

Interviewer: Rossel-Joyce Garcia
Interviewee: Kate Swanson
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Race and Oral History Project

RJG: So.. ok, my name is Rossel-Joyce Garcia. Today is May 14, 2019 and I'm here with Kate Swanson from Detainee Allies in her office at SDSU [San Diego State University] and I will be interviewing her for the Race and Oral History Project. Do you mind just stating your own name?

KS: Sure, my name is Kate Swanson.

RJG: Cool. So for the interview, could you kind of just tell me a little bit about yourself, like your profession, where you're from... things like that.

KS: Sure, so I'm a professor in geography at San Diego State University. I've lived in San Diego for about ten years. Originally, I'm from Canada and I guess I am a human geographer. I do a lot of work on migration. I've been working with migrant youth for a number of years. I've worked with young migrants from Ecuador as well and in recent years, I've been working with the detention centers, actually in Mexico and San Diego on the US side of the border as well.

RJG: Just before we get into a little deeper questions.. Feel free to stop the interview at any time if you don't want to answer a question. You could always say you don't want the interview published. It's up to you.

So you mentioned you're a human geographer, so I'm going to assume you have a little background in community organizing. So can you just tell me a little bit about that.

KS: Umm.. I mean I've been involved in community organizing in various aspects for – through over many years, but do you want me to speak more specifically to my involvement with migrants and refugees in this area?

RJG: Whatever you feel called to speak about.

KS: Ok, I'll speak about that cause that's what I've been doing more recently. So yeah, over the last year when.. if you recall with the border last summer, this is when the zero-tolerance policy was implemented, a lot of children being separated from their family and the – on the news, in the media. We saw a lot about children being held in cages and I think a lotta people were very visibly upset about this so a group of us got together and just decided to try to do something about it. And so, it just initially started as like a few faculty members, a few neighbors getting together at someone's house around a kitchen table and deciding just to try to organize... to do something. And so what we decided to do was to write letters and we initially wrote a letter of introduction to a list of about 30 people that we found online who were in detention at the Otay Mesa detention center and within a week they wrote us back and so that was... and I guess in terms of community organizing, since then, the organization has grown to over – I think we have

like 250-300 volunteers now and we've written to – we've gotten letters from about... I think over 500 people, migrants and refugees in detention. So in the last year, it's taken off, all from the volunteer labor of just faculty, students, and neighbors in San Diego trying to do something about the situation

RJG: Yeah, so you mentioned the detention centers. Could you maybe talk about which detention centers we're working with?

KS: Right, yeah. So it started with the Otay Mesa detention center; this is a privately run immigration detention center that's held by Core Civic. They are, I think, about 25 miles south of where we're sitting right now, and they hold over 1000 migrants and refugees in detention, from, I think they state on their report – most recent report – about 112 different countries that are in detention there. Both men and women, all over the age of 18. But it's – so we work with them, and then we also, since, starting in about December with the latest caravan that came across the border, the detention centers are getting fuller and fuller, so they started shipping people across the nation and so a lot of people who have been writing letters to us got shipped over to Etowah, which is a rural county jail in Alabama. And so, there are a lot of people who have been in detention for over like a year/year and a half from Venezuela, from Cameroon, from Ghaza, from Jamaica, from all sorts of countries that are now held in a rural county jail with a regular prison population, that almost everybody else knows as well. And I think we've also gotten letters from people in Gadson – I think Gadson is Ala -- is Etowah. there's been a few other – few other detention centers that have reached out to us as well asking for help. But mostly it's Otay Mesa detention center and Etowah county jail in Alabama.

RJG: So when the detainees from Otay Mesa moved to Etowah, I'm assuming there was a word of mouth kind of thing going on, where they spread [the work Detainee Allies does]. can you talk about that?

KS: Sure, well I just think people – so there were –for instance, one guy, he had been writing us for a long time and I think once he got shipped over to Etowah, he wrote us and told us all about his experience of being shackled for 24 hours and only having a sandwich for 24 hours. They were not told anything and just basically shipped from one place... I think they went from Arizona and then they went to Louisiana then they went to Alabama to get put into another jail. and so, I think they just – people just kept reaching out to us to say, “help, you know, what's going on? help us, what's – you know, here we are.” So, I think it has been word of mouth. and recently we just created a newsletter so we're sending that now to Otay Mesa and Etowah and trying to send money and resources and just, you know, humanitarian contact to people in both of these places. But I think it'll keep spreading as the immigration system keeps shifting people around to different jails and people will reach out from different places too.

