

# The stories they hear

A recent retiree, never a leader in social causes, has launched a group to visit immigrant detainees in O.C. She ministers by listening.

By **JIM HINCH FOR THE REGISTER**

The first story, like so many stories Jan Meslin would hear at the immigrant detention center in Irvine, was hard to follow, and Meslin didn't know how much of it was true.

But that didn't matter. What mattered was the connection.

It was September 2012. Meslin, a 62-year-old recent retiree from Mission Viejo, sat in a loud, cavernous, fluorescent-lit visitor center at the James A. Musick jail in Irvine.

Across the table sat Martina, from Honduras, an immigrant detainee and one of roughly 1,000 people held in Orange County jails for immigration violations.

"She had been trafficked by her own mother when she was 12 years old," Meslin recalled. "Brought to the U.S. to work in bars."

## Want to visit?

Friends of Orange County Detainees will host an orientation for new volunteers at 6:30 p.m. Thursday at the Orange County Islamic Foundation, 23585 Madero Drive, Mission Viejo.

More information:

[endisolation.org/friendsofocdetainees](http://endisolation.org/friendsofocdetainees)

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Martina was now in her 30s, though Meslin said she looked older.

"She said that she had no money to call her children, and she worried that her children would not understand the separation."

After a half-hour a sheriff's deputy signaled that their visit would have to end.

The two women had barely understood each other. Martina spoke little English, Meslin no Spanish. Yet after that brief meeting Meslin, a onetime computer trainer and special education assistant in Saddleback Valley schools, felt herself propelled into a new chapter of her life.

Today, Meslin is leader of Friends of Orange County Detainees, an informal group of 50 volunteers who visit immigrant detainees in Musick jail, Santa Ana jail and, beginning this month, the Theo Lacy maximum security facility in Orange.

To date, the group has made contact with 94 detainees, some of whom have been in detention for nearly three years awaiting word on whether they will be deported or granted asylum in the United States.

Some are refugees. Others were brought to the U.S. as children and didn't even know they were here illegally. Others are hardened criminals.

Still, whatever their backgrounds, Meslin believes the people her group visits all have stories and families and, while detained, they're just "wasting away" their lives.

"This program really offers a way for everyone to see the world through others' eyes," she says.

Orange County is one of the nation's key points for immigrant detention. Three local jails are contracted by federal officials (through Immigration and Customs Enforcement) to hold immigrant detainees brought into the system from other parts of Southern California and as far away as Massachusetts. In all, there are 10 detention centers in California holding about 3,800 detainees. And, nationally, there are about 34,000 detainees held on a typical day.

Immigrant detainees have not been charged with crimes. Immigrants charged with crimes are routed into the criminal justice system and housed with other criminal inmates.

Detainees are mostly housed separately from, and have fewer constitutional rights than, criminal defendants. They are not given free legal representation or free phone calls. Jails can charge them high fees for telephone use, pillows, aspirin and other amenities.

Detainees wear color-coded jailhouse jumpsuits and are shackled at judicial proceedings. Most never receive a visitor. Their families, often illegal immigrants themselves, might be too scared to come to a jail, or they live too far away or simply don't care.

Which is why Jan Meslin went to the Musick jail visitor center last September.

Meslin is a Unitarian. A few years earlier, her Mission Viejo congregation began studying immigration as a social issue. Meslin was appalled to learn that hundreds of immigrants were being detained without legal recourse a short drive away from her home.

A person active with a local faith-based community organizing group who spoke to Meslin's church about the issue suggested that Meslin visit immigrant detainees. Detainees are lonely, bored and often believe no one cares about their plight, the activist said. Visiting them, the activist added, might fill a huge, unmet need.

Soon, Meslin and others from her congregation had an appointment at Musick.

Meslin was nervous the day she met Martina. She had to pass through a metal detector and hand over everything but her driver's license and car key to jailers. The Musick visitors' center mixes detainees with criminal inmates, and signs warn visitors not to touch detainees and to keep hands visible at all times.

