I met Jesús. He was standing next to what I supposed was his car, waving his arms frantically in the air and cursing in Spanish. Although he didn’t carry a sign, and I hadn’t seen him during the march, I recognized him as one of us by his white shirt.

He was shouting at another man, planted just beyond him: ¿Qué pasó? ¿Qué pasó?

As I approached, the man turned. Seeing me, he asked, in careful English, Did you see what happened here? No, I didn’t see anything, I responded, matching his English. Then again, for good measure: No vi nada.

He gestured to his car, a worn but well-maintained sporty sedan, nothing fancy. Painted candy apple red, it stood out next to our van, which was parked just beside it. Someone broke my window, he said. Look. He pointed at the passenger side of his car: Mire. He must have noticed my reluctance to get involved. But I had to walk past his car to reach mine, so I obligingly peered around him as he gestured. Sure enough, glass lay scattered inside and outside the car, the window shattered into hundreds of shiny crystals that danced in the sunlight.

Lo siento, I said spreading my hands wide. I’m sorry. I didn’t see anything.

I shrugged, and he nodded. It was hot—much too hot to care. And, really, I had not seen anything. I passed his car and walked to our van. Opening the doors at the back of the van, I hid from the men and their shattered window. After all, I reasoned, I had things to do. I reapplied sunscreen and filled my backpack with icy bottles of water from our cooler. As I drank some water and cooled down, I peered back at the two men from behind the van door. They were pacing around their car, visibly upset by the shattered window.

¿Quieren agua? I tossed a couple of bottles of water to Jesús, who accepted them gratefully and passed one to his compañero. They were young, perhaps in their mid-twenties. There was silence as they guzzled water. Then
I listened. I listened as Jesús told me about how he had paid a man—*The se-
curity guard, you saw him, ¿no?*—to watch his car while they marched. I
nodded. I had seen him. We, too, had been approached when we first parked:
a man had walked up to our van just as we pulled in, peered inside, told us
the cost of parking, and waited. At the time, we thanked him and assured
that we would pay for our parking spot at the machine located at the front of
the lot. The man quickly replied that *of course* we should pay the machine—
definitely not him—he was not allowed to collect any money. We had also
noted his companions, a group of men hanging out across the street who
seemed to carefully eye each car and its passengers. So I had a pretty good
idea of what had happened to the window of Jesús’s sporty red car.

*What should I do?* Jesús asked. *I had money in there, five hundred dollars.
It’s gone. Stolen. What should I do? Should I call the police?*

I looked down at the ground, quiet this time because I wanted to help
and knew the answer to his question, but I did not want to give it voice.
Finally, I glanced up at him sideways, rubbing my forehead, and told him the
truth: *I don’t know if it’s . . . safe . . . for you to talk to the police.*

Looking into his eyes, I saw that he understood what I was saying. I was
hoping he would protest, hoping that my assumption about his immigration
status had been wrong and he would tell me—not to worry—he had papers
and all he needed was someone to interpret into English the details of the
situation to a police officer. But he didn’t. He was quiet. Resigned.

But I was angry. *Look,* I said, *I know someone we can talk to. We can ask
if there is anything we can do. Maybe someone will be able to help.*

Together, Jesús and I walked back to the rally, leaving his friend to keep
watch over the shattered window. We walked in search of one of the legal
observers attending the march, who were decked out in neon-colored base-
ball caps and vests, a clear message to both police officers and marchers that
they were on hand, monitoring. It was on the long, hot walk back to the
capitol that I learned that my new acquaintance was named Jesús, that he
had recently moved to Georgia from North Carolina, and that he was origi-
nally from Mexico.

Like many young Mexican men, Jesús had come to the United States
seeking work to support his family back home. He had lived and worked in
North Carolina for years without incident but had lost his construction job
several months before the march in Atlanta. Since then, Jesús had been
through difficult times, unable to find steady employment due to his lack of
documentation. It seemed to him that North Carolina was becoming in-
creasingly hostile to immigrants; police had begun to establish checkpoints
and patrols outside predominantly Latinx neighborhoods, and *la migra*—
Spanish slang for immigration enforcement—seemed to be working closely
with police to apprehend unauthorized immigrants. A friend had told Jesús
that he could find a job in Georgia, that the state was friendly to immigrants, and that he would not have to worry about la migra—at least not in Atlanta. Of course, this was before the passage of H.B. 87.

As we walked, I spotted Miguel Carpizo, the East Tennessee organizer for the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition. We filled Carpizo in on the details of Jesús’s situation, and together the three of us set out in search of someone more familiar with Georgia’s legal procedures.

It did not take long to spot one of the many lawyers who had volunteered their time as legal observers. Sporting a hot-pink baseball cap and high ponytail, she nodded again and again as Jesús slowly told his story in Spanish while Carpizo and I took turns interpreting into English. It was clear that she understood the situation. I was hopeful that she knew of a solution, that I had simply overreacted. After all, I reasoned, the police had given their word to organizers that they were not interested in the immigration status of marchers. And Jesús had done nothing wrong.

Her response, however, was not what we hoped for: It’s possible that the police will not ask for your status, she said. But they will make a report, and they will ask you a lot of questions. You’ll have to give them your information. You might have to give them your driver’s license. She continued, It’s also possible that they might not ask these questions, but probably they won’t be able to find the person who did this anyway, so you won’t get your money back. In my opinion, a report made to the police could result in severe consequences for you. You could make a report, but—given the potential risks—I strongly caution against it.

She went on to recommend that Jesús take pictures of the broken glass and damaged window and report the incident to his insurance company, if he had one. He nodded; he did not have insurance. As an undocumented immigrant, Jesús was prohibited from obtaining a driver’s license in most states; this prevented him from purchasing car insurance from many insurance companies. I remember Jesús’s eyes—stony, resigned—as the lawyer said, repeatedly, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. With great dignity, chin held high, Jesús thanked us, shook my hand, and headed back, alone, to the parking lot.

When I later returned to our van, Jesús’s car was gone. Left behind were the broken shards of glass to serve as a reminder of our chance encounter on that sweltering Georgia afternoon.

Note

1. DREAMers are undocumented youth who would benefit from the DREAM Act, which would provide pathways to citizenship for those who grow up in the United States and fulfill certain requirements, including military service or higher education.