

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Adelanto

Désirée Zamorano · Wednesday, June 5th, 2019

UPDATE 5/30/19, from the author's colleague Andy:

“Early this morning, I watched as David boarded a flight to Phoenix. As he said to me before going forward in line, “I am so happy.”

After 14 months in Adelanto, David was finally released yesterday on a \$10,000 bond, with funding aggregated from a crowd-fund, from monies garnered by [CLUE](#), and from a matching grant from [Freedom for Immigrants](#).

David is not out of the woods; he's wearing a GPS bracelet on his ankle, and he has upcoming court appearances to make. But he's out of Adelanto, he has a place to stay (his work supervisor's home), and he has a chance to continue his flight in the friendlier, infinitely freer, circumstances of his home turf.


And he's going to his daughter's elementary school graduation this evening.”

Original Post 9/5/18

It starts with pain and outrage.

You're out of the country when you hear about a Supreme Court Justice stepping down, and the caged children. You want to keen and wail, but you don't. You want to never return to your country of origin, but you do. You return to daily life at home.

A few weeks later you go to a Long Beach synagogue for a training in visiting incarcerated immigrants. People from CLUE and Freedom for Immigrants explain and encourage. A Venezuelan poet [sears your heart](#). You listen intently when a woman who has been an activist most of her seventy years tells the audience, “You're going to want to fix things. You won't be able to. You are there to sit in solidarity. To listen. Remember, your visits disrupt the power structure.” You think you understand what she means. You think you can do this.

You and three others make the two hour drive to Adelanto, a town on the desert side of  Angeles National Forest. You look up where you're going, GEO Group's [Adelanto ICE Processing Center](#), a euphemism for an immigrant incarceration complex. You think Adelanto

seems fat and happy with incarceration, holding almost 10,000 bodies, nearly a third of the town's population, in its county jail, state prison, federal prison, and the "processing center."

You are paired with Andy, the two of you will visit "David," while the two others at another building will visit "Frank." You later learn that one of your group is denied her visit to Frank, the staff deeming her pants "leggings." When you find this out you think about the arbitrary flexing of power, and who it demeans.

Like the other prisons you've visited, you leave everything behind, trade your ID for a visitor pass and wait. You know that the prisoner you are visiting are allowed showers only once a week, but also before meeting visitors. You think about your privilege; you think about what you are going to say.

You and your colleague Andy go through security and enter a small community room with plastic chairs. David is there already, a brown man in an orange suit moving chairs for you like a gracious host. He tells you he has never had a visitor before, in all his five months here. You realize he has been waiting for someone to talk to. He talks quickly, expressively, and mostly to Andy. You watch, you listen, and this is what you hear:

He'd crossed over in the 90s, been married to a US citizen, and through her had applied for citizenship. The attorney they hired never correctly submitted the paperwork. He shrugged it off, and later divorced the woman, but continued to see his daughter and send child support.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe I should have stayed married to her. Ni modo (as in, what can you do?)."

He worked in traffic control, earned a decent living from the city. He later moved in with another woman. He was offered jobs in Los Angeles and Seattle, but he wanted to be near his daughter. He lived and worked in his adopted state for over 22 years. He paid his taxes, he paid child support. What he didn't pay was a fine for a truck that he had abandoned, and his car's tags. Once he was pulled over for the tags the officer realized that, due to the unpaid fine, David's license had been revoked.

You hear: Criminalization of poverty.

He was asked to produce proof of legal residency. He had none.

You hear: He became the property of ICE.

He hired an attorney and paid him \$3,000. ICE moved him hundreds of miles away to Adelanto, California, a state where his lawyer was unqualified to practice.

You hear: He was ripped from his community, his loved ones, and now has no representation.

While pointing out a "good guy" in the prison room where you listen, David complains of racist and emotional abuse by the staff, how he and others are spoken to, how he and others are treated. "They're *racist* here." David names a Border Patrol agent who wanted him to sign self-deportation papers. Without a lawyer David refused to sign anything. David tells you the agent took him handcuffed to a room without surveillance. He threw him against the wall, breaking his nose, and assaulting him. (You now notice he has a broken nose, a damaged wrist.)

The medical attention he received was seven tablets of Advil.

You hear: Intentional abuse, intentional neglect.

He does not have a lawyer here. Since he is not a resident of the state of California, he does not qualify for one. He did have someone helping him with his paperwork, who encouraged him to apply for asylum. He does have some hope that his claim for asylum was strong.

You ask: Who told you you have a strong case? You are worried he is being bilked again. He tells you the group that helps him fill out his paperwork did. He tells you that his brother was killed by a cartel thirty years ago, the cartel would be after him. He tells you his girlfriend died recently, hundreds of miles away. He tells you he wants to get out of here, to talk to his daughter, to take care of his deceased girlfriend's things. He asks, would you come to his asylum hearing?

