

# El dia de la madre, remembering those behind bars

BY BY PAT RUMER  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

As of this writing, today, May 10, is Mother's Day in Mexico and Central America. I am standing on a small piece of land outside the Detention Center of ICE in Tacoma, Wash. We are here to remember the mothers who are incarcerated in this special jail built for persons without documents.

I am here to remember the mothers and to be in solidarity with everyone fighting to change the laws of my government that separate children from their parents. These incarcerated mothers have to leave their

Pat Rumer is a Portland activist on Latin American and international issues, specifically involved with immigration justice.

children with family members or neighbors, or in the worse case, they are put into foster care. I speak with another vigil participant, Vicki, who tells me that her sister was detained two years ago for a month. She has four children. Vicki and others in her family took care of them. But they did not understand

why their mother was taken away and they missed her a great deal. Vicki attends this vigil each year to remember her sister.

I am also here to resist these laws and show support for all the people in the Detention Center. It is not a lot to give one day each year to travel to Tacoma and participate in the Mother's Day Vigil organized by the Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice (Portland) and the Washington New Sanctuary Movement.

We chant: *Parar las Detenciones - Parar los Detenciones - Mantenga las familias Juntas*. How many more years will we have to hold this vigil? This is the seventh year people have gathered to say loudly, *No Mas Deportaciones*. The crowd of a hundred people waves signs saying "Free them Now," "Stop the Detentions," "Bring Them Home."

I came to this vigil for the first time in 2009. I was surprised to find the center located in the heart of the industrial area of Tacoma near the train station. It looks like a big warehouse of a corporation that makes computers, but this warehouse is owned by a private corporation that has round the clock guards and barbed wire fence. We are

not allowed to enter.

We are outside but we sing out for justice; we hope that our voices, words and presence can penetrate the walls so that the people inside know that we are outside supporting them. There are flowers for the women who arrive to visit a husband or brother or sister. The visitors carry our voices, prayers and speeches inside where we cannot go.

This detention center is owned by GEO Corporation. They earned \$115 million from

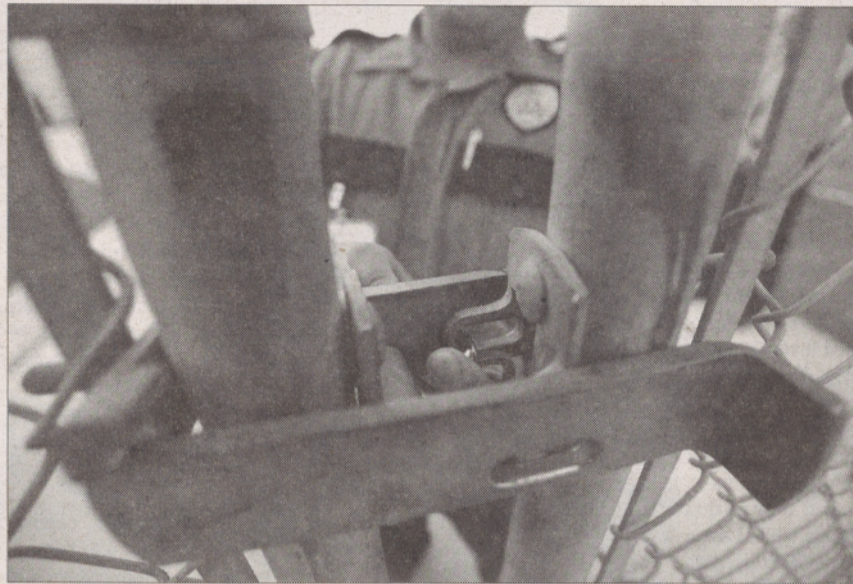


PHOTO BY AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

their detention center operations nationally. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, la migra, has a Congressional mandate to detain people without documents in the United States. ICE then contracts with GEO and another private corporation to provide 34,000 beds at a daily cost of \$119 per person: It's a lot of money. There is a profit to be made in this business. This is my tax dollars at work. I am angry. I don't want my government to use my money to warehouse people. It is not right. It is inhuman.

We hear testimony from women who have lost their husbands to deportation. They are undocumented as well and cannot find work. One woman shares with us - my three-year-old son stopped speaking after his

father's deportation. He is being seen by speech therapists and the entire family is receiving some therapy through the schools. How can we treat people this way?

Towards the end of the program, a woman pastor leads us in a service of remembrance for the 60 people who have died in detention this past year. She asks us to pick up a small stone by the side of the railroad tracks, put it in our hands, move forward silently during the reading of the names and to place the stones in a circle on

the ground. Various people read the names and countries of origin of the people who have died.

During the reading of the second group of names, all four are from Guatemala. Tears in my eyes, my body moves forward. Without thinking I put my stone in the circle in memory of Guatemalan brothers whom I do not know but who are *compañeros* in my heart.

I think of this country, Guatemala, so beautiful, so poor. I feel a great sadness that they died so far from home and their families. Suddenly, I realize that on this day one year ago, Mother's Day, the Guatemalan Court found General Rios Montt guilty of crimes against humanity and genocide. My daughter Deborah had left a voice message

on my phone telling me the news, and I began to cry, thinking of all the people I knew in Guatemala and what this decision had meant for them.

Are we in the United States really different than Guatemala? What are our crimes against humanity? What crimes have undocumented people committed? Why are there no laws protecting their right to due process when they are detained, transported to Tacoma and then deported to their country of origin?

The female lead singer of the group, Bajo Salario, shares her story. My church, St. Andrew's Roman Catholic Church in Portland, raised the funds for bail for her husband. Then they helped them get legal papers so that her husband was not deported. That is real support - an act of justice.

What a struggle it is. Yes, it is good to save a few lives, one by one, but where is justice? Where are members of the U. S. Congress to understand that we are all human beings and that immigration reform needs to happen now so that we no longer treat people like this?

More people have been deported by President Obama in the last five years, a total of 2 million, than during the entire eight years of George Bush. We yell and chant with the hope that someone hears - *No more deported persons! No more! No more!*

At the end of the vigil we sing in Spanish the movement song, We shall not be moved. *Unidos en la lucha, no nos moverán Como un árbol firme junto al río No nos moverán!*

We walk with paper plates inscribed with messages: We hunger for immigrant justice; We thirst for justice for immigrant families. We tie these plates to the wall surrounding the detention center with the hope that the detainees will see them. The plates are simple symbols, but I hope they mean something for the people separated from their families and communities.

When I climb back into the car for the return to Portland, I ask myself, *What are you going to do, Pat? What can you do?* I am unsure, but I do know that I will join with other people to speak the truth so that these crimes against humanity are not invisible.

*Nosotros venceremos.*  
We shall overcome.



**Follow Street Roots on Facebook**

and

**Twitter!**




*Ending homelessness and achieving self-sufficiency - now roasting and distributing craft coffee.*

Available for purchase at:

**New Seasons Market**  
**Green Zebra Grocery**  
**Food Front Cooperative Grocery**  
**Chuck's Produce**

Call us for office coffee accounts!  
503-784-9263



www.centralcityconcern.org  
facebook.com/CentralCityCoffee



**Where senior and disabled adults receive the care and respect they deserve.**

Call us for more information  
**(503)223-2144**

1337 S.W. Washington, Portland, OR 97205  
www.taft-home.org



**Dignity**



**Poverty**