

The Lovelight Stories

PODCAST

Ep: 8 | Exposing Detention Centers & Understanding Immigration in the U.S. with Amilcar Valencia
| El Refugio

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00:00.00

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Well hello, Amilcar. Thank you so much for joining me on the Lovelight Stories Podcast today. It is a joy. I know we've been in touch the last couple of years and I've had a chance to go see the work that you do in detention centers and even visit 1 in South Georgia. oh and your hospitality house. You have so much going on. Can you share a little bit about El Refugio and how that all began?

00:29.37

Amilcar Valencia

Yeah, well, first of all, thank you so much for inviting me to your podcast It's really great to connect with you again, but also share with your audience a little more about what we do at El Refugio. El Refugio is an organization that was funded in 2010 to support immigrants who are in deportation proceedings who are currently detaining this detention center which is located in southwest Georgia. Very close to the Alabama Border far from the city of Atlanta um, and through that process we support immigrants who detain as I mentioned support their loved ones who come to this them. We ah you know partner with different groups too. Make sure that we are doing whatever it takes to ah be present to accompany people who are going through these proceedings and also shed a light into what really happens in detention and how their lives are impacted by our migration and deportation system in the United States. so that's our work and in simple words just to a company to support people who are going to this very painful they um probably the most difficult time of their lives. Um, while they're in detain or while they have lobe None detain ads to work. And our role is to be there to be pressing into a company then again as I said educate people about this issue and do something about it that that's our goal we wanted to be active in making sure that um yeah, others know about. And also advocating to put an end to the system.

02:18.84

lovelightstories

Right? And your work is so incredibly important both on the side of helping the immigrant themselves, but also the advocacy work and migration and immigration. Has been such a hot topic in the United States for the last couple of years and um, it's a to a double- edged sword if you will. But I think None thing is we don't fully understand. The topic of immigration and what people perhaps go through in that process and why they're migrating in the none place all of the

time and I know personally when I came across El Refugio and visited the detention center. It was such an eye-opening experience I couldn't believe that it was something that was happening an hour or so from my door but I didn't I didn't know much about it. So can you share just with everyone why people migrate in the first place like what are the main reasons that you're seeing immigrants migrate to the US?

04:43.00

Amilcar Valencia

Well, that's an important question because as you mentioned often people um just get a piece of the pi and you were mentioning that you know understanding what is happening. With immigrants here in the United States and we only see like kind of tiny piece of it. But sometimes we fail to understand what happens before they journey to get here right? Or why is it that they're coming to United States um and there are many reasons so people you know have. Everyone as a human being have the right to migrate. Um, but in this country right? and very particular laws that allow certain people to come into the United States through certain processes and there is ah a. Good amount of people and mainly people from latin America from you know, ah Africa and the caribbean who are less likely to be assessed through a legal process to come to United States so often people don't have the ability to say I'm just going to you know, get a visa and go to native state and then maybe when I'm there I'm going to file for something and see if I can stay there right that that doesn't happen if you're someone from el salvaor what the Mao or you know. Country in in Latin America or you know haitians for example people in and from Jamaica so it's very complicated that there is not many process or the process are limited to come here legally to United States I think that's what sometimes people say. But why? Why don't people come go to the line right why people come the right way the reality is that there is no line for a lot of people that's just pretty simple. There's no line for people to come here legally and when their lives are threaten where their lives are in danger. People don't have the luxury to wait. Ah, for that people flee ah because of poverty persecution war you know the violence in in in our the countries in Latin America but of course in other countries as well. Um. Um, people come in here because they are seeking protection people because people are coming the United States because you know they see this country right? and we say that as a country of country of freedom and you know the American dream right? that but the reality is that um.

