

# Santa Cruz Sentinel

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## STATE LEGISLATURE

# Slate of anti-Trump bills pa

Climate data, immigrant protections among those sent to Gov. Brown

By Katy Murphy and Casey Tolan

Bay Area News Group

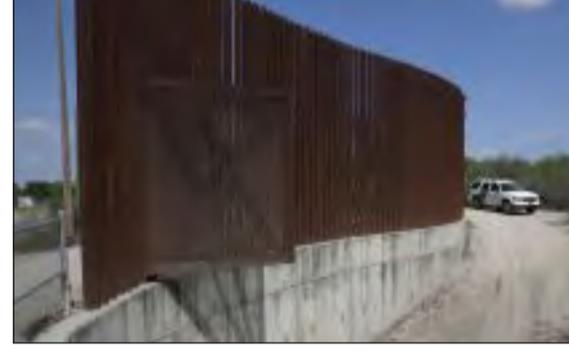
**SACRAMENTO** » In a supercharged year marked by hard-fought victories on affordable-housing and climate change, California lawmakers pushed through a passel of legislation to thwart initiatives

from the Trump administration — but also discovered that even their popular resistance has limits.

Democratic legislators pushed through a bevy of bills aimed at shielding undocumented immigrants from deportation while they're at work, at school or even in police custody, and the anti-

Trump "resistance" sent Gov. Jerry Brown bills to protect climate data from federal censorship, guard against a Muslim registry and block future presidential candidates from the California primary ballot unless they release their tax returns — a direct swipe at the president, who

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## SANTA CRUZ COUNTY STORIES

# KING FOR THE PLAY

Actor Avondina Wills climbs to 'The Mountaintop' in portrayal of MLK



SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Actor Avondina Wills will be portraying the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in the Actors' Theater production of 'The Mountaintop' at Center Stage from Sept. 29 through Oct. 15.

By Wallace Baine

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**SANTA CRUZ** » Avondina Wills was 12 years old when Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed in Memphis. And standing at the center of his memory of that day is his mother.

Hattie Wills was raising three

boys by herself in the predominantly black Fifth Ward in Houston. Avondina was her oldest.

He had never seen his mother so distraught. On that morning, she was sobbing, starkly out of character for a woman who was probably the strongest person her son had ever known. She gathered her sons together and had them do what under normal

circumstances they enjoyed doing more than just about anything: watch television.

"They're going to show his speeches," she said to her children, "and what we're going to do today is sit in front of this television and watch this speech, so you can remember for the rest of your life what this man did for all of us."

Today, almost half a century later, the memory is particularly vivid for Avondina Wills, who is preparing to inhabit the persona of MLK in "The Mountaintop," a play by Memphis playwright Katori Hall that imagines the night before King's assassination. The play is a two-person performance — King

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## HEALTH CARE

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Covered California federal rule its own exchange

By Pauline B... Carmen Hered Kaiser Health News

California and other states will exempt themselves from a new federal rule that would require them to buy individual health insurance under the Affordable Care Act.

In California, the state is contemplating a rule that would circumvent the federal rule for a few more years, too.

The Trump administration's rule gives people until Nov. 1 through 2018 coverage of health insurance. It will change 45 days after Nov. 1 through 2018.

But in California, the other state-run exchanges in Colorado, Minnesota, Washington, D.C., Massachusetts, and New York, and the federal exchange in Washington, D.C. — covering health insurance for 2018 will have to make decisions.

In Colorado, the sign-up period for 2018 will start on Jan. 12. In Minnesota, it will start on Nov. 1 and run through Jan. 15. In Washington, it will start on Jan. 15.

Consumers shopping for health insurance in California, Colorado, Minnesota, and Washington, D.C. will have to make decisions about their health insurance plans outside of the federal exchange.

**OBAMA**

# Profile

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and a motel maid named Camae — taking place in a room in the infamous Lorraine Motel where King was murdered on April 4, 1968. Samuel L. Jackson and Angela Bassett played the two roles on Broadway in 2011.

For Wills, the production ranks as a mountaintop in his own career, which has included everything from playing the Big Bad Wolf at Disneyland to portraying Troy Maxson, the tragic hero at the heart of August Wilson's landmark play "Fences."

It can be an intimidating assignment for an actor to take on a historical figure that, in the case of King, has morphed from an imperfect man into a mythic hero. In the three years that he's been searching for an opportunity to do the play, Wills said that he's been meditating on the immense burden that King took on in being the public face of the civil rights movement.

"He got death threats every day," said the veteran Santa Cruz actor. "And to be in that situation and to continue to believe in your faith that you're doing right, to see the results of it, and the failures of it. And you don't stop because — what else are you going to do? Your people are suffering. That's what's juicy about this part, to put yourself into all those emotions and live it."

Wills has lived the peripatetic actor's life since he

first stepped on the treadmill in the 1980s, working as an extra in Denver in television movies starring Raymond Burr who was resurrecting his early career roles as "Perry Mason" and "Ironside." Since then, he has lived and/or worked as a stage and film actor in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco in between stints in Santa Cruz.

In the late 2000s, he lived the struggling actor's life in Hollywood, going to auditions, working catering jobs at awards ceremonies, doing the occasional corporate film to make ends meet, then returning to Santa Cruz to be close to his son Jari. Since then, he's been pursuing roles on stage, looking for more opportunities to get better as an actor. "I don't know what's going to happen next," he said of his future as an actor. "I'm enjoying this journey and the journey tends to take me to the next spot."

But all this concentration on the life of Martin Luther King has brought Wills back to his mother, who did not live to see him play the role (She died in 2014). In the years after King's assassination, Wills experienced significant upward mobility as a teen. His mother got the family a bigger house in an integrated neighborhood where he attended a new school. He's quick to credit King's sacrifice on behalf of African Americans for his family's good fortune. But even more credit, he said, goes to his tireless, resilient, steadfast mother.

"Even if there never was an MLK," he said, "there would still be my mother. And she believed in us and

in the possibilities of what we could accomplish if just given a chance."

## AVONDINA WILLS

**Home:** Santa Cruz. Originally from: Houston.

**Family:** Two sons, Avondina Jr. and Jari.

**Credits:** Stage work has included 'Fences,' 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,' 'Driving Miss Daisy,' 'Of Mice and Men,' 'Sylvia' and many others.

**His name:** It's pronounced 'ah-VON-din-nay,' and, according to family legend, his mother found the name while looking through a copy of Stars & Stripes magazine while she was pregnant with her first child (Wills was born in Tokyo where his father was stationed while serving in the military). His mother called him 'Vondy' growing up. He later went by 'Willie,' from his surname. But today he is now mostly known by his given name, of which he is proud. "I had one agent who told me once, 'We need to change your name. It's way too long.' Well, I thought, there is no way I'm changing my name, but I will change my agent." His middle name is Minjoro.

**'The Mountaintop':** Wills stars alongside Sarah Cruse in 'The Mountaintop' at an Actors' Theatre production at Center Stage Theater, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. The play opens Sept. 29 and runs Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$25 general; \$22 seniors and students. For information, go to [www.sccat.org](http://www.sccat.org).