Meslin, casting around for something to say to Martina, asked about Honduras. "She smiled broadly," Meslin said. Soon, the two women were chatting about children – Martina had four, all under 8 years old – and the "food and customs" of Martina's hometown.

Meslin gave Martina money for a phone call. "She looked worried," Meslin said. But it was clear the visit made a difference.

Outside the jail, Meslin felt both stunned and elated by what she'd just done. For the first time in her life, she said, she felt she was "part of a bigger thing."

Meslin told her friends. Her friends told friends. The growing group went back to Musick, then to Santa Ana jail. Meslin learned that Martina had been freed, that she'd been declared a victim of trafficking.

"She used the money I gave her to call her children," Meslin said. "She had not spoken to them in months. They told her that they missed her cooking, specifically chicken."

Meslin said she wishes the entire system of immigrant detention could be replaced with something less restrictive. But she said her group takes no official position on immigration as an issue. The only requirement for volunteers, who come from a variety of faith backgrounds, is that they commit to visit one or more detainees for three months.

So far, relations with both ICE and jail authorities have been friendly and cooperative.

"Just being there helps," Meslin said. "That's all we can do."

Meslin is not a born activist. A sign in her kitchen reads, "I can't clean house and save the world at the same time." She herself can't wholly explain why, at this stage in her life, she suddenly has been drawn to minister to immigrants.

"To me it's not that big a deal," she said, meaning she doesn't consider herself extraordinary.

Meslin was raised Presbyterian in Rochester, Minn. Her mother started a social-concerns committee at church and took Meslin to visit people in nursing homes. But Meslin said she didn't really like going; "it was boring."

Listening to detainees is different.

"You start thinking of them sitting there, all by themselves, waiting for a visitor," Meslin said. "Once you start, you want to go as much as you can."

Meslin keeps an archive of volunteers' written accounts of their visits.

"He seems defeated," one volunteer wrote of a Mexican detainee named Jose, who owns a painting company in Adelanto and, in April, was facing deportation. "Every week I see him he says over and over how he wants to see his kids."

Another detainee, an asylum seeker from El Salvador, "writes poetry, wants to send some to me," another volunteer wrote. "He has been in detention since 2010."

Wrote another volunteer: "I visited A ... this morning, and it was a sad visit. I had just been privately wondering how marriages stood up under the long absences of one of the spouses. I found out; they don't."

Meslin herself wrote of visiting a 37-year-old El Salvadoran detainee who was also seeking asylum. He'd been a member of the MS13 street gang in El Salvador but left the gang when his daughter was born.

Now both the gang and anti-gang police in El Salvador sought to kill him, the detainee claimed.

"He is tattooed," Meslin wrote. "The ones I notice the most are the names of his two daughters tattooed on his fingers."

"He is also an artist. He made me and another visitor painstakingly detailed rosary beads out of plastic lunch bags – the hanging crosses are from wrapped shiny metal made from ballpoint pen clips."

"They are works of art, and every visitor I bring, he offers to make another as a gift of gratitude. One month ago, the detention authorities raided and confiscated all of (the) crosses he made."

Meslin said she risks growing depressed from her work. "I'm realizing more and more that most of the people we visit will exhaust all of their options and finally get deported," she said. "It's a sad ending."

Yet, she won't stop visiting.

"It makes the detainees so happy when we come.

"Hopefully, we can keep going and, hopefully, the system can get better."

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HANNAH POTES, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Jan Meslin made her first visit to meet a detainee in jail in September and has become a leader of Friends of Orange County Detainees.

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**- JAN MESLIN**

PHOTOS: HANNAH POTES, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Jan Meslin is a leader of a group that visits detainees at immigration detention centers. “We offer them friendship so they know someone on the outside cares about them,” she said. “For some, we are their only visitors.”



The Friends of Orange County Detainees group often goes to the James A. Musick Facility in Irvine to speak to individuals scheduled to be deported.