07:30.59

Amilcar Valencia

That's that American dream or that opportunities are not for everyone when it comes to immigration for example or people who come here from our countries. Um, so um to put it. Simple. We have a lot of people from. Ah, lately from Nicaragua who come to United States seeking a asylum so the Nicaraguans ah, for those who know the treating Nicaragua right now this political situation very in stable I mean we had ah you know all people Nicaragua have you know these. Political persecution for those who are organizing against the government and and people have two. You know people are being killed people are being ah jail because they're protesting. Ah the government in Nicaragua. Um, we have a lot of haitians who come here and we know that haitians have. Also a very um, ah very troubled political situation in the country. It's also a lot of poverty. You know the pressing was recently appeal. There is a lot of uprising a jailing people so people don't people have to leave right? The country and then and when they come to United States they come here because they seek that they seek that protection they seek what we call asylum or person who is wanting to be protected because of their reality in their home country. There. There are people who come here because again political situation violence war. There are people who come to United States because of their identity. So you know people are very persecuted because you know maybe they're a christian and then they not only that they're not feed asset that right or bully this is more than they're very persecuted because who they are

um and or. You know people with you know some different religious um ah believes are also persecuted so there is just a wide range of um reasons why people come to United States and currently that that is you know we we've seen patients as I said. You know, a lot of colombians there reality in South America is very in a stable right now and to put it simple this country also has something to do our um foreign policy as ah has affected directly what happened in in those countries. And people are fleeing. You know we are also starting to see people who are freeing because climate change right because of ah, they're being directly impacted by that so they're just effort just many reasons. Why people come here because maybe their loved ones are here already and.

10:19.30

Amilcar Valencia

They just want to be reunited with their loved ones and that's the reason that that what they come here when there is no process or there is no lie people had to go through more dangerous ways to come here and unfortunately you know our current loss since Ninety six. Every person who comes to our border. Even if they're seeking protection. Um, they will be detained and process for deportation. That's what our current law says.

10:45.41

lovelightstories

Right? right? I've heard it said too before that people don't want to leave their home country often I mean that's what they know That's where they've grown up. That's where their families are their friends. Um, and they're most of the time leaving because they have to and it's not necessarily ah, a choice that they have in their minds. Would you say that that is pretty accurate. A lot of the time.

11:14.28

Amilcar Valencia

I know I'm an immigration myself I came here in 2010 to the United States and I completely agree with that personally. I just didn't have the I didn't want to leave my country I was I was fine. My country my community you know what? I know right? And um I know so many people so many friends who I mean they their life is there. Their family is there. Their work is there everything but when every all of that is taken away. Or your life is in danger or you your families and then there is no choice for you. There is no options and people are basically forced to leave their country and that's the reality. Of course there is other people who migrate and maybe they do have the chance to complete a visa and then is a different process. But the vast majority of immigrants who go through you know this long journey to get here and I crossed many borders to get here and then go to through the us Mexico border um, they just you know are again. Ah, don't have the opportunity to come here legally and then just finding ways to get here and to be protected or again reunite with their loved ones um.

12:37.28

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Right? I don't know if I've realized that you were an immigrant yourself that is so interesting. It makes a lot of sense. Um was your journey difficult to the United States yourself

12:51.80

Amilcar Valencia

Um, not personally I will not say that my journey was difficult. Um, and I will say that this is probably there were cases when people can migrate here legally um to the United States I do have a lot of family. Um, who migrated here during the civil war in El Salvavada my mom actually

left El Salvador when I was about two years old um because of the civil war in El Salvador during 1980 s um and that that's the reason she came and many other you know I mean more than el salvadorians left el Salvador during that time. Many they came to United States seeking protection. Um, because again we were in in a civil war now salavaor but I personally had not had that experience of. You know a long journey or you know crossing borders in that way. Um, but I do know my everyone in my family who is here in any states and I will say that I have a lot of loved ones here in not in Georgia but in in New York in and other states as well. Ah, all of them. Across the border. All of them came because there was no opportunities for them to come here legally um, most of them are still undocumented. Some of them have ah been able to obtain a green car or a few of them are getting things now but I have loved ones who still don't have any documents um and can be detained can be deported anytime.

