

Interviewer: Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar

Narrator: Jess Whatcott

ETHNIC 120D/Race and Oral History Course, Dr. Espiritu, Spring 2020

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Interview Transcript

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 0:01

Okay, my name is Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar. Today is May 13 2020. And I am interviewing Jessica Whatcott the zoom meeting for the UC San Diego recent oral history project. Can you please state your full name, date of birth and place of birth?

Jess Whatcott 0:19

Yeah, so my name is Dr. Jess Whatcott. My date of birth is January 14 1982. And I was born in Salt Lake City, Utah. Pronouns are they, them, theirs.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 0:33

Okay, thank you. Um, just to let you know that we are recording. Do you consent to having this video recorded?

Jess Whatcott 0:42

Yes.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 0:44

So for my beginning of my questions will be. Can you tell me more about your background, like where you grew up and what the community was like?

Jess Whatcott 0:55

Sure. I grew up in the suburbs of Salt Lake City, Utah. I grew up in on the west side as we call it, which was a more Utah's not very racially or ethnically diverse, but I grew up in one of the areas that is so I had a lot of a lot of latinx neighbors, a lot of Southeast Asian neighbors. We had a lot of Pacific Islander neighbors or neighbors behind us where we're Tongan. And so that's the neighborhood I grew up in. And I already spaced what else I was supposed to say.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 1:44

Okay, um, what was the most memorable, memorable moment from your childhood?

Jess Whatcott 1:51

Oh, I should. The other thing I should say is that most people know about Salt Lake City, Utah, that there's a lot members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or people call them Mormons. And the church is headquartered there. So that's why we had all those different types of people in my neighborhood. They were different members of the church who had migrated to Utah. And so it is a very welcoming place for, for refugees who are resettling for members of the church who want to migrate to be closer to the church headquarters for a lot of immigrants, so my maternal grandparents are both immigrants. They're from the Netherlands. They both migrated as children with their families after world war two and during World War Two Nazi Germany occupied the Netherlands. And so there was a lot of it disrupted the daily life there. So a lot of my grant not really my grandparents because they were younger kids during the occupation, but their older siblings had a lot of stories about not having enough food to eat and

like having to go out in the countryside to find food, or not having material to make clothes or things like that. My, my great grandmother told us stories about how she would make clothes for my grandpa and his siblings out of Army blankets that they found military blankets. So that was you know, I think leading into the conversation about Allies to End Detention that's I grew up listening to those kind of stories and hearing about their journey to the United States. They, back in those days had to take a ship across the ocean and they landed at Ellis Island. And so I grew up listening to those stories. And I, of course, understand that at that time, there were preferential policies that privilege European migrants over people from other parts of the world. And so that is, you know, I, my mom, the other day was asking me about, like, Why do people need to, like, try to gain asylum at the border, and I was trying to explain to her the whole history of immigration policies and how it is privileged, our family over people coming from other parts of the world. So yeah, so I will. So what we've got there.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 4:58

Thank you. So yeah, so what was the most? So that was like your most memorable moment from your childhood, like something that you really remember?

Jess Whatcott 5:07

Yeah. Well, because my grandparents were Dutch, we went to the Dutch community center a lot. And they had separate holidays. Well, you know, they celebrate Christmas and a lot of the holidays that people do in the United States, but they're different traditions. So like, instead of putting stockings up, we would put out wooden shoes. Yeah. And so and that, like

they would have different events down at the Dutch community center where we would go and meet with other Dutch families. I come from a really big family too, and they're really close. So all my cousins would be there and everything and so I have a lot of memories of doing that kind of stuff, which was awesome. little bit different than other people in our neighborhood.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 6:04

Yeah. That's nice. Um, what was your thrive to pursue a higher education and why did your you major in the fields that you majored in?

