

Joanna Brooks Interview Transcription

Interviewer: My name is Destina Valladares and I will be interviewing Joanna Brooks for the organization of Detained Allies, and we will be interviewing her for the UC San Diego Race and Oral History Project on the day of May 20th 2019. Can you please State your name Joanna?

Joanna Brooks: My name is Joanna Brooks.

Interviewer: Alright, so, my first question for you is can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your background?

Joanna Brooks: Sure, I was born in Los Angeles and I grew up in Orange County California and Santa Ana, and my ancestry includes lots of People who came to California in the 1850's through 1930's so that would include Basque people who settled in LA in the 1850's and Mormon pioneers who crossed the plains and then moved during the great depression from Utah to LA in the 1930's and Okies who moved to Southeast LA in the 1930's seeking work.

Interviewer: Detaining allies works in providing support to people who are in detention centers can you describe the kind of work that Detaining Allies does.

Joanna Brooks: So, we are able to do very little, because the scope of the need is overwhelming, because the entire system has changed. So, we provide compassion to people who are refugees who are detained at Otay Mesa and a few people after they transfer or are transferred to other detention centers across the US. So, Georgia, Alabama, and Washington. So we pair volunteers to write letters to detainees and we receive letters from detainees describing their lives and their needs and their realities and we try to make sure that as many as detainees as possible gets a piece of mail that says that they are thought of that they are – that's encouraging to them. These are people who are a long way from home who have faced torture, death threats, political violence, rape, domestic violence, displacement of all kinds, economic violence. So, we just um- make contact, human to human and also as we are able to provide a limited amount of funds for commissary so they can call their families.

Interviewer: What got you into this type of work with Detaining allies?

Joanna Brooks: Yeah so, last June which is June 2018 I was like everybody else, I think (laughs). I was watching the family separation issue at the border. And I was – Ah! I say, I Describe it you know – I have a very religious background as my core and I would say, the spirit wouldn't leave me alone for like days. Every morning my kids would get up and poor things, and I would hollar, "oh my god do you see what they are doing now?" (says this while imitating herself crying) and you know I came to realize as I sorted through different organizing efforts, you know a lot of the organizing was being led by Raices which is based in Texas and I realized I'm – you live 20 miles from the border. And I've been in incredibly - even though I like to think I'm educated and conscious I've been incredibly privileged condition-ignorant of the people that are being detained right here and so my husband and I were just really moved by the situation

and we called a house meeting you know. We are old organizers we met organizing for the union back in grad-school, so we invited over friends and people who we thought were of good will and that included people from my husband's synagogue and from our neighbors and colleagues from SDSU. We tried to discern a way to make any kind of impact on this massive travesty so as we began to review the local groups that were providing aid like Casa Cornelia. Which is amazing, we realize groups like Casa Cornelia who have been here for decades have serviced a very different kind of migration. They have been in place three different waves of refugees and displaced people to be sure but mostly to help people with sort of economic circumstances get legal representation get out of detention and that the ten thousand migrants who were heading for Tijuana as part of the caravans from central America we were all completely not ready and when that intersected with the Trumps administrations quote "zero tolerance" policy we were facing in this city kind of an unprecedented situation for which a lot of the old rules just didn't apply. So, we were trying to find a way to make any kind of impact that would bring kindness and compassion and humanity to a really ugly situation. It really came home to me I attended - I went to a protest one day down at Otay Mesa detention center and I was like Oh my gosh this place is like 20 miles from my house I've never been here I've never been here and there are people right inside and they can hear us and who is in there. So, we found a petition online of thirty people from the first caravan from Honduras who are organized and had petitioned with their names and "A" numbers signed a document that a grass roots group named Pueblos Sin Fronteras had posted to their Facebook and we took down their names and A numbers and we started writing letters and so we just started offering a hand in the darkness just we know you are there can we provide you with a little bit of commissary? can we you know - we developed letters we could send inside we you know our first letters we sent inside included the UN declaration of human rights and contact information and places to go in case you were deported, in your home countries so people wouldn't be completely without understanding and we just kept going and so over the last year we have written too more than 450 detainees and I think we've dispersed close to \$25,000 dollars and just really limited commissary funds and phone funds so people can call their families because especially in those early days Operation Streamline came to San Diego in July 2018 which means that a lot of the normal protections offered to people seeking asylum through the court system were no longer afforded. People were being tried and deported in mass trial settings of 60, 50, 60, 70 at a time and it just didn't seem right that people would be going back to countries that they had fled at great personal expense from death threats without being to at least call their families so we thought that was the least we could do. and it's been enough I mean doing the least we could do has been enough. It's been enough, all of us are completely unprepared for the situation we face now but that was where we could make a point of contact.