14:37.27

lovelightstories

That's so scary. Wow That's probably part of what has led you to do this work in your professional life I would assume is just that background and experiencing it personally.

14:49.44

Amilcar Valencia

Exactly yeah I think for me, it's clear that um ah, not only my family but ah, you know a lot of friends I mean my people right? I'm speaking of about el salvadorians but ah, you know from Latin America who have um. Had to leave our homelands because of our home is not safe anymore or offers no opportunities for you then people had to leave so for me, it's clear that that's a motivation for me to do this work. But if you see it. Ah. When you're here and you see the pain the suffering everything that people go through I don't think you can turn away from that after you hear those experiences after you hear those stories after you accompany people who um, had had loved ones who had been deported. Ah, maybe they went and they said their loved ones at the attention center and that was probably the last time they they're seen under loved ones. Maybe for the entire life. Maybe for many years Kids who have been superior from them and of course the pain and suffering that people go through inattention. People who died. The people who died in the journey to get here. Um is again something that um, ah I'm clear that we you know this? this is a system that is inhumane and is unnecessary and we need to do something to end it.

16:21.46

lovelightstories

Right? Wow Can you share with us a little bit about what it is like along a journey coming here. Um I don't know any stories that you have heard or anything like that.

16:37.27

Amilcar Valencia

Of course there is there is I mean there's so many stories of people who have made that journey here again for those reasons that we already mentioned. Um, um, but you know people had chi go to. If you're from central America you had to at least cross 3 borders to get here. You had to go to Honduras, Guatemala, el salvaor and then through Mexico. most people do that journey. Ah, it may be and Bas and other ways of transportation. But there is just. Ton of people who actually do this journey walking pretty much the whole time and there is people are probably familiar with the different caravans of people who were coming like from Honduras and with Aallano Saba or in the recent years that is specifically what people do. People don't have the money the funds and they travel together because it's safe for them. Um, you know they had to encounter. You know, not only outdoor days. Um, along the way like the police or you know, whatever

immigration. Um. Police is in their countries like in what mal and undone and they had to go through all of that and sometimes there are no only um seen as you know someone who's here and then suspiciously. Ah. Um, but also sometimes are detained right in in our place in in detention as well or are detained and sent back to their country and the porter from those countries and that happen to many people and when they get to I mean they had to go through also dangerous path right? Those date. Mo people who come here in document they had to pay a coyote right to can help and guide in through the desert to get to United States and it is a very dangerous journey. Um, that people go through because. They go through rivers many people who don't make do make it they died in rivers ah they drown in rivers they died of ah tururs in the desert and they get lost. Um, there is just so many. Documented death in along the border. Um, and people do that because that that is better than staying in their home country. So I don't know if people can understand that because if you never had the need if all your needs had been met.

19:23.70

Amilcar Valencia

All your life. Ah that you know you have what you need your families with you. You never had the need to leave your house. People won't want to understand that for many immigrants it is safe to do this. Ah, dangerous journey to cross many borders to cross deserts to cross rivers ah to go to ice detention centers to go all through all these suffering. Um, that is better than staying in there. In their in their home country. Their lives are in danger and they are in a survivor mode to seek that safety that protection that they need and that's why people are coming here of course not the whole reason or everyone has the same reasons. But that is the story of people who come here in the United States to do um, again to live here to feel safe feel protected re be reunited with their loved ones.

20:32.66

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Just the fact of people taking the risk of death the whole journey and basically doing whatever it takes to try to get here knowing that they might never make it is a ah picture of desperation essentially and um. Really does put it into context I think for helping us understand hopefully what it could be like and what they're like how um desperate I guess they really are to make a change and find a safer better place to live. Um, we've had a lot of border issues recently in the United States and so much controversy and all of that we have policies that make migrants take some of the most dangerous routes to enter the us you kind of just touched on that a little bit.

