

By FELICITY FIGUEROA

GUEST COLUMNIST

Ana (not her real name) sits across from me, on the other side of the wood partition. Originally from Colombia, she has just turned 24, the same age as my older son. But while his greatest worry is finishing an essay for class, hers is the three children she has been unable to see since she was first detained at the James A. Musick low-security prison in Irvine months ago.

“I don’t want them to come visit me,” she tells me in her native Spanish, “because I know when they see me they will try to hug me across the table and then the guards will come and it will be very bad. No, it’s better that they think I’m on vacation.”

I was visiting Ana through an OC group that forms part of CIVIC – Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement – the official national network of the U.S. immigration detention visitation movement.

The local program, “Friends of OC Detainees,” pairs prospective visitors with immigrants held at two detention facilities in the county: Musick in Irvine and the Santa Ana City Jail.

The goal is to offer a bit of human contact to individuals who, because of a civil infraction, are not afforded even the benefits given to criminal inmates: They have no right to counsel, no right to a telephone call.

According to CIVIC, the United States maintains the largest immigration detention infrastructure in the world, detaining around 400,000 persons per year. Many – including legal permanent residents with longstanding community ties, asylum-seekers, and victims of human trafficking – are detained for weeks, months, and sometimes years, often far away from family and friends.

“Friends of OC Detainees” seeks to alleviate some of the feelings of hopelessness this situation can cause. Through our visits, we let these men and women know there is someone outside the jail wall who cares about them – regardless of whether or not they carry the proper documentation.

And Ana? I wish I could say; but the last time I went to visit her I was told that she was no longer at the facility. A helpful guard searched for her name on the computer, but there was no record to be found.

For information on visiting detainees, email FriendsofOCDetainees@gmail.com.

-Felicity Figueroa has lived in Irvine with her husband and two sons since 1991.