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By Ian Shapira  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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Anthony Lemus, 16, was in his Woodbridge townhouse with a classmate, both of them huddled at a computer crafting a major speech, a manifesto in 500 words railing against the federal immigration legislation. As the high school junior tapped away at the keyboard with a determined glare -- "A lot of people assume we are just gang bangers, but out here in the crowd all I see is future doctors and lawyers" -- his concentration drifted. He changed the music to psych himself back up.

Would it be "On My Block" by Scarface? "Under the Bridge" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers? Or "Hotel California" by the Eagles? Finally, his friend, Salem Trad, turned to Lemus and smiled: "We got to close it up because we can't make it too long. I say you finish it off."

Lemus did finish off the speech, and now he is known as one of the Washington area's most vocal organizers of the recent student demonstrations against the crackdown on immigration. In protest after protest, and in language that was as urgent as it was uncomplicated, his voice raised the rallying cry: "They're trying to kick out the hardest-working people in America!"

The charismatic junior at Freedom High School in Prince William County, home to more Hispanics than the District, led hundreds of teens in walkouts with the single-mindedness and savvy of a well-honed politician -- not exactly the darling of the school system, hardly an Ivy League-bound student, but a guy who seized the galvanizing moment and took a stand, earning the respect of students and teachers alike. A guy whose drive, like so many other teenagers', is at odds with his youthful insouciance.

The demonstrations that swept the country and the Washington area produced no single nationally known leader, but instead multiple stewards -- such as Lemus -- who have risen up from their neighborhoods, workplaces and schools.

Now that the school protests have petered out and last week's climactic march to the Mall has passed with no concrete plans for what will unfold next, Lemus wonders whether he can sustain his newfound interest in activism and politics or whether it will be undone by what he admits are his wayward tendencies.

Despite his obvious zeal, Lemus is a study in paradox:

He often serves as a hallway peacemaker at Freedom but until now has never participated in any serious extracurricular activities that would empower him to make real change at his school. Although he spoke in passionate sound bites about the immigration battle on Capitol Hill, until this month he had known little

about his own parents' arrival in the United States and even thought his mother was illegal (she's not).

Last week, he sat in his family's Woodbridge townhouse listening -- for the first time -- to his Salvadoran parents recount how they illegally crossed the border into the United States in the 1980s.

Lemus heard his father, Tony, a furniture mover, describe how he had been a union leader for a carton factory in San Salvador. Fearing that he would be drawn into the country's civil war, he fled to Mexico. He then hid in the trunk of an American's car for the passage over.

Then the teen got to hear his mother's story. Reina Lemus, a house cleaner, explained how she hid in a cave and then slipped over from Tijuana in the middle of the night, evading sweeping searchlights.

Anthony fell silent, considering the magnitude of his parents' experiences and what had been his lack of curiosity about their lives.

His leadership was remarkably effective at forcing schools such as Freedom High to acknowledge the rights and cultural identities of Hispanic students. But even as Lemus believes that Latino youngsters must combat harsh perceptions about their potential in America, by his own admission, he gets F's in some of his courses, falls asleep in class and hardly reads.

"I know I have to be a leader for my people," he said one recent night with friends at Brittany's, a popular Woodbridge hangout. "I think the perfect leader is a human one. You need a leader that understands his people. I think that's why people listen to me. People can relate to me. They say, 'Hey, he's going through what I'm going through.' "

Lemus said other political issues, such as the Iraq war, have not galvanized him because they do not threaten a single race and don't seem like things he can change. But when the immigration issue surfaced, he instinctively grasped for the megaphone because of his loyalty to his parents and culture.

His peers readily accepted his leadership because, they said, they rely on him routinely -- whether it's to break up fights or figure out weekend plans. His cellphone is all but glued to his ear most of the time.

"He talks to everybody. He gets along with every single person. If he meets somebody, he'll give him his cellphone number," said Karla Brizuela, 18, a senior at Freedom who promoted the school's demonstrations on Spanish radio and spoke at last Monday's rally on the Mall. "But he doesn't do his schoolwork -- ever. It's so weird that now he's doing something for other people, and he never does anything for himself."