21:15.37

Amilcar Valencia

Have questions.

21:28.75

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But is there anything else like specifically with the border issues just to provide a little bit more context to our conversation.

21:35.74

Amilcar Valencia

Um, yeah, definitely. So um, yeah, we kind of touched that real quick. But um, there is again. Ah when we have policies in United States that one you know the border has been. Built up like a huge fence righting continues to build like during the last administration this is now something new happens. You know a few decades started to happen a few decades ago but you know there is there is more the billions at the border. There is more apprehensions of the border. Ah so

those who. Come here are look I go through the most dangerous routes and then we for example, you know policies like remaining Mexico that was implemented by ah the Trump administration ah or seat tolerance right in and also during Trump's administration ah, title 42 which is basically cross close the border for anyone ah because of health I mean I'm quote like you know, opening here like quotation marks right? Ah because of you know, keeping. Our country safe against covid right? But we know that all those policies were not about specifically. Ah covid safety was about actually keeping certain people out. Um so all those policies had make it in and over like the border construction and more surveillance more.

23:06.23

Amilcar Valencia

More cop officer patrolling the border makes it more difficult for people so people go different routes and unfortunately you know, um, we mentioned the many documented that at the border. Just recently we had. You know these many immigrants from Mexico Guatemala sonarna salva or Handurans who died in these caught in this track right? Um, ah in San Antonio um that that is that those are the consequences of ah border policies that I don't see. Um, ah the full picture of the work full reality of migration immigrants and what happens in our countries instead of you know, actually allowing people to come here and allowing them to do what the law actually mandates our laws like this is not. Of course international laws says that immigrants should be ah you know, be able to go through a process and then determine whether they could remain in the country right? and us silent do the thing that is legally right? and then are these current policies. Ah you know you know, stuck down by the current administration but some of things still remain like title forty two are making their journey much more difficult and we see the consequences on more death. Ah. Of immigrants come into united states so what happens that the word affects the whole immigration process here and sometimes people we are very removed right? We here in Georgia people in other states are removed from that reality. But. We still see it. We still see people who are detained at the border and are sent to store and we're dealing with um, trying to find out how this person was detained. You know what is the process can this person be released on bond on parole. Or other means of release. Um, but we sometimes are you know if you don't do this work just completely removed and then you just believe whatever. Ah you know channel says about the border and we don't fully understand how the life of immigrants. Are you know, put in danger and how many people actually have died because of our border policies.

25:43.20

lovelightstories

Yes, and clearly our border policies have brokenness in them. It's a system that is broken and not perfect and just. Has a lot of room for improvement and I think that's why this has been such a hot topic because on the other side of it. We have people you know concerned about um like how do we manage who is coming and going past the borders and how do we like worrying about um. Drug cartels are trafficking across the border and different things to try to regulate that and I think a lot of people would say these policies are trying to also regulate those things. Do you have any? This is a loaded question and I definitely didn't um, ask you this before so I Just want to get your perspective because this podcast is all about just perspectives and sharing um new things and learning alongside of each other. So Do you have any. Suggestions or thoughts of how to allow create a better process for immigrants a more humane process while Also. Protecting the border from unintended consequences of just having an open border.

27:09.47

Amilcar Valencia

Um, yeah I that's this at the ah. Definitely a great question and I think that um, again, if we just see one side of things right? Sometimes we just say oh well we know there is. Criminals coming entering our border is drugs and there is all of these. Um, but we also don't one don't talked about how for example, um, ah our you know our policies in the United States like everyone can purchase. You know a rifle in that states and then you know those you know arms those guns are also trafficked back to Mexico and into you know is a full circle. Of like what happened here also affects the reality of people and affects why people are migrating so it is ah we need to see the issue in and a more ah holistic way because it's not just the border issue or our border policies is. Also what happened here how affects the communities. Um, and why people are migrating to the United States by going back to the question. Um I think the one when there are compositions about the border. Everyone has an opinion. Ah, even people who you know doesn't understand the border I think the first thing that we need to do when it comes to border conversations. We need to let border communities talk and decide how they want the border to be. Ah, secure or you know how the water needs to be managed because ah you know the border is is more than just you know a piece of land where you know there is fence anything like that is the communities that are being directly impacted by. Ah. You know what happens at the borders I think the very listing that the very none thing we need to do is to make sure that those communities who directly impacted by the border have a say on how you know our border policies need to be changed or implemented in in a way. Um I know that? ah. The United States has you know policies that make it again very difficult for people that we're trying we're doing everything that we can as a country or our loss allowed to um, stop migration in a very big scale.