Jess Whatcott 6:18

Yeah, so I'm a first generation college student in a broad sense of the word. So my parents got married right out of high school, like the summer my mom graduated, and they were already pregnant with me. So the Hey, my mom wanted to go to college like she had applied and stuff, but because she was pregnant, she just had to get married and get a job. So I think like having my mom's like, desire to go to college really motivated me when I was a kid. So I knew that there was like that thing called college that I wanted to go to, but I didn't know what it was about and neither did anyone in my family like they don't really know what college meant. But then my parents split up and my mom decided that she needed to go to, to college to get some kind of skill. So she went to the community college and she got a certificate to be a radiologist technologists. Those are the people who take x rays. And so so I actually got to go to school with her sometimes to college, when I was six, sixth grade, sixth seventh grade, because there would be like, the days that we had off school and I have to go to class with her or times I had to go

with her to campus to do things. So that was really inspiring. To see my mom go through that process of going to college also, but at the same time, that was a really hard time economically for our family because my mom told me just a couple of years ago that that whole time that she was going to school and she was raising two kids. She only earned about \$5,000 a year through all of her financial aid and, and side jobs. She put me in my sister a lot to work a lot like we would make, she would make crafts and sell them. And so we would like have to help make the crafts. So she did a lot of stuff like that to make money. And so I knew I was old enough, my sister was too young to sort of know how hard it is to go through school. Like how much like I mean, we were we had to, they have church welfare there. So it's not it's not government welfare, but it's um, the church has like food, food banks and other things like that. So we were on church, church welfare at that time. So I knew how that whole experience, I remembered I knew how hard it is to go through college. So I really wanted to go, but I knew I was going to be really hard. So I, so when I was applying for school, I was really trying to keep in mind and my mom wasn't really able to help because she didn't have the experience of going to school. I was I tried to figure out like, where I could go, that was going to be the cheapest. That was like really on my mind, like, how can I do this? I know it's gonna be expensive and like how can I do this without spending a lot of money so I ended up going to Utah State University for a year. Because it was really cheap. It was, I think \$900 tuition for a whole semester. It was \$900 and it was \$900 for the dorms to live in the dorms. And so I went there because, you know, I mean keep in mind the minimum wage back then was like \$5 an hour in Utah. So even if I worked full time, it would be like barely barely making it. But um, but yeah, I just like picked the cheapest option. And that was fine when I got there, but then I realized that I wasn't going to be very happy at that school.

And so, I was introduced to a like a lot of other people who like knew more about the options and what was available and so they, they recommended that I transferred to a different school and so I ended up coming to California. I just wanted to live by the ocean, I wanted to live somewhere beautiful. So I moved to far north rural California, which is very beautiful there Humboldt County, um, I didn't know anything about it, and I transferred to schools there. And it was also pretty, pretty inexpensive. But I was a lot happier there. My family wasn't very excited about it. They were kind of mad at me for moving and they were worried that I was gonna not be able to afford it and things like that. So that was hard, but I ended up finishing school in there. And I studied political science and women's studies. I was very interested in politics and social change. And so those were even before I went to college in high school, I was part of the environment club and we did recycling. So I was very, I was very interested in about changing the world around me. So that's why I picked those majors.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 12:16

Okay, can you explain what is the purpose of Allies to End Detention?

Jess Whatcott 12:24

So Allies to End Detention exists to amplify the voices of people who are inside detention centers. And we focus mostly on our time as a detention center, but not exclusively. And so what we do is we, we write letters back and forth to people inside we help to connect people to organizations that might be able to, like lead if they're if they need legal help. You know, we try to connect them to legal organizations. If they need some financial support we we

make donations to people. And we also try to help make sure people have access to phone calls and their basic needs. And then we also try to connect on media and other people who can amplify the stories that people are sharing from inside to to a bigger audience. So those are the kind of three things that we do with Allies to End Detention. And right now we've had to shift is a pretty new organization. It's less than two years old. And so we're figuring out all this stuff as we go along. And, and right now we've had to shift a little bit because of the crisis caused by ICE negligence and core civics negligence and exposing people to COVID-19 and so we're we've kind of ramped up to other kinds of advocacy work that can help get people out of detention, because that's really the only way that they're going to be safe from this pandemic.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 14:19

Do you or can you tell me about a personal or any personal or all personal interactions when crossing the border?