You look at Andy. You don't know. You don't commit.

Later, leaving the lobby, you feed a machine to give him money for phone calls. The corporation that runs this charges you 15%.

Later, you realize your pain of going would be so much less than his pain, his isolation. You and Andy agree to attend.

The Monday morning of the asylum hearing you arrive at a different building for David's appearance. This time you notice that all of the people working for GEO are under thirty, men and women of color, with the exception of one smoke-steeped pot-bellied much older white man. The three staff members at the front of at this facility are unwelcoming, and unconcerned about your wait.

You watch as GEO employees arrive in clumps, remove their belts and hardware, walk through security, have a wand waved over them, and walk on through. You and other visitors wait. You examine the lawyers and translators waiting in their own dedicated line.

You and your colleague Andy, now your friend, are led into a secure hallway, where framed photos of an orange-haired ghoul and an improbably powerful elf smile unconvincingly at you. When David's case is ready, a guard leads you into the courtroom.

You are a little stunned to realize that GEO Group houses courtrooms for the Department of Justice. You think: What a metaphor for our privatization of incarceration, our privatization of "justice."

You are told to sit in the back row and to not speak. David turns and smiles shyly. You see gratitude.

You examine the room which is white, windowless, with a huge seal of the Department of Justice on the wall behind the judge. There are three rows of benches, and the bench in front of you is scuffed at the base. You wonder who sat there, kicking it. The judge sits facing you, the court translator sits with a microphone in the witness stand, both David and the government prosecutor face the judge, their backs to you, the bailiff to the side.

You note that the judge and the government representative are white.

For one ridiculous moment you think the judge will see a decent man seated in front of him, and waive this all away. You find yourself oddly choked up. You push it aside.

You listen. After court speak and formalities the judge says, “As you do not have an attorney, I will ask you the questions.”

You are on the alert for any tone of malice or hostility. You listen as the judge questions David. You are surprised by the judge’s gentle manner and respectful tone, as he works his way up to asking David why did he fear, thirty years later, reprisal from the cartel? Throughout the forty minutes of testimony, it becomes uncomfortably clear to you that there had been no threat to this David’s life, there was no evidence that a cartel was after him, that all he had was this false hope of amnesty to cling to, to wish upon, to testify to, and he would work hard with his answers to make his fear seem concrete to the judge.

You had no hope for him before, and you have no hope for him now. All you can think is that he should have never been here in the first place. All you can think is, for the price of his car registration...his US life is shattered.

You are in thrall to the translator, who does a stunning job on concurrent translation, softly repeating the judge’s words to David in her mic, transmitted to his headphones, then repeating David’s answers for the judge.

You watch as the judge takes notes, as the translator takes notes. You are fascinated by the fact that the government representative appears bored. You are fascinated by the two inches of gray near her scalp; you wonder if you had not been sitting behind her would she have been checking her email? You wonder if the two of you had not been in this courtroom, would the judge have been so gentle, and gracious?

You hear the judge ask David if he wants to appeal. David says yes.

You listen as the judge declares his summation to the transcriber, in a nearly automatic, robotic manner, including numerous spelling, spacing, and punctuation references, that the translator, in a soft low murmur, translates for David. You marvel at the banality of bureaucracy during such a tumultuous time for this man. You listen intently as the judge references the human rights abuses in Mexico, as he states that he believes the respondent was telling the story to the best of his ability, but that David does not fall into any of the five groups who would suffer persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Nor does he warrant protection under the convention against torture. You wait for the word “denied” and hear it twice, uttered so softly that it is nearly anticlimactic.

You are escorted out without being able to speak to David, so you and Andy wave. David gives you both a grimace, as if to say, “ni modo.”

You had prepared yourself emotionally for this outcome.

As you wait for your ID, you spot the translator as she heads to the lobby’s restroom. You compliment her skills. You wait in line for your ID, and then you hear:

“What do you mean I need to be ICE approved to visit my client? I just saw him last week!”

You watch as the translator returns from the restroom and the staff tells her she cannot come in because she is not on the ICE approved list. She looks at them like they are crazy. “I was just inside,” she says. “The judge is waiting for me.” She looks at you and shakes her head. After a delay, they allow her back inside.

You watch the attorney stalk away from the counter; you follow him. He is a lawyer from a pro-bono organization based in downtown Los Angeles. You hear: two hours in traffic each way, a squandering of his resources. He tells you that four attorneys were denied visitation to their clients today because they were not on the ICE approved list. He says, “They are making fucking sure we can’t do our jobs.”

You are a witness.

The pain and outrage intensify.

Organizations:

<https://www.freedomforimmigrants.org/>

<http://www.chirla.org/>

<https://www.cluejustice.org/>

<http://www.carecen-la.org/>

<https://www.aclu.org/>

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