29:59.10

Amilcar Valencia

Um, and I think there is so many other countries who have policies that are ah humane that allow people to go to a process that allow people to ah who are seeking protections who seeking asylum but people who are who coming here because they just want to do. Ah, you know better for themselves for their communities for their families and everyone should have that opportunity. We believe that migration is a human right? And then you, you should be able to move freely. To and our country I understand that there is laws and then there is things that there is processes. But what we have here is completely inhumane and thus in takes an account the reality of the people who are coming here and we only focus on enforcement. Piece of it even when we talked about when there are conversations in congress about you know immigration reform is the very none thing that Democrats and everyone else rightly says is that well we need to secure the border first and I think that we're starting just by the wrong topic of conversation. We need to see. Human beings none and then come up with that allow us to honor their dignity their autonomy and their rights. Um before even coming up with policies that are not the solution to the problems. There is the border like having a None twenty five feet long a tall border won't stop the migration of the people will still come here. Um, even if the border is completely. Ah, you know seal and the Southern Border another thing we all talked about borders in the southern ah context never about the north ah side of the border and I think that says a lot about how we see and the kind of people we're trying to stop to come into United States and again we haven't mentioned these but. Our border policies our immigration policies our detention and deportation process are ah racist and again we're just trying to stop certain people to come here while allowing people from you know. Other countries that is not Latin America to come here. You know, white people are immigrants are more affected to come here than immigrants from Haiti for example or the Caribbean or Latin America

32:38.49

lovelightstories

Wow. I hadn't even thought of that that's a really good point and I like your answer in general like honoring dignity none and looking at the person and seeing what is it that. We need to do to honor humanity and I mean we live in a global world and we have countries that were responsible for our own country and managing that and keeping everybody quote unquote safe or whatever it might be but at the same. Hand we're all god's people and it really makes None think um that it's what why are we? Why are we keeping some people out and others. Not.

33:20.73

Amilcar Valencia

Yeah.

33:26.87

Amilcar Valencia

Um, yeah I think and I know we're we talking a lot about this issue but I think it's important. Um, just to put an example right? We have seen every I think every person who comes here who has concerns were fleeing violence war persecution. People should have the right to be accepted and being able to even people don't actually need to and this is for everyone people don't need to be detained. People can come go to a process of immigration process without being attained but that's not what we're focusing on. We're focusing on. Under the apprehension attention peace and deportation again. But going back. To example, we have we know how horrible the reality for ah people in in Ukraine. It is and people are fleeing the war in Ukraine and there is so many. People who come Ukrainians who have come to the us Mexico border or you know through other port of entry seeking protection right? and they're getting that protection I mean in the last couple of months. Um April may there were. More than None Ukrainians accepted ah and none of them were detained but then were incarcerated um in the same period. We have deported more than 26000 Haitians. So.

