

Welcome to Dilley: Home of the Largest Family Detention Center in the World

“Our group awakened at 6:00 AM every day in order to be in the detention center by 7:00. Usually, the only people moving about the hotel complex were the frackers coming off a night shift. 7:00 AM was the plan. Mornings, unfortunately for us, were the time detention workers changed shifts. Therefore, whilst the workers went through the metal detector and clocked in, the legal team was forced to anxiously wait, regardless of fast approaching court appearances.

Mornings were relatively slow for the law students as the attorneys were in court with clients until 10:00 AM. It was on the morning of Tuesday, March 24 when I recognized an unassuming, shy woman walk in and have a seat at the table next to the children’s playroom. I approached her and asked if she was here to see an attorney. She shook her head yes, but said that she had spoken with Don Esteban yesterday. He said he was going to help her. In other words: I don’t know you, go get Don Esteban. So that’s what I did. I informed Stephen, “Don Esteban,” that his client was here. We walked up to the client and Stephen said, “This is Rodrigo. He is my friend. He will be here to help you. We will be here. No matter what.” We then proceeded to an open meeting room (of which there are only 6 for roughly 350 detainees and their legal representatives).

I began by asking her the standard biographic questions. Name, country of origin, date of apprehension, etc. When we got to the education question, she revealed that she had never gone to school. She didn’t know how to read and write. She only knew how to cut sugar cane. I replied by acknowledging her response and saying that it wasn’t a problem. When we got through the biographic portion, we moved onto her story, which would compose the substance of her asylum claim.

She told me it all started when the gangs tried to recruit her twelve-year old-son. They would wait for him when he got out of work and tell him that he needed to join the gang. He would reply that he wasn’t interested and say that all he wanted to do was go to school and work. His third encounter with them ended in bloodshed. Walking home with his friends after school, the gang members shot at them indiscriminately. Two of his friends were killed, but he was able to get away amidst a hail of gunfire. Her son fled to a relative’s house in another town, but eventually the gang found him. They would yell that if he didn’t come with them, he was going to die just like his friends. Eventually, he fled to los Estados. The States.

It didn’t stop there, however. When the gang found out that Sara’s son had left, they started asking her for renta (rent). She explained that they lived behind her house so all they had to do was jump the fence and knock on the door. They would tell her that she had to pay them the rent, if not things would end badly for her and her girls. The gang also started to recruit her daughter.

After stopping for a moment to hand Sara a tissue to wipe her tears, we continued. After killing her son’s friends, the gang then killed her nephew. They shot him twenty two times. Then, the gang sent a small boy to try and lure away Sara’s youngest daughter. But Sara knew their tactics of using small kids to lure away people’s children and ended up chasing the boy away. The gang also threatened to cut their heads off.

I asked Sara if she had ever tried to contact the police. She informed me that it would have been useless. The police were hopelessly corrupt to a point where they were interchangeable with the gangs. She told me about a time her neighbor tried to file a police report on some gang members who were extorting her. The next day they found the neighbor in her home with the doors locked and her throat slit. After the incident with her neighbor, that’s when Sara decided she needed to leave and do everything in her power to save her children. She gave a coyote (explain what a coyote is...) her house in exchange for the trip north. In return, she and her daughters would be led on the treacherous path, that if they were lucky, would end in los Estados (the States).

The path starts in Central America, zigzags through Mexico dodging danger, and ends at the Rio Grande River – the border between Mexico and the States. After her two young daughters and herself crossed the

river, she presented herself to the Border Patrol. Sara told them she wanted to apply for asylum and that she needed help. Somehow, she ended up here in Dilley, in family detention.

At this point during the client interview, I couldn't even speak. I just quietly nodded and thanked her for sharing her story with me. I left the room to get her a glass of water, but mostly to let her catch her breath. I came back in and she thanked me for the water. I sat back down and I asked her if she was ready to keep going. She said yes, and I turned to my next set of questions. "Are you married?" I asked. She said she was separated. I typed the info into my computer and proceeded, "If you don't mind me asking, why did you and your husband separate?" She nodded and said that he was a drunk. When he started drinking, he became mean. He would come home drunk after working in the sugar cane and she would be waiting for him with a plate of food. He would yell at her and throw the plate at her feet. It started with arguments over nothing; food on floor, broken plates. This became a nightly occurrence. But still, he only made seemingly empty threats. Then one night he came home "bolo" like always (Central American slang for drunk), but this time he followed through on those threats. He got the machete he cut sugar cane with and he beat her with the handle of it. She had the marks on her back for a week. The next time he came home "bolo" again and threatened to hit her and take her daughters away, Sara grabbed her girls and escaped through a hole in the roof. She explained that this route of escape was already familiar at this point.

I handed her more tissues to wipe the tears that had started to flow again. I swallowed the lump in my throat and told her, "Thank you for sharing that with me. We're finished with that for now." She brought her girls back in and we finished the interview. I informed her that we would meet again tomorrow, the day before her credible fear interview, to prepare and so that I could tell her what the interview would be like. She thanked me and said *que Dios me bendiga* (God bless you). I said, "Likewise. I'll see you in the morning." I took a moment to gather myself but then stepped out to see another client who was already waiting for me.