RJG: I noticed you mentioned it was a prison in Etowah. So can you maybe talk about like the kind of conditions [detainees face in prison/detention centers]... I've heard back and forth, like, the prices of the commissary are more expensive in Etowah. So, can you kind of do a compare and contrast kind of thing?

KS: Sure. I would argue that they're both prisons. I know they're represented as detention centers, but really, they're prisons. It's, you know, people who are coming across the border asking for help and we lock them up in jails and treat them under prison laws. So, the difference is interesting. So Otay Mesa detention center is private; it's run by Core Civic, it's traded on the stock market, so it is for profit. So they have, for instance, the federal immigration law says that people in detention have to be paid at least a dollar a day for their labor. What this means that a lot of people in the Otay Mesa detention center work for a dollar a day, to do cleaning, to do cooking, a lot of the basic jobs in the prison... What that means for the privately run detention centers is that they don't have to hire staff, so they don't have to hire cleaning staff, they don't have to hire cooking staff because they have people to do it for them for a dollar a day. What that also means is their profits go way up, right? Because they don't have to pay for those services. So, I know my pension plan that CalPERS, which is one of the – a huge pension body... We are invested in Core Civic and in Geo group... A lot of, maybe the UC (University of California) system might be as well. A lot of pension systems are invested in these private prisons because its good money, they make good money. So this is where – that's a huge issue with the privately run prisons, right? The county jail is different. It's federally funded, but it's in a rural area. I think it is Gadson, Alabama. There's about 25,000 people that live there. Pretty much the whole town runs on prison labor cause that's the only industry there. There was a recent case where the guy in charge of the prison, I forget what his title was, but he has made off about a million dollars' worth of food surplus, so he was skimming the budget from food to go towards his own pockets. So, it's lack of oversight in a lot of these places. It seems to me the people in Etowah -- here's the thing I've heard... In Core Civic, they get paid like a hundred something day per bed to cover like bed, food, everything, whereas the federal, Etowah, I think they get forty dollars a day for food and bed, so the letters we're receiving form there, they speak about cockroaches, mold in the prison.. Someone – who was telling me this? Someone said – yeah, it's just awful. I think, I can't remember if this is a conversation I'm thinking of with someone, but the abuse from the prison guards, insufficient food – but they complain about not having the labor program there; so they're not even allowed to work for a dollar a day which means they have no way to make money at all, so it's like they actually said it themselves that they prefer to have a labor option because then they could make a little bit of money. So, it's – I mean they're prisoners. they're prisoners even though they're asylum seekers asking for help. They're prisoners, is how we treat them.

RJG: I think like... in a more positive light, how have you seen the fact that they're going through the struggle together as a community builder kind of thing? Yeah, I think there has been a lot of light in the resistance.

KS: Yeah, so we've obviously gotten a number of letters from people saying – so, sometimes the money that they get, they will pool. So what we try to do is send 20 to 30 dollars a week to a group of as many people as we can, but people will pool that money and then share it with their friends so that they can then, you know, find their loved ones or buy something that they need, so there is that. People talk about they're donating their commissary to their friends they get as well. We also have people who write letters for one another, so they – we, one week there's a pastor or a minister and they said he wrote out 16 letters for people who weren't able to write them themselves, they like said “please help us, this is our story, please help us”. I got a letter this week from someone who said he doesn't read or write, so someone is helping him. We get letters

from India, that are written in Spanish because someone's written it for them as well, so I think there is. Oh yeah, that's right. There was a guy from Nicaragua. He was in a county jail in Aurora – actually, I don't know if it's a county jail, but he was in prison in Colorado, immigration detention prison and he was talking about, the toilets were clogged, the guards wouldn't fix it, so he got in there himself to fix it. I'm just thinking the conditions again. but what did he say?... He was saying that there was people from China, people from Cameroon, people from all over the world and they would all work together to form community and learn language from each other, teach each other their languages and try to support each other cause that's all they really had.

