

The shame of America's family detention camps

By Wil S. Hylton, New York Times

Christina Brown pulled into the refugee camp after an eight-hour drive across the desert. It was late July of last year, and Brown was a 30-year-old immigration lawyer. She had spent a few years after college working on political campaigns, but her law degree was barely a year old, and she had only two clients in her private practice in Denver. When other lawyers told her that the federal government was opening a massive detention center for immigrants in southeastern New Mexico, where hundreds of women and children would be housed in metal trailers surrounded by barbed wire, Brown decided to volunteer legal services to the detainees. She wasn't sure exactly what rights they might have, but she wanted to make sure they got them. She packed enough clothes to last a week, stopped by Target to pick up coloring books and toys and started driving south.

As she pulled into the dusty town of Artesia, she realized that she still had no idea what to expect. The new detention center was just north of town, behind a guard station in a sprawling complex with restricted access. Two other volunteers had been in town for about a week and had permission from federal officials to access the compound the following day.

Brown spent the night at a motel, then drove to the detention camp in the morning. She stood in the wind-swept parking lot with the other lawyers, overlooking the barren plains of the eastern plateau. After a few minutes, a transport van emerged from the facility to pick them up. It swung to a stop in the parking lot, and the attorneys filed on. They sat on the cold metal benches and stared through the caged windows as the bus rolled back into the compound and across the bleak brown

landscape. It came to a stop by a small trailer, and the lawyers shuffled out.

As they opened the door to the trailer, Brown felt a blast of cold air. The front room was empty except for two small desks arranged near the center. A door in the back opened to reveal dozens of young women and children huddled together. Many were gaunt and malnourished, with dark circles under their eyes. "The kids were really sick," Brown told me later. "A lot of the moms were holding them in their arms, even the older kids – holding them like babies, and they're screaming and crying, and some of them are lying there listlessly."

Brown took a seat at a desk, and a guard brought a woman to meet her. Brown asked the woman in Spanish how she ended up in detention. The woman explained that she had to escape from her home in El Salvador when gangs targeted her family. "Her husband had just been murdered, and she and her kids found his body," Brown recalls. "After he was murdered, the gang started coming after her and threatening to kill her." Brown agreed to help the woman apply for political asylum in the United States, explaining that it might be possible to pay a small bond and then live with friends or relatives while she waited for an asylum hearing. When the woman returned to the back room, Brown met with another, who was fleeing gangs in Guatemala. Then she met another young woman, who fled violence in Honduras. "They were all just breaking down," Brown said. "They were telling us that they were afraid to go home. They were crying, saying they were scared for themselves and their children. It was a constant refrain: 'I'll die if I go back.' "

As Brown emerged from the trailer that evening, she already knew it would be difficult to leave at the end of the week. The women she met were just a fraction of those inside the camp, and the government was making plans to open a second facility of nearly the same size in Karnes County, Tex., near San Antonio. "I remember thinking to myself that this was an

impossible situation,” she said. “I was overwhelmed and sad and angry. I think the anger is what kept me going.”

Over the past six years, President Obama has tried to make children the centerpiece of his efforts to put a gentler face on U.S. immigration policy. Even as his administration has deported a record number of unauthorized immigrants, surpassing two million deportations last year, it has pushed for greater leniency toward undocumented children. After trying and failing to pass the Dream Act legislation, which would offer a path to permanent residency for immigrants who arrived before the age of 16, the president announced an executive action in 2012 to block their deportation. Last November, Obama added an executive order to extend those protections to their parents. “We’re going to keep focusing enforcement resources on actual threats to our security,” he said in a speech on Nov. 20. “Felons, not families. Criminals, not children. Gang members, not a mom who’s working hard to provide for her kids.” But the president’s new policies apply only to immigrants who have been in the United States for more than five years; they do nothing to address the emerging crisis on the border today.

Since the economic collapse of 2008, the number of undocumented immigrants coming from Mexico has plunged, while a surge of violence in Central America has brought a wave of migrants from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. According to recent statistics from the Department of Homeland Security, the number of refugees fleeing Central America has doubled in the past year alone – with more than 61,000 “family units” crossing the U.S. border, as well as 51,000 unaccompanied children. For the first time, more people are coming to the United States from those countries than from Mexico, and they are coming not just for opportunity but for survival.

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