

Etowah Visitation Project gives volunteers new perspective on privilege being an American: guest opinion



Lady Gaga, a chihuahua mix, sits with his trainer, a detainee at the Etowah County Jail, Tuesday, December 4, 2012 in Gadsden, Ala. (Eric Schultz / eschultz@al.com) (Eric Schultz)

By Beth Thames

They are detainees, immigrants, prisoners, and they come from all over the world: Togo, Kenya, Nigeria, Jamaica, Switzerland, Vietnam, Latin America.

More than 300 of them are housed at the Etowah County Detention Center in Gadsden, where they will spend months or even years. Some hope to see family again on the outside. Some have no hope left, say the members of the Etowah Visitation Project.

These visitors, organized a year ago, now number about 15. They bring hope and conversation for 30 minutes once a month, along with gift bags of snacks and pen and paper. They sit in the visitors' area and talk into a telephone receiver to the men whose faces appear on television monitors, as though they were miles away.

Though they're separated from violent criminals who are serving time, these men are locked away for other reasons. Some overstayed their work or student visas. A few were arrested for minor offenses. Maybe they served their time for that offense but now must serve time for staying in this country without papers. Maybe they have no connection to the place they came from. Maybe they've lived American lives for a decade or more, getting married, raising families and working.

Some seek political asylum; some refuse to sign paperwork because they fear being sent back to the country they left. Some are simply stuck in the system. They are, for now, marooned. Immigration is one of those burning issues of our time. Everybody has an opinion about it, usually a strong one. Whatever your opinion, one Huntsville lawyer and church volunteer has a request: "Visit a detainee," she says. "Listen to his story. No matter what your political views are, no matter how much you believe in the rule of law, you will feel empathy."

That's what she felt when she visited a 24-year-old from Serbia. She chose him from a photo since he looked like her son. She started her conversation with the few Serbian phrases she'd memorized, but he answered in English. He'd left Serbia when he was barely 13, right after his father and grandfather were shot in an uprising.

He spent his middle and high school years in Kentucky, served time in jail for drug possession, then was to be released. But ICE (Immigration Customs Enforcement) picked him up and he's been in the detention center since. He has no ties to Serbia, having grown up here, but he'll be deported there.

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So why should anybody care? The Visitation members think everybody should, since they've seen what happens when 300 men are housed in a facility built for a criminal population, not a civilian one. They've seen what happens to people far from family.

They believe most people would care if they were there, in that visiting room once a month. Caroline Earhart, Lynn Anderson and Katherine Weathers - a stay-at-home mother, a small business-owner, and a retiree, respectively - say the Visitation Project has given them a new perspective on the privilege of being an American.

"I never thought I'd visit anyone in prison," Ms. Weathers says, "but I've learned that these people just want freedom and liberty, like we all do. These are fathers who just want to be with their kids. They want to have a life."

For now, government officials will decide what kind of life they'll have.

Caroline Earhart, the mother of two school-age children who learn about world geography from her visits, encourages people to email her at etowahvisitationproject@gmail.com.

If people don't want to be visitors, they can still be pen pals or make a donation for Christmas gifts. She and Ms. Weathers will even pick the gifts up. Already, Sunday school classes have filled bags, and Boys and Girls Clubs have sent Christmas cards.

It's not too late.

On her Etowah visits, Ms. Earhart always tells the detainees to go back to their home countries with a message. "There are people of good will in a place called Huntsville, Alabama. I was in prison, and they came to visit me."