Jess Whatcott 14:32

I, I don't interact with, I don't do border crossing stuff. Yeah.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 14:40

What was your understanding of Allies to End Detention before and after joining.

Jess Whatcott 14:48

So I actually there's a lot of people from faith communities that are part of Allies to End Detention. And so although I know a lot I practice my faith I was connected to I was connected that way, frankly from from another LDS person that I knew. Because I still feel culturally connected to that community. So I, when I came to San Diego, I was looking for a way to get involved in things. And I, I have a background of over 10 years working on prisoner issues working in solidarity with people inside of prisons, specifically Pelican Bay State Prison in Northern California. So I wanted to do something I just figured I would get involved in something around incarceration issues, and but I knew I was moving to a border region and I knew that there's been a rise of migrant detention in the past 10 or so years. And so I thought that I would have skills to transfer to that work coming from my backgrounds in prison stuff.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 16:09

Okay, um, what is your task in the organization?

Jess Whatcott 16:15

Yeah, so I, I have been spearheading the subcommittee doing work to free people from outside Mesa detention center during the COVID pandemic. So I have been coordinating volunteers to take action to promote the campaign. I before that was just a regular volunteer who helped to answer letters. read and respond to letters and I help do the money order deposits to give people donations into their commissary accounts. So that was just one of the regular volunteers doing that stuff.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 17:08

From reading the letters, what was one good, one bad experience that you faced while reading letters?

Jess Whatcott 17:16

Hmm, um, well, I'll say that we get letters from and all kinds of languages. And that's been a little tricky. I definitely assumed that I would be mostly Spanish speaking people writing letters, but that's not the case at all. We get letters that are written in French, from Cameroonians, and Haitians, and we get we've gotten letters in Russian. There have been some in Portuguese from people from Brazil. So really That's been kind of a logistical challenge is like how do we find volunteers who speak these languages and who can write in these languages to respond to all the letters. So that's been a big challenge. I think also, having answered letters from incarcerated detained people for a long time. It's really sad to like, know what people are going through inside and you just wish you could break them out. And like, get people free from scary situations. So that's, you know, that's a challenge to remember that you're doing something by making a human connection and knowing that detention centers in prisons are designed to keep people apart and separated and to disappear people and so it is doing something to like, make that contact with them. But still, you wish you could do more.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 19:04

What has the organization provided for you personally?

Jess Whatcott 19:09

It's a really great community of people. So coming moving to San Diego last fall, I only knew one person here before he moved. So it's been a really awesome way to meet other people. Forming friendships but also, you know, thinking about things developing like political analysis and values with each other is something I really value. A route about activism is creating, not just not just friendship, but like creating like a shared vision for the world we want to build and like how we're going to accomplish it.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 20:01

Okay, with Allies to End Detention being a great resource for refugees. How do you feel about policies or laws that are being created to take away all resources for refugees?

Jess Whatcott 20:17

I think it's terrible. It's awful. I so I actually teach a class called the women in American history at San Diego State University. And what I did in class this semester is actually tried to talk about the history of us imperialism, the construction of the US Mexico border, and also talk about US foreign policy, and economic policies that have created conditions where people need to migrate away from their home. So one of the things we talked about in class was the Vietnam War, and how that created a refugee crisis where at least a quarter of a million people had to flee Vietnam. And then we also talked about neoliberal economic policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement that destroyed small farms in Mexico. So we talked about those kinds of

policies and how they force people to migrate. And then the sort of contradiction of us policies that affect people, and then the solidification and the militarization of the border that prevents people from crossing. So I think it's important I mean, I personally think it's important to understand that from a historical view, how we got to this place, it wasn't just Trump. It wasn't just Obama or 9/11. But it's been 170 years of U.S. imperialism and policies that have created this crisis.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 22:06

Okay. With such a sensitive and emotional task with being part with being part of the organization, how do you self care?

