

Witnessing at Homestead Child Migrant Prison

By Anne Bridgman

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Do attending protests, writing letters, and calling our representatives make a difference? In the current political climate, it's hard to know. But as Rev. Lo said on Easter Sunday, we can be confident that love makes a difference. That's why I travelled nearly 3,500 miles across the country to Homestead, Florida, recently to witness at a prison for child migrants.

Two thousand children and adolescents ages 13 to 17 were held at Homestead when I was there three weeks ago. By now, it's estimated that 3,200 are there. Those imprisoned at Homestead came to the United States to seek a better life. Many fled violence and severe poverty in their Central American countries. They went through so much to get here and when they presented themselves at the border, many of them legally, they were separated from parents and other family members, or, if they came alone, told that the contacts they had in the United States—names and phone numbers scribbled on pieces of paper—had to be thoroughly vetted and so they had to be detained.

What happened to them next is criminal. Instead of being welcomed to our country, they were locked up in the largest child prison in the United States. A prison that operates as a for-profit entity, enriching shareholders for every day a child is held. And giving those who run the facility motivation to hold the children longer.

So I went to see the children. To stand on a stepladder across from a field where they played soccer. To wave and blow kisses and make hearts in the air. To receive their waves and air hearts and blown kisses.

We know that being held in a detention center for weeks, sometimes months, harms children. There is strong scientific consensus from decades of research that separating children from their parents is deeply traumatic. Thousands of studies tell us that a strong foundation for healthy development requires a stable, responsive, and supportive relationship with at least one parent or primary caretaker. We also know that persistent levels of stress can disrupt the architecture of the developing brain and other biological systems with serious repercussions for learning, behavior, and lifelong physical and mental health.*

Our wonderful Senator, Jeff Merkley, who has visited Homestead twice, tells us that he has learned that the children held captive there are threatened when they misbehave or act out with not seeing their parents again. We also know that because Homestead is on federal property, it is exempt from state laws, including routine inspections by child welfare officials. In April, three Democratic congresswomen from Florida were turned away, not allowed to visit the facility, even though Congress is supposed to have oversight responsibilities.

While I was witnessing at Homestead, I learned that the children held there are not allowed to touch one another (even siblings can't embrace), girls can't braid each other's hair, and no one receives comforting hugs from anyone else. The conditions inside are dirty and cramped. More children are coming all the time. On a youth's 18th birthday, he or she is shackled and led away from Homestead to an adult detention center.

Supporters of the facility claim it's like summer camp or a slumber party. I saw otherwise. On my first day, one boy called out to me, in Spanish, "Get me out of here!" On my last day, another boy called over the fence, in English, "Help me!" The plaintive voices of the youth brought tears to my eyes and I felt powerless to help them. What could I as one person do to end the cruel detention of innocent asylum-seeking children?

As I flew back to Oregon, I made a list of actions to take. It's essential that my visit goes beyond witnessing, that I spread the word to others who can use their voices, that we keep advocating for these young people so they are not forgotten. Will you help? I encourage you to take at least one of the following steps in the coming week:

- Write Senator Merkley, thank him for visiting Homestead, and encourage him to continue his efforts to focus on this and child other detention facilities
- Encourage friends from other states to contact their Senators and Representatives to encourage them to visit Homestead
- Ask friends outside Oregon to contact their Senators and Representatives to cosponsor with Senator Merkley and Congresswoman Chu the Shut Down Child Prison Camps Act
- Visit Homestead, encourage others to visit Homestead, and/or donate so others can visit
- Join the Facebook page "Witness: Tornillo. Target: Homestead" and encourage others to do so
- Donate to RAICES, Annunciation House, El Otra Lado, or other organizations helping those seeking asylum, and encourage friends to do so
- Write Caliburn, parent company of Comprehensive Health Services, and demand they stop making over \$1.5 million a day off the suffering of children in Homestead, FL
- Let me know if you would like me to come speak to your group, neighbors, friends, or other gathering (acbridgman@gmail.com)
- Check out this map of the 88 child detention facilities in the United States as of last summer--<https://projects.propublica.org/graphics/migrant-shelters-near-you?sfns=mo--> and if one is near you, consider visiting it to learn more (though note that centers don't allow visitors) to inform ProPublica's efforts to keep track of these facilities

* Source: Congressional testimony of Dr. Jack Shonkoff, Harvard University, February 7, 2019. To view this six-minute testimony, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvdNRt2uavU>