35:01.74

Amilcar Valencia

Um, just to put it in perspective. How racist our policies are yes I believe we should welcome Ukrainians we should welcome. Ah, you know anyone who is fleeing world persecution. But what about people in Haiti. What about colombians what about venezuelans what about nicaraguans they are being deported in in in I mean in in masses right? many people and then not only they're being deported. Yeah they're not being affected but people have you know claim they're flea in persecution because of their political. Um. Ah, you know stands or you know and then there will face consequences when they get to when they get to Nicaragua because they're being directly raising their voice against the government they fled sick seek protection in a state in there. They're being deported and when you're deported you are telling like the United States is telling the home the country like Nicaragua here. We're sending you these people and then the none thing that that can happen to someone is being jail ah and being persecuted because they are. Dissidents of the government. So not only were deported people and in detaining and cause in so much pain while they're here not giving then any chances but also standing then to maybe infinite ah indefinite detention. Ah, and you know who else what else.

36:36.39

lovelightstories

Wow and one of the facts that it is such an inhumane situation. Um, we've talked a lot about that the inhumanity of detention and.

36:42.33

Amilcar Valencia

I.

36:53.95

lovelightstories

Ah, let's dive into that. Let's go ahead None explain what the detention systems are how they operate who owns them what people are experiencing in detention because that was so eye-opening to me.

37:10.60

Amilcar Valencia

Yeah, and I'll go back to what you said at the beginning like I didn't have any idea this was an our front friend where I lived I didn't know how immigrants are being treated in this process. Um, and I think that speaks to. The reality that often people have ascensions and many times and uninformed ah knowledge about immigrants or immigration um or misinform reality of immigration. Ah, ah. Because they don't know and I think what we been doing in the last ten years as our organization. Of course we none thing is to see every person as a full human being with dignity intros respect. They should be treated as such that's not something that we see. Happens in the attention centers. But when we do that and we bring people to attention center it awakens people can see how someone who is again seeking protection. Maybe someone who has been here their entire life or maybe grew up. In Georgia in North Carolina their whole life is here their family their work everything and now they're being isolated from their community. They're being detained. There. Not only that that that. To be said just that piece of being isolated ah is inhumane but they also go through so many other things in terms of abuse inside of detention center and neglect inside the detention center and there are so many so many stories. About this unfortunately well-dominated not only by al here by many other organizations here in Georgia. But if you google store attention center. Ah, there will be many stories about abuses that people go through in detention. Um. And many times there are no investigations for what happened inside of these detention centers. Um I think to put it into a broader context. The United States is the country with the biggest um, ah, incarceration population in the world. And 25% of the people incarcerated ah around the world are actually incarcerated here in the United States that's huge and the that's because we have a criminal justice system that focus on criminalization not in you know and the.

39:56.81

Amilcar Valencia

Reforming or those who go through whatever process because of ah you know their history. Um, you know there's no focus on ah making sure that that people come. you know better or you know that they changed right? because the system is not to do that. It's just to punish people. Um the immigration attention system is part of that broken system that and like channels like it has a process to detain like none of people. Um. Every day in the united states there is more than 200 or about None facilities like a store or localities to like city gels or county gels that rent the space to immigration to detain immigrants. So anyone who come through this process here because they. Had an encounter with the local police. Whatever it was and maybe ah, no license or driving with a license or no tail light wherever it was but because they are immigrants they are put into gel and then detention proceedings deportation proceedings. Um people who are. Crossing the border again asylum seekers people who are seeking protection people who are seeking to be reunited with the loved ones they will be detained um and we're talking about in the recent years system that has detained 2019 is the highest peak of the number of people detained daily under immigration ah custom enforcement about None people. Um detain in immigration things center which is an insane number. Um, who onset. Ah, yeah, immigration is the government entity in

charge of managing this but immigration or the government doesn't have owns all these facilities so they just have contracts with again counties localities. Or corporations like core Civic which is the one that manages those toward detention center a corporation like core civic. There. There are a few more geo and others that are in the business of detaining people and what I'm saying they are in the business of detaining people. That's exactly what they do they make profits for detaining every person they get pay for every person in debt in their facility. Um, and um, you know it's a vistas model for them if they have it's like.