Jess Whatcott 22:18

Yeah, I mean, to be honest, I'm in an extraordinary privileged position because I well, this is my first year at this job who first year not actually being a temporary contingent labor which was before but you know, I am because I do have a full time job that I can do from my house. And I have a house. I mean, I rent but I like I have a place to live. I'm incredibly lucky right now. And so I don't, I understand that self care is important and I do try to shut off in the evenings and not work on the weekends and do things like that. But I also feel like I have a responsive ability to give a lot right now to other people that are hurting and in dangerous positions.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 23:19

So it kind of will lead into the next question it's kind of similar. How do you separate your work and personal life?

Jess Whatcott 23:30

Yeah, I do know. I understand that question. And like the place that it's coming from, but like for me, a lot of my personal life is tied up in my the passion that I have around doing social justice work. So a lot of my friendships have come out of people that I volunteered with or did activism with. And, you know, I definitely like still exercise and recreate and do things like that. But I do also like, make time and my quote on quote personal time to do activism is on top of my regular job. But I think that it's something that really feeds me and nourishes me and makes me feel a part of something. That's, that's bigger than myself. And so, you know, I think getting burnout is real and like figuring out ways to sustain ourselves are real, especially because I think this fights gonna take years. And so, I mean, yes, COVID-19 is gonna probably be with us for a couple years, but also it's going to take a long time to shut down detention centers and prisons, jails and prisons. So I do think it's important to sustain ourselves in that in that work, but I also I feel like the self care questions sometimes like it makes it seem like it's all bad and stressful when there's also a ways that doing this work gives us life and is exciting and motivating and builds friendships and builds community. So I think there's a lot of like nourishing and powerful things that come out of it to.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 25:35

How has the pandemic effect a year or a year personal work or with the organization?

Jess Whatcott 25:43

Okay, allies you mean?

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 25:46

Yeah, or in general, or with allies, and your work yeah.

Jess Whatcott 25:50

Okay. I'll just say with Allies to End Detention we have been trying two things. One is we've been trying to figure out how do we do our letter writing and answering in new, physically distant, creative ways, because we used to just meet in a big room and do it all there. And then the second thing is, we're trying to figure out new responsibilities that we have with the letters in terms of what they say about what's happening with the pandemic inside. Trying to help get people released immediately, who are really vulnerable. And how do we also there's a lot of requests from people inside to, like, share information with the media. And so we're trying to figure out how to do that responsibility responsibly. So it's not only do we have to figure out how to do our normal stuff and creative ways, but we have to figure it out. Like these new, new responsibilities or new requests that are very important right now. My own my, my day job as a professor, we had to move all of our classes online really quickly in the middle of March. I am

fortunate and that I had some, I already had some stuff set up that made me made that a bit easier. Like I already had students turn things in online and stuff. But so for me, it wasn't so much the technical aspect of it as it was talking to students who were in really hard situations and not knowing how to help or like trying to strategize with them and keep people motivated and encouraged. Not just to do their work, but just I think a lot of people are really struggling just in general and so that's been hard to watch some people going through that and being far away from them. I'm just in my house. I don't have an office.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 28:22

With the pandemic, do you feel that you are more engaged with the refugees than before?

Jess Whatcott 28:30

Um, you know, I feel more. The work that I do is different from work that I've done before where I had more one on one email correspondences with people who were in prison. So I got to know people, people who are there for people who are in prison for a lot longer. So sometimes I would be writing to people for years, you know. So I got to know people a lot more personally, individually with this work and just the urgency of like, trying to get people out of detention, um, I haven't gotten to build those personal connections. But I do feel part of a broad community of people who are all working on the same goal. And, yeah, it's as hard I wish I could talk or, you know, I don't know what people look like, I'm like, emailing them a lot. Like, so. I know that they're out there and I just have to use my imagination.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 29:41

Um, is there one thing you think would make your task easier? What would it be?

