

Lead Stories

Tales of detention center woes

IMMIGRATION | A California nonprofit helps immigrant detainees tell their stories of isolation, suffering, and abuse

By SOPHIA LEE
Posted Oct. 22, 2014, 01:33 p.m.

California's Angel Island is a historic state park, where tourists can gaze at the San Francisco skyline, hike woody trails, and read poems inscribed on the walls of the now-shuttered Angel Island Immigration Station.

The [poems \[http://www.poeticwaves.net/\]](http://www.poeticwaves.net/), carved by detained Chinese immigrants between 1910 and 1940, bemoan the difficulties of isolation, weep with longing for freedom, and encourage other immigrants to “cast idle worries to the flowing stream.” One detainee wrote, “America has power, but not justice.”

The poems echo disturbingly similar sentiments of modern-day detained immigrants —except the voices of today's detainees have mostly been silenced. Visitors to Angel Island probably aren't aware immigrants [still fight \[http://www.worldmag.com/2014/08/detention_contention\]](http://www.worldmag.com/2014/08/detention_contention) against what many describe as inhumane detention, with stories of injustice that mirror the Chinese immigrants' decades-old suffering. About 5,000 immigrants are held in civil confinement in California alone, and about 400,000 are detained nationwide annually. The United States detains the largest number of immigrants of any country in the world, including many asylum-seekers, victims of human or sex trafficking, and legal residents whose cases are stuck in the gullet of a severely backlogged immigration system.



Associated Press/Photo by Gregory Bull

A man detained at the Otay Mesa immigration detention center in San Diego looks out from a room.

That's why the Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC), a California-based national nonprofit organization, recently launched a **new multimedia project** [<http://www.endisolation.org/detention-stories/>] that features recorded audio and animated short films portraying life behind detention center walls. Funded by a grant from Cal Humanities in partnership with the National Endowment for the Humanities, "Detention Stories: Life Inside California's New Angel Island" is the first project of its kind to document the stories of detained immigrants in a systematic way.

Because video and audio recordings are prohibited within detention facilities, several detainees asked CIVIC to help them share what they have to endure on a daily basis. "Detention Stories" allows the detainees to have their voices recorded via telephone and transformed into animated films about two minutes long. The first film reached more than 10,000 people through social media.

The goal is to "open the hearts and minds of Americans," said Christina Fialho, CIVIC's co-executive director. She said current technology and storytelling can break down the secrecy and isolation that once allowed human rights violations and abuse to thrive at Angel Island: "Although their bodies may be locked up, their voices remain free."

One film features Wang Yu, a Chinese immigrant whose wife and young daughter are U.S. citizens. He came to America on a legal visa, but U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) tried to deport him. Wang still doesn't know why ICE arrested him, nor did ICE give him an answer. "I don't have a criminal record. I don't have a traffic violation even," said Wang, his voice rising with emotion. When he refused to sign the document for deportation, he claims the ICE officers tried to use force: "They use the hands, to push the hands on my mouth. Told me to shut up. I ... I could not breathe. I almost died. But they don't care." The ICE officers then locked him in a detention center under solitary confinement for 50 days. Three times a week, he was allowed five-minute showers, although he remained handcuffed. A phone call to family members or friends cost \$5 per minute. Today Wang is back in China, still waiting for the green light to return to America and his family. "The first thing I want to do when I come back to America is go to church with my wife and daughter," he said.

When asked about claims made by detainees in CIVIC videos, ICE spokesman Andrew Munoz said the agency has made "substantial strides" since 2009 to improve its civil detention system and "reduce transfers, maximize access to counsel and visitation, promote recreation, improve conditions of confinement, and ensure quality medical, mental health, and dental care." He did not address any specific claims of mistreatment.

Because ICE at times deals with criminal aliens—“violent offenders with gang affiliations”— its practices may “impact detainee comfort,” Munoz said. But he insisted the agency tries to ensure it “never infringes individual civil rights.”

Wang is not alone in making claims of abuse. More than 300 immigrants are held in solitary confinement, for reasons that range from refusal to stop appealing cases to engaging in activities outside the norm. But because the immigrants are under civil confinement, they don’t share the legal safeguards granted to convicted prisoners under the U.S. Constitution. Once out of detention, Wang filed an official civil rights complaint on July 21 with the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. He has yet to receive a response.

Marcela Castro, who was recently released after more than six months in detention, recalled days of despair and boredom. She and some other detained women tried to distract themselves by mixing Kool-Aid powder with water and applying it like make-up to eyelids and lips. “We got too much fun that we didn’t care what’s going to be the risk of it,” she said in her video. But the guards “got offended” and warned them that the next time they played with Kool-Aid make-up, they would be thrown into “the hole”— their lingo for solitary confinement. “Every time you have something to do to distract your mind, they always come and take your options to be free,” Castro said, her voice soft and flat. “They don’t let you be a human being, they don’t let you to be yourself.”

Another CIVIC film features the story of [Sylvester Owino \[http://www.worldmag.com/2014/09/how_long_is_too_long_to_detain_immigrants\]](http://www.worldmag.com/2014/09/how_long_is_too_long_to_detain_immigrants), who has been detained for almost nine years remains imprisoned in a detention facility in Alabama. The “craziest part,” Fialho said, is that the people who have the strongest claim to stay in the United States are usually the ones held in detention the longest, because they are appealing their cases and fighting intense pressure to be deported.

Fialho said ICE assurances of civil rights protections are not enough. It’s up to independent, community-based groups such as CIVIC to expose stories that otherwise would never escape detention walls, she said.

“I think the message for us and our call for action as Christians is very clear: We’re to welcome the stranger and visit the prisoner,” Fialho said. “And for myself, in responding to God’s calling, I learned that our federal government is really unable to detain our immigrants humanely.”

*Copyright © 2014 WORLD News Group. All rights reserved.
Articles may not be reproduced without permission.*