Interviewer: So, you mentioned the organization is very new and I was just wanted to ask what this year has looked like for Detainee Allies and what that has looked like in your personal life on a personal level.

Joanna Brooks: yeah so, first of all it has been an enormously – so many things at once – So first of all I have learned so much and – I think we are up to 1,000 letters in the archive now and I have held pretty much every single one in my hand and have read pretty much 80% of them

and so I have gained a completely new understanding of the reality of life for so many people on this planet right now especially - The 21st century is the era of migration they tell us. The ideas that were developed in international law after WWII and the Holocaust to protect migrants aren't sufficient to protect migrants now. Climate migrants, migrants from low level civil war, and gang violence and economic violence. I've Learned a great deal and I used to cry when reading the letters, but I don't cry anymore. And I don't think it's had that much of an impact on me – secondary trauma is real and a lot of the volunteers we work with especially student volunteers we have to be really careful and say, get counseling and psychological services at school get yourself taken care of because its real reading letter after letter about death threats and rape and... systematic violence. But I thought that weighed on me more than it did, but it hasn't. I think it's because I have a spiritual foundation in which – not that other people don't but for me personally I can only speak to myself but like for me it has been a very spiritual experience facing that. In these letters and you have this humanity of someone in your hands and it's kind of what I was raised to understand god to feel like was that... that vulnerability and responsibility not being god but like you are in the presence of something holy when you realize that humans just – these are all lives and we have each other and that's it. That's been one feeling that feeling of awe and vulnerability and sorrow. Another one has been amazement of how many people will show up out of the blue and do good things, you know, our website was made by a stranger volunteer I've never met, we have an entire database that was developed by someone Jennifer knew who gave their time to program – to completely program from the ground up a code database so we could keep track of people. People give money not a lot but little bits I got people from Canada writing, I got people from Europe writing, I mean people just show up and it's not always systematic but it's always just enough and it's amazing to me and I've also gained new perspective of the importance of when these political systems and these notions of structural change. So, I should add another thing we were able to do in the letters is - our students interns at SDSU have been reading them and for a while we were really focused on coding the letters keeping track of different kinds of human rights pieces inside because we found that so few people knew that refugees were being held in prisons and that they were being held because Trump had been so successful dehumanizing people and turning them into criminals instead of refugees and even fewer people understood that these were privately run prisons that were extracting profit from holding refugees. Often times by keeping them in circumstances that did not live up to at least what in the state of California are established standards for detention, jail and prison. So we were able to document and produce a report that we delivered to all of our Senators and Assembly members and the Attorney General staff and we were able to get at least CalPERS which is the public employees union is invested in one of the companies that runs the private detention centers it's called CoreCivic and so we were able to get them to pass the largest faculty union in the nation to pass a resolution to divest from CalPERS. So, we were proud of that so compassion plus data. Yeah, so this year has been really wild for us in terms of how fast can we get a system going can we make it functional given how grass roots we are can we keep it up week to week? What is sustainable? are we doing enough? And I think for people who are used to thinking about politics in really conventional ways like you make phone calls and get people to vote and you pass something it doesn't look like politics but for us I think the thing we've come home to is that the politics in this day and age politics doesn't always look conventional and it's about trusting other people and building a

community because we are so alienated from each other we've lost our political imagination in America. People don't know how to organize anymore. Everyone needs to know how to organize and it starts when you talk to your neighbors just as humans and then you invite them over and do something that is meaningful instead of just bullshit. Socializing. But you know my real relationship with Rosanna has gotten so much – I've always loved her – our kids grew up side by side we lived next door to each other for 10 years but we are not PTA moms even though we live in that kind of neighborhood and were so happy that we built a friendship around this. Because she has a family inside different circumstances, but you know same bullshit so to actually organize with one another and talk with one another about things that happen because what happens when a political regime does what ours is doing is that it dehumanizes not just the people on the other side but it dehumanizes the people on the inside too and we all lose sight of who we are and what we should be about and we get sold on things that are really empty so at least on Monday nights we are doing something interesting and it's been a real goal to cultivate love in the room and just make sure everyone feels appreciated and supported because that's how it has to be and that's the important part.

Interviewer: Something that stood out to me when we first started volunteering was that you made sure that everyone that was new read the letters, touched the letters, can you talk about why that is and what the importance of that is?