RJG: That's unfortunate that they had to do that and sad about the detention center... but it's pretty awesome. so you seem to know a lot about the letters, so im assuming you work first hand with them. can you kind of explain more of what you do?

KS: sure, yeah... I've had a lot of different roles, but lately what I do is I read all the letters that come in and I'm scanning all the letters and redacting all the letters every week and I work with a group of about ten student interns, so we go through the letters every week to look for cases of medical neglect, we flag anything that needs to be addressed. We also try to code the letters. We go through and try to find any human rights violations. to code them, we've written a report based on the letters as well. So, yeah, I guess my role has been really using them and reading all of them, coding them, analyzing them for human rights violations and writing reports and then trying to address needs, like I've been on the phone this week with someone from the Otay Mesa detention center who's getting deported today, I think. You know, so sometimes, I am not as involved in the actual detention centers as some, but I try... yeah... it's a lot. And I send a lot of money too. I'm actually taking a lot of money out of my own pocket because there's so much need, so I try to do what I can.

RJG: So, working first hand with the letters, is there any that really stood out to you or you felt really connected to?

KS: Yeah – yeah. there's too many, really there's too many. Last week, a man who wrote about how he was suicidal. He is away from his two daughters, one with down syndrome. He hasn't seen them in months. He lost all hope. He thinks he's going to get deported. I believe he might be the same man, he sent a picture of his murdered son in his casket. Yeah, they're really in... intense, a lot of difficult letters that read every week. Some are more hopeful though too... like some – we got a letter from a man from Russia last week, where he said, “thank you, thank you”, you know, “I'm so glad someone wrote me back”. Or another one, a great one last week, someone – I have them all on my phone – he said, he wrote us a 16-page letter, and someone wrote him back and he said, “I'm so happy that someone has listened to me and heard my story and it feels so good to know that there are people out there that actually care and are hearing me and want to do something about this situation”. so, you know, we got really difficult stories of people explaining their stories of why they're here and people saying, “I don't understand why I am in prison or why... I've come here to ask for help and they've put me in prison for months and months, I don't understand this” and then a lot of people just saying, “Thank you, for caring. thank you for helping. Thank you for sending money, it's the first time I've spoken to my family in six months. You know, thank you for listening.”

RJG: Yeah, I definitely feel that humanitarian aspect. I think that with the letters, you mentioned that some of them are super intense. So how do you kind of navigate that? Like you're working with such a wide load of letters.

KS: Yeah, it's hard... Yeah, I – I think I've been doing this for a long time. I used to work a lot with kids, unaccompanied minors, I did interviews with kids in Mexican detention centers who were being deported back to their countries and a lot of them were going back to possible death and I think... it's hard, it's really really hard. And I think that it's... I don't know, I don't know. I feel like for me, I feel like I... doing something helps. You know like if I know this is happening and I don't do something, that's even worse. For me it's the... taking action in any way that I can, and even if I know it's not going to change the world, it's not going to change the system but it might help one person – it would help this one person. Then I can live with myself a little bit better.

RJG: So, you're talking about changing the world. What -- it's a big question – does a world look like to you where immigrants, refugees are able to live free of persecution?

KS: Just that. They're able to live free of persecution, like I don't think we should be locking up people for asking for help. It's insane to me. I don't... I... (sighs) I think most people will... people only leave their homes when they have to, and no one wants to – like I'm an immigrant to this country. I mean I love where I live, but if I could've stayed home, I would've stayed home. I think most people would stay at home if they could cause that's where they're from, that's where their land is, that's where their family is, that's where they want to be from and so when people leave their homes, they're doing so because they have to. It's sort of, in the case of the recent migrations from certainly central America... I think even in Venezuela, there's places as well, this is a necessity, they have to leave. And so, I think you're having this system where there's a temporary work program, if people can come for you know 5 years, 10 years, until things are ok, and they can go back home, then that would be great. I just... I know a lot of nations are erecting more and more borders because I think they're afraid of difference, they're afraid of change, they're afraid of these perceived envisions – that's, that's just making it worse. It's not going to stop, people are not going to stop coming. Cause it's – we'll have environmental refugees sooner or later, right? Like the crises are accelerating around the world and so we need to – I don't think borders work, but I don't think... I think it may sound scary to tear down borders, but I think people won't always be here right – just people need to move, you need to move around the world as we always have. I don't know, create safe places for people to exist. The system we have right now doesn't work and building a wall sure as hell isn't going to work either.