Prince William school officials would not permit a reporter to follow Lemus around in school, saying they did not want to cause more disruptions at Freedom and draw attention to a student who had been persuading others to skip classes. But during spring break last week, Anthony showed that he was the center of gravity for a confederacy of Hispanic and black friends who all live off Route 1 in Woodbridge, about 25 miles south of the District on Interstate 95.

During their vacation week, Anthony and his friends typically roamed the neighborhoods and strip malls along Route 1, sometimes listening to Anthony's cellphone play what he called his theme song, "On My Block." They often gathered in the parking lot of a Food Lion or at the outside tables at a Checkers.

At Checkers one day, the back-and-forth was particularly sharp, but to the teens, the chatter seemed to flush

out any pent-up anxieties about their differences. "I got a question for Spanish people," said one of his friends, a 15-year-old black Puerto Rican freshman at Freedom, whose father did not permit his name to be used in the paper. "Why do you all drink Coronas?"

Anthony was quick: "Well, how come you all drink malt liquor?"

The kids smacked the tables, snickering loudly, while Anthony and his friend grinned at each other and shared knowing nods. Then, Anthony and Trad, 16, headed off to the office of a chiropractor, who is treating their back problems.

"You guys were supposed to show up yesterday," said receptionist Stephanie Portillo, rolling her eyes.

"We went to *Washington* ," Anthony said, sounding slightly irritated that a fellow Hispanic seemed not to know the significance of the immigration rally on the Mall.

At Freedom High, which has more than 1,100 students, it was a minority -- 250 to 350 students, virtually all Hispanic -- that participated in the immigration protests. Nearly 40 percent of Freedom's students are Hispanic, the highest percentage of any Prince William high school. Federal law bars officials from asking about family documentation, so it's unknown how many students have a parent illegally in the country. Thirty-four percent of students are black, 20 percent are non-Hispanic white and about 5 percent are Asian or Pacific Islanders.

Racial tension at Freedom typically manifests itself in segregated seating during lunch, but the recent rallies may have inflamed feelings somewhat.

Candice Dickerson, 16, a black sophomore whose mother heads the school's parent-teacher-student organization, speculated that if blacks staged the same kind of protests, they would be dealt stricter punishments. "The police wouldn't walk with us, and they would probably lock us up and send us to jail," she said. "Hispanics made it seem like they're the only ones. There are immigrants who come from Africa."

During the protests, Lemus, who learned about the immigration bills on CNN.com or television news, was effective in controlling the crowd and riling it back up again. "Yo! Yo! Yo! Calm down. I need everybody to calm down," he belted out through a megaphone, as the crowd chanted "Huggy! Huggy!" in unison.

"The fact that everyone showed up. Yo, man, that's ridiculous," he yelled. "It doesn't matter where you're from. Just hug each other!"

Lemus said he thinks his school's major problem is that not enough is done to give students who feel marginalized enough attention or power. He said he hopes to run for student government president -- at the urging of school officials who were impressed by the way he led protests -- and form a coalition of Hispanic students across Northern Virginia.

"Now more so than before, he will be looked up on more. He has earned this newfound respect, not just from Latino students, but from other students in the building as well," said Madre Mack, Freedom's assistant principal. "Some of his teachers were talking to him about his skills and how he needs to utilize them on a more daily basis rather than just one particular event. I told him that I was going to stay on him."

Lemus's newfound celebrity sometimes makes him a bit concerned about his image. "Yo, the Potomac News

only said I had a 'modicum' of power. What does that mean?" he asked one day.

His mother, who has a green card and is studying English and civics to earn citizenship, said she is proud that Lemus became so impassioned but wants him to buckle down. "My dream is that he becomes a doctor," she said.

Lemus, however, is thinking that he'd like to go to college and one day serve as a judge. He likes to keep busy, which may be what propels him forward or pushes him back.

"Right now, in English, we're reading Edgar Allen Poe, but I don't read literature. If it's interesting, I'll read it," he said, sitting at the booth at Brittany's. "I don't have the attention span to read a whole book. I don't like to get bored. I do a lot of stuff."

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