Joanna Brooks: So yeah, so my actually - it's really funny - my academic training is as a literary historian, so for me I spent a lot of time touching 18th century documents by underrepresented - like people who wrote a long time ago who were very important and marginal so I know what it feels like when you touch something like that that is sacred. When I was researching the 18th century archives written by like Native American leaders and touching documents like this it was sacred they had touched that thing and it was precious. It was so significant, so I find that when you touch a letter it humanizes the entire refugee the story it humanizes the story, I mean they are not even just pictures on t.v. they are like this person has a story and they wrote sentences and every different letter writer is different and their writing by hand and some writing in golf pencils and some are typing it and some are writing in phonetic Spanish and some of them are writing – you know some of them are getting their roommate to write in Spanish even though they are from India and like the number of stories and the variety of stories just boggles the mind it just boggles the mind and it makes me really humble I'm very grateful and appreciative so I want everyone to be in touch with the humanity and I think that's the vision that the librarians who are supporting us at SDSU as well that people's understanding what's going on will change if they touch these letters whether physically or digitally apprehend them in a see them and realizing every face, every face you see, it has a story.

Interviewer: What has been the most surprising thing you have read from the letters?

Joanna Brooks: Every week I am like oh I've read everything – Oh I've seen everything - so like last week we got one from Yemen where he was like I grew up in this indigenous tribe and held Yemen and then I came down from the mountains to go to college and then I joined a political movement and then I had to flee and for me it was like I know there's a terrible terrible

civil war in Yemen but I had no idea, I had never been in touch with a human. Then I read one from a guy who fled Tajikistan and had to leave Tajikistan for economic violence and went to Russia and then was writing about the white supremacist and Russia who oppressed the Tajiks because they're more Asian. But last week killed all, I read a letter from an Anglophone Cameroonian, so in Cameroon the francophone Cameroons you have two historic empires, right? And the ones who are the French speakers are at war against the ones that are the English speakers and we have like a bunch at least a dozen Anglophone Cameroonians in our group and so I read one this guy said that on music Cameroonian refugee and when he got here he was sick so no one else wanted to talk to him so I'm like oh this guy probably has HIV he's probably quarantined and he said but there was one other Cameroonian who would talk to him and they fell in love and they want to spend their lives together. And I was like that beats all. I have no problems, I have no problems my house could burn down but I have no problems - but like both the depth of the rare bare humanity of it but also that people fall in love and they want to spend their lives together people have these tremendous sparks of hope and dignity even in very difficult circumstances.

Interviewer: How has reading these letters shifted your perspective on immigration?

Joanna Brooks: Oh yes, it changed everything. I mean I always knew in my heart you know – Oh I meant to say earlier one of the things we had to get used to as a group was the idea of failure is just being okay. Like it came for me when I was reading Dorothy Day was a Catholic organizer in the 1930's or '60s and she worked mostly with poor people in New York City you know radical catholic, catholic worker. And I was reading one night, and she had this essay on failure and she this essay – and there were always more people showing up at the Catholic worker house than they had room for. Like, they were going to fail there was no way - this was a structural issue and it's the same with us. But, that's okay what we're doing is we're creating an opportunity to be human in a world that is all about dehumanization right now. And we are creating that for ourselves but for other people like the artist Santa Barber who make post cards and send them every other week I mean they send a lot, they're beautiful. Like, we create spaces and keep alive this memory of what it means to be human what it means to be human is to be – is to recognize one another and see one another not not become so drunk on the various distractions of our time. So, immigration it helped me put a – it gave me an opportunity to put a lot of things together analysis together that were sort of latent like you know I've been to grad school and I did my good stuff so I knew things but to really put together a coherent critique of like – ok US foreign policy from the 50s forward - at least I mean c'mon - colonization 400 years of it but like specifically national economic exploitation of Central American countries that contributed to destabilization and then the civil wars in the '80s that I remembered from growing up in the '70s and '80s and then the migration here from those and then the deportation of those families and their kids and then how it drew a lot of threads together for me and it also helped me realize that gut feeling you know like I've studied a lot of theory about like the end of the liberal state and state solutions doing as much violence as they do good and I realize just like all of the language we use still in a lot of sectors about like okay asylum. You're going to be a refugee you're going to

go there you're going to be seen as an individual you're going to claim - make an individual legal claim and it's going to be heard you're going to be represented it's going to be heard before an actual judge and you're going to get a shot. It's not at all what's happening - that liberal notion of personhood and citizenship is not at all operating right now, it's not at all. And everything about the law that's set up to afford rights to the individual - I mean we are dealing with waves how do you deal with waves of people, so it really shifted my brain like how do you begin to touch that. I talk to a friend of mine who runs a small non-profit for deported dreamers in Mexico City and we talked about like rather than national solutions to things right, the state is going to come save you, that's just not going to happen anymore. What instead we have is the trans local you know like a local community here can care for itself and a local community here and along the way so it just was a big shift in my imagination politics not of immigration I mean I always knew from back in the day from back when I was passing out flyers on street corners around prop 187 you know back in the day. Remember? Do you know prop 187? Back a long time ago I mean I always knew.

Interviewer: Do you want to Expand on that?