RJG: Yeah, so actually, building off of that idea kind of, can you maybe talk about your opinion on borders? Like do you think it's a physical thing –

KS: An imaginary thing?

RJG: Or an imaginary thing?

KS: No, it's an imaginary thing. Borders are purely imaginary. Yeah, they're social constructs. It's a fiction, but they're a political reality in the way our world operates, right?... I don't know what the solution is, anywhere where you have big gaps in inequality, people are going to migrate in places where there's more... equality, you know what I mean? So, there's a huge gap in equality between Mexico and the US, so people are going to... People are always going to move to better their life circumstances. And so, if they perceive that life is better over there, people are going to go over there because you want to improve the life for yourself, but also for your children. so, I think, you know, we need to get rid of global inequality (laughs)... no easy task there – I think – yeah, I don't believe in borders. I think it's – I think that's a scary thought to a lot of people, but I really think they don't work.

RJG: I would agree with you. You were talking about global inequality. I think Detainee Allies is a great example of, like, just like normal people trying to combat this. Like it's not people who are like the president, or like the prime minister somewhere or like – it's just college professors, you have some people who were just neighbors. So, what do you see – or what is the role of community organizing and just the normal person? What is their responsibility in your eyes?

KS: Hm. I think, I think what we've done is really easy to replicate. I think anybody could do it, right? It's – it was just a matter, again, people were around the kitchen table and wanted to do something and we just, you know, found the power of US postal to write letters and build that humanitarian connection between people who are locked inside an invisible box where they don't want their stories getting out and you know, the rest of the people outside. It's – I think there's – a big part of the project is we try to build, like foster human connection just to let people know that there are people who care. Like it's not... there's so much inhumanity right now, especially in the political system and it was just a way to say, "You know what? We don't agree with what's going on and we care, we hear you, we want to help, we want to listen, we want to hear your story" and there's so many – I mean immigration, certainly there's so many immigration detention centers around the US, where other people could replicate this so easily. but I'm sure there's other projects where, you know, you just find a way - find a way, a simple act to get in there and organize and do something, where you could do it.

RJG: I love the idea of just doing something. so just on a more hopeful note, what is next for you and just Detainee Allies, in general/in terms of all of this stuff?

KS: So for me, I just want to keep amplifying voices. I want to get stories out. I want people to know what's going on inside of the detention centers because I think that these are invisible stories. I think people who run the detention centers don't want these stories to get out. I think politicians don't want them to get out. I think they want to dehumanize migrants and refugees, you know, as illegal aliens, right? They're criminals, they're rapists, they're "bad hombres", you know, they're all those things that we hear on the media. I want people to recognize our shared humanity and recognize that they're just trying to better their lives. There's this one great story of a man who – He talked about how he jumped the fence in one of his caravans, you know, when the border wall was rushed and he said, "You know I jumped the fence with my daughter and my wife, but I did it because you would've done it too and anybody would've done it" because his life was at risk. They were being pursued by people in Tijuana. He felt that they were at risk there and he said, "I jumped the fence to help my daughter, to help my wife. And if you

were in my situation, you would have done the same thing”. And I think if people recognize that, you know, like if anybody is in a situation where your life is at risk or in danger, you’re going to do whatever it takes to get out of that, to support your children, your wife, your mother, your father, anybody. You’ll do anything to improve your life circumstances. So, I think we can get these stories out and recognize our shared humanity. I’m hoping it’ll help change the discourse, the narrative, the rhetoric, all those academic jargon words. But I’m hoping it’ll change the discussion on immigration in America.

RJG: Thank you so much for sharing. Before we end, do you have any last thoughts or comments that we haven’t addressed that you’d like to share?

KS: No, that’s great. Thank you for doing a good interview. Thanks for your good questions.

RJG: Thank you so much.