Jess Whatcott 29:54

I don't know how to answer that question.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 29:56

Um, so kind of basically like. For example, if like Trump or higher authorities were to make certain policies or just in general, like if something were to make, like working with Allies to End Detention easier what do you think it would be the new would be.

Jess Whatcott 30:17

I, I look forward to a day when we don't have to have to end detention. So I think it would be great if ice closed down all of their detention facilities immediately. Let everyone out. And then even bigger than that, I think it would be great if we tore down the border wall and a demilitarized the border. So that's what I'll say. And I guess I should say, the number of refugees are being resettled from other countries is like down to a trickle. And so I'd like to see us go back, I think I'd like to see the US. Again, the one of the leaders of countries accepts refugees for resettlement, and not just asylum seekers who are presenting at the border, but people who are coming from refugee camps across the world.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 31:16

And how does your family feel about you being part of this organization?

Jess Whatcott 31:25

You mean, my like, family of origin?

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 31:30

Yeah. So you just answer like, you know, family friend or family. Just basically how do they feel about you being part of something so big that impacts your life?

Jess Whatcott 31:43

Hmm. My, my, you know, the family that raised me my family of origin, they honestly have no idea what I do. They don't, a lot of them do care about refugees and migrants, but they are not social justice people and some of them have beyond that like caring about people have like pretty conservative political views. And so, you know, I most of my family lives together, or they live really close. And I am one of the only ones that lives far away. So I think I visit a lot, but I don't really share what I do with them. And then I think I have I have a chosen family of people, some of whom I've met through activism. You know, one of my dear friends is we've known each other for 20 years, having a birthday this Saturday. Those people, they we talk about our activism in the world and we think through, you know, problems that we're confronted with. And so we, although most of my friends are involved in different types of things, actually, many

of my friends are still involved in work around prisons. We, I think, share a similar vision and support each other in the different paths that we're taking to reach that vision.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 33:34

For this interview, what is one thing you want the viewers to take away?

Jess Whatcott 33:41

I, I guess I would encourage people to think really big when they're imagining the world imagining a new world or imagining that another world is possible. You know, I think sometimes we get focused on One kind of policy or one court case that we want to get ruled a specific way but I think it's our job to also dream you know, wildly and about the world that we want to create because I think it's only with having that dream or vision in mind that we can not settle for small changes here and there. So that's why I love the FreeThemAll campaign because it's not just Well, let's only free these people that are really high risk or like, let's only free people who don't have any criminal offenses or like let's only be free, non violent. People who have been charged with non violent crimes, but we're actually you know, dreaming really big or saying no, like, let 32,000 people out of detention right now, right? They don't need to be there. And so yeah, I, I think it's, it's our job to dream those, those big those big questions those big asks and to make radical demands, especially right now.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 35:19

So to conclude our interview, is there anything you personally want to share about about what's going on with Allies to End Detention or for the FreeThemAll campaign or even just with your work?

Jess Whatcott 35:33

I so, well, let me just clarify is this This interview is like, it's part of like a long term oral history type of thing, right. Okay. So with that in mind, I will say that, you know, when people look back on this moment in time, I I hope that they recognize that whatever outcome came out after this, I think there's a couple different possible worlds one where things are more militarized, and there's more surveillance and there's more restrictions and another world where we realize that we actually don't need any of that stuff. It's just a sham to like, make some people money. And so I hope that when people look back, they they see all these radical demands that people were making, and they you know, we were all at this time. We're not all I mean, yeah, there's questions about food and shelter and making it to the next day, but there's also people who are including people in detention. Right. People in detention are not only focused on their immediate needs, but they are making radical demands to be free. And so yeah, I hope people recognize that about this moment.

Karencathleen Gonzalez-Aguilar 37:13

So to conclude the interview, I just want to thank you so much for being a part of this oral history project. And thank you for letting me interview you about your personal life about Allies to End Detention and some about FreeThemAll campaign.

Thank you.