42:42.60

Amilcar Valencia

For them. It's like a hotel right? If you're a hotel owner you want to your rooms to refill every night and that's how you make money? Um, so there is also that incentive ah to have more space more availability. So more people are getting are detaining this process. And then we have more policies that allowed collaboration with the police more border apprehensions. Um and transfer from another state facilities to immigration attention centers. Um, because again the incentive for this corporation is profit. And card in cost. We you had you saw that None at store a store visitation is ah, non-contact like when you visit someone in detention is non-contact like there is a glass window and then the person has on the other side of the window has a phone you have a phone and that's how you talk. Ah, to the person. Ah, this none of all is inhumane. Ah, we see how in state facilities people are able to have like chairs and tables and hug their loved ones that doesn't happen in mi tension center most of them don't have contact visits. And why is that in the context of profit. Well they don't have to have an extra guard in the facility to ah you know to be there and observe or at least we press and write when the v teaching is happening so there is no guards doing that there. There are. Ah, you know people who are detain share with us how many times their medical needs are not met. Um, ah if they are you know, get sick with you know, simple like things like you know you need to be treated by you know, maybe a nurse you don't have to go to outside. Doctor it still takes you several days before your call to go to the medical unit inside of the attention center. But if you're someone who has a chronicle disease like diabetes heart problems or anything of that nature. You use you know. Someone who has diabetes has to have like you know on a schedule when they had to have their medication and then they had to check their sugar levels constantly. Um and there are many cases where people have unmanaged. Ah, and in many cases people have been. You know a person who we advocated for. They were visit in and important contact with their loved ones. Ah lost vision for some time had numbness on his legs so diabetes was unmanaged sometimes the us like.

45:32.86

Amilcar Valencia

More than 400 ah levels of sugar in his body. They were giving him bread and past a lot of cards. The food that he was getting was not appropriate that there was no. You know they were giving ah so instead of giving him fruit. Ah, they were giving him appeals which also has a lot of concentrated sugar. Um and things like that like people who needed surgeries for months and months just didn't receive any attention until they're almost bursting right? or you know person who had ah. Real emergency situation of surgery was not treated for many months until that person was you know about to collapse or you know, almost eyeing attention and at that's when you're taken to the hospital. That's when you are being seen by. Outside doctor and that's super inhumane and those just mention a few things. Um I mean there is realities of stories that we know of people who have been attacked as well inside of de attention center the use of force who up when someone says you know. Maybe feel that they've not been lien or they don't have um you know they haven't seen the immigration officer and they no one is you know getting to their aid when they need support. There are people who had done peaceful. Protest. And then what is the response from the facility. They have a specialized unit. ah' like. So it's like a sword I

think it's core called sword um in ah and a special unit is like it was swat like a canine unit. Kind of like that go and basically disperse anyone who is protesting attack None rubber bullets ah gas pepper gas or paper bombs and people have des documented ah stories of that. um ah person that I was talking to the phone he said that he was this was during covid he um and was concerned that he had covid. He had all the symptoms. He never received any medication he complained several times he asked to go to the medical unit. And they never heard ill allow him to do that finally days after he was taken to the unit but he was told that I'm sorry there is no medication. We cannot do anything you had to go back to your unit and he did just something very simple. He.

48:23.49

Amilcar Valencia

Refused to get up from the chair and just to stay there as a protest because he wanted to receive Attention. He felt he had you know trouble breathing. he had you know pain his chest had all of these problems and they were not paying attention to that So he did this. Ah. You know, simple protests right to be in order to be listen and they guards came they slammed his face on the floor. Ah he almost lost his vision because of that and then he was. He was attacked and then placed in solitary confinement because he was doing what any person should be able to do like the man to be seen right by adopter or just claiming their rights. Um, he was attack was placed in solitary confinement. Um, and then. You know and then he was Deported. You know with these scars in his face and never got any apologies any treatment any investigations for the treatment he received by the guards in the attention Center. Um, so it's just ah, unfortunately.

49:30.64

lovelightstories

Um.

49:36.94

Amilcar Valencia

So many stories of suffering