Joanna Brooks: No – I mean – so 187 was when I was in grad school and it was denying services to the children of illegal immigrants which is of course “illegal immigrants” but of course that was a strike against – it was a strike against people born here. So that was first of all a total cynical contravention of US constitutional law but it was also just meant to be freaking mean it was just meant to be hateful and it was just meant to target Brown people and so I was you know – the crazy part I was at grad school and I was trying to do the right thing and I was volunteering at MALDEF (Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund) and passing out door hangers – Remember to Vote! - in East LA and like half of people in East LA voted for it. Because the multigeneration folks were more prejudice against more recent arrivals and – I wasn't necessarily surprised or shocked by it you know but – a human is a human and these people are beautiful. That's it.

Interviewer: What does a world where immigrants and refugees are free from persecution look like to you?

Joanna Brooks: Oh my gosh, right? I mean so – I don't know. So, if I want to draw on what I know about how did Indigenous people do it, I mean they got wiped out by my people– the nation state was such an interesting thing that happened to us all, you know. Like, the notions of the – these massive continental citizenships established through empire and violence so. A world where people look after each other... In small local spaces and have an understanding of the - their interconnectedness and of their dependence on the same landscape and same resources. That looks good to me. But I don't know what we are going to do with the nation state it's a very challenging big framework we have to all think through.

Interviewer: You've mentioned that this work is true democracy. Because, democracy to you is acting like a human.

Joanna Brooks: (laughs) Yeah!

Interviewer: Keeping this in mind how do you respond to people with such strong opinions on immigration and what that should look like from their perspective.

Joanna Brooks: well, I don't respond most of the time because... we are passed that point. My mother and I have very different views about everything and there is just no point. This is Proto-fascism. We are passed the point when this is anything based on facts. This is not based on facts. This is based in fear of losing power. White people are afraid of losing power there's a great book I just read called *Dying of Whiteness* that's really good it's based on great scholarship and it's about resistance too healthcare reform resistance and – gun rights – and it's about – education defunding – and I say this as someone who – not all – but most of my heritage is really really normal working class White people. You know – this is beyond the point of arguing and it's hard to see that you know. It's hard to see that happening. I don't know what to say anymore to people that... say that they follow Jesus and can't afford a welcome to a strange, I don't understand that at all. I do what I can do which is I work with other people who want to do something and who feel moved and that's enough, for me. And you know we hope that the data we gather will change hearts and minds but I think the other thing that is hard is like – when I read these letters I can't stop, working. I mean it doesn't obsess me, it doesn't ruin my life – my kids are tired of me on Mondays they want Mondays to come and go – but like I don't have the option not to do something and a lot of people do. And that's really interesting and painful to see. I don't blame anybody but it's just like, okay.

Interviewer: What advice would you offer people who would like to do something like this? Do this work?

Joanna Brooks: Use your imagination. Organize organize organize. Nothing is too small. Just organize. We have lost our organizing imagination it is so important. If you read back in the histories of union organizing in California among the farm workers, right! They knew! I was raised – I've learned to organize many places – First of all I've learned to organize in the Mormon church like Mormons know how to organize people and how to look after people. Like, feed each other care for each other everyone shows up, regular schedule and it is no accident that a large cluster of us are Mormon people. But an other place I've learned how to organize is – I was an organizer of the UAW in Grad school and we organized all the TA's in the UC system for our first union contract. I remember reading histories of the people who taught the people I learned to organize how to organize right. It's like, you have a list, you have a list of names you call down, you turn people out. There's a discipline to it and there is a love to it, and you show up its not accidental, you show up. It takes discipline and it takes love but once you are not afraid and you are just like, come over! Let's do something! It's very freeing it's like the most freeing feeling to actually be moving and not just, frozen. But that's the thing don't be afraid. But don't underestimate the amount of work and discipline it takes. But it's worth it. But nothing is too small. Reclaiming our ability to organize just to know what that means. So yeah, I'll get going when you ask me to talk (laughs)

Interviewer: well that's great, is there anything you want to expand on or anything you want to say we didn't touch on?

Joanna Brooks: I'm trying to think what did we miss... um. Its ok if projects don't last forever. I don't know how long we will last. I mean we are set up to go pretty long. -were going pretty well and well hit cruising altitude and we may tweak this and tweak that. I don't think we are going to grow a lot more beyond this and that's ok. Right after the first burst of publicity came people from all over the country were like "we want to do it too" and I'm like ok here's what it takes and they were like crickets (laughs) there's like 16 steps. Its work! Right you see it, its work. And we have a pretty efficient system but it's still pretty chaotic but – there's always opportunity and it doesn't have to last forever whatever you do, you organize. Outlast harvest the lesson the next crisis will come. Thank you guys I'm so glad you guys showed up you guys have been a really wonderful piece this semester.

Interviewer: That concludes our interview