As I fell asleep that night after about 16 hours of work, I had a nightmare about what Sara had told me. I got up at six the next morning and piled into the van that got us to the detention center every day. My first appointment was again with Sara and during this meeting we prepped for her credible fear interview or *entrevista de miedo creible*. I attempted to simulate what the interview would be like.

We prepped for about an hour and then toward the end of the meeting, I asked if she would consider signing a media release for our program. I explained that if she was okay with it, we would share her story with others, so that we could raise awareness about what was going on in Dilley. She agreed, but said it would be better if we didn't use her real name because she didn't want the gang back in her town to find out, in the worst case scenario that she and her daughters were deported. I told her that I understood and checked that box. Then I asked her to sign, but she reminded me that she didn't know how to write. I apologized for forgetting and that's when her daughter told her to make her mark, like before. She awkwardly grabbed my pen and slowly made her mark: a single capital X.

I proceeded to end our meeting and thanked her for coming. I said, "I want you to sleep well, to rest easy. You're going to do great tomorrow." She replied by saying that *primero Dios* (God first). Then she went on to apologize and reveal that she had forgotten my name. I said, "My name is Rodrigo." She tried to say it but she couldn't roll her r's. She apologized and said she couldn't speak very well either. I replied, "Well, my last name is Juárez, you could just call me that." That's when her eyes lit up. Juárez! She said she would just call me that and thanked me once again before leaving.

That night I slept three of four hours at the most. When we walked into the attorney trailer the following day, the linoleum floors looked especially bright. Maybe it was my nervousness, maybe my mind was slipping into a sleep-deprived alternate reality. I quickly walked into a room and proceeded to set up my battle station. I looked over my notes, brushed up on affidavits and asked the attorneys some last minute questions. At 9:30 AM on the dot, Sara walked in. I think I saw the faintest of smiles on her face. After exchanging pleasantries, we walked into the meeting room and I asked her how she had slept. She answered that not very well. I asked, "Are you a little nervous?" She said she was but I reminded her, "I'm

going to be in there with you, supporting you. You're going to do great." She replied that primero Dios (God first).

When we got to the courthouse, the asylum officer asked me, "Are you the attorney?" I replied, "I'm a law student representing her under supervision." He nodded and led us to his office at the end of a long hallway, past a children's playroom to the right. During our walk down the hallway, I leaned over to Sara and whispered, "Be calm. Everything is going to be okay." During the interview, the asylum officer asked all the usual questions. How do you know they wanted to kill you? How many times did he hit you? Do you feel persecuted because you belong to a particular social group? I was ready with my bottled water and my tissues when she eventually began to cry.

As we finished up the interview, I thanked the asylum officer and he replied, "Sorry this took so long. They're usually shorter." I politely said, "Well. She's been through a lot." The officer nervously smiled and led us back down the hallway where the guards were waiting to usher us back to the attorney's trailer. Past the Brown Bear and Blue Butterfly cabins. On our walk back, I told Sara, "You did great! You answered all of the questions despite the bad translations by the interpreter. I fully expect the result to be positive!" After every phase I uttered, however, she simply replied that primero Dios (God first). She thanked me and gingerly walked back to her cabin. She was clearly still a little shaken up from everything that had just happened.

On our last day at the detention center, the emotions were running high amongst the volunteers as well as the clients. This was the day where we would do "check out" meetings with our clients and explain to them how our program worked. The CARA Pro Bono Program - a collaboration through CLINIC, AILA, RAICES, and the American Immigration Council - is structured so that there are new groups of volunteer attorneys and law students taking over cases each week in a series of legal brigades. We input detailed case notes into our case management software online so that the next group of volunteers can be up to date on the status of a particular case.

At around eleven in the morning, Sara walks in. This time when I greet her, however, I undoubtedly see a smile. In our meeting, I try and explain to her the structure of our program: how the following week, I wouldn't be there anymore. She says she understands. I try to reassure her but she gets teary-eyed as she tells me it was because she was getting comfortable with me. She explains it was difficult for her to open up to people. I say that I understand but I explain, "I know, I know. But all of the volunteers are here for the same reason. We want to help you. We want to help the women and children being detained here. The next attorney you meet with might look different, might speak differently, but we all have the same heart. The same goal." With tears in her eyes, she nodded in acknowledgment and said may God bless me and protect me. She told me that we were doing God's work.

With my voice shaking, I replied, "Thank you very much, Sara. May God protect you and good luck to you and your family." Before she left, I asked her if it was okay if I give her a hug. She nodded and we awkwardly embraced (she was like two feet shorter than I was). When she walked out of the room, she gathered her daughters and then walked to the guard's table so they could be ushered back to their cabin.

As we left the detention center for the last time that week, our group of volunteers stopped to take a picture next to the detention center's welcome sign. It's nothing more than a plastic banner which reads "South Texas Family Residential Center" draped over the entrance of what used to be a gated community for families in the fracking business. The group picture was definitely bittersweet.

I may have left Dilley, but Dilley has not left me. Since getting back to Portland, I can't help but think of my experiences there. But also about all those women that we left behind in South Texas. Currently, the South Texas Family Residential Center houses around 350 women. Not including their children. Soon, the center will be expanded to house around 2,400 mostly Central American women and children. New asylum-seeking families are arriving there every day."

