

An Opinion: They Are Children

By Scott Laird

At the end of the gathering we held a moment of silence, each of us with a lit candle, some with heads bowed and eyes closed. In the background, we could hear the happy sounds of children – laughing, running, climbing, and playing in the park.

On July 12, I attended a vigil at Columbia View Park in St. Helens, overlooking the Columbia River. The vigil was protesting the inhumane conditions faced by asylum seekers and refugees being held in U.S. Customs and Border Patrol detention facilities at the United States/Mexico border.

The event was organized by my friend Lori Baker, who told me prior to the event she hoped 20 people would attend. Instead, about 50 of us were there, from all across Columbia County – Clatskanie, Columbia City, Scappoose, Vernonia. Most of us didn't know each other.

Lori felt compelled to get a permit and host this event as part of a nationwide vigil, after hearing the most recent report of the wretched conditions in which children were being held in detention. At 8:00 pm she stepped forward to start the event and struggled to find the right words, haltingly apologizing for not being a better public speaker.

And then something sort of magical happened, as those of us in the audience, most of us strangers, came together and rallied around her. You could feel the generosity and the acceptance. It didn't matter if Lori stumbled while speaking. What she had to say was important, and we wanted to hear it.

Lori read part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a human rights treaty which establishes a special set of civil rights concerning the welfare of children around the world, noting that children should be brought up in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality, and solidarity. The United States government played an active role in the drafting of the Convention and signed it in February 1995, but unfortunately, has never ratified it. "In all actions concerning children... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration," states Article 3.

Just last week Elora Mukherjee, the director of Columbia Law School's Immigrants' Rights Clinic, testified for three days in front of the United States Congress after she returned from interviewing 70 detained migrant children in

Clint, Texas. Mukherjee testified about the horrid conditions she observed during an inspection visit where 700 children are being held for weeks, and even months, in a facility designed to hold 100 adults. She said she witnessed children so dirty they had a stench, with inadequate bedding, clothing, and no hygiene tools like soap, toothbrushes, and diapers. She said some of the children she interviewed were too traumatized to even speak their own names, and others cried uncontrollably. She said her team had to intervene to get medical attention and food for several of the detainees. While they were allowed to interview some children, the 10-person team said they were not allowed to tour the full facility and were barred from visiting some of the most vulnerable children who were being held in a "sick ward."

These are children. Some of them are babies. They've been separated from their families and are in the care of the United States government.

At the vigil, a letter of support Lori had received from Oregon's U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley was read. Merkley has been an outspoken critic of the policies that have led to the separation of families and the forced detainment of children.

Later, we heard first-hand accounts of children in detention, taken from the interviews during the recent inspection.

"We are in a metal cage with 20 other teenagers with babies and young children. We have one mat we need to share with each other. It is very cold. We each got a mylar blanket, but it is not enough to warm up. The lights are on all of the time." -From a 16-year-old girl

"I'm hungry here at Clint all the time. Sometimes I wake up from hunger at 4:00 am. I'm too scared to ask the officials here for any more food, even though there is not enough food here for me." -From a 12-year-old boy

"We have not been able to shower. The toilet is out in the open in the cage, there is no door for any privacy. There is water but no soap to wash our hands." -From a 17-year-old boy

"They told us that we could only have one layer of clothing, and they threw away the rest of our clothes in the garbage." -From a 16-year-old boy

"I was given a blanket and a mattress, but then, at 3:00 am, the guards took the blanket and mattress. My baby was left sleeping on the floor. In fact, almost every

night, the guards wake us at 3:00 am and take away our sleeping mattresses and blankets. They leave babies, even little babies of two or three months, sleeping on the cold floor. I think the guards act this way to punish us." -17-year-old girl

"Three days ago my baby soiled his clothes. I had no place to wash the clothes so I could not put them back on my baby. Since then, my baby of only three months has only been wearing a small little jacket made of t-shirt material. I have nothing else for my son to wear... I have been told they do not have any clothes here at this place. I just want my baby to be warm enough. I am having to make sure I carry my baby super close to me to keep his little body warm." -From a 17-year-old girl

"I am in a room with dozens of other boys. Some have been as young as 3 or 4 years old. Some cry. Right now, there is a 12-year-old who cries a lot. Others try to comfort him. One of the officers makes fun of those who cry." From a 17-year-old boy

"I started taking care of [a five-year-old whose name has been withheld] in the Ice Box after they separated her from her father. [She] sleeps on a mat with me on the concrete floor. We spend all day every day in that room. There are no activities, only crying." -From a 15-year-old girl

Hearing these stories was heart-breaking, and some in the crowd sobbed openly as they listened. At first, I too was deeply saddened. Then I started to feel something else. Anger.

It doesn't matter what country they were born in or why they came here. They are children.

It doesn't matter how they got to our border or who brought them. They are children.

It doesn't matter which political party you belong to, or whether or not you support our current administration. It doesn't matter if they crossed our border illegally. It doesn't matter who YOU want to try to blame for this. They are children.

Seeking asylum in the United States is not illegal, but torturing children like this should be. Some of these detention centers are privately run facilities. Someone is making a profit on the suffering of these children.

At the vigil, some members of the crowd spoke. They urged us to make our voices heard and speak out against these inhumane conditions. Then the

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names of six migrant children who had died while being held in U.S. custody were read:

Darlyn Cristabel Cordova-Valle, 10, El Salvador

Jakelin Caal Maquin, 7, Guatemala

Felipe Gomez Alonzo, 8, Guatemala


Juan de León Gutiérrez, 16, Guatemala

Wilmer Josué Ramírez Vásquez, 2½, Guatemala

Carlos Hernandez Vásquez, 16, Guatemala

What happened to the United States that used to welcome refugees to this country – the tired, the poor, the homeless, the wretched, the huddled masses, – with a lit lamp and an open door? What about the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the stranger?

Later, we all gathered together and lit candles, like others at vigils all around the country, and held a moment of silence. And listened to the sounds of the children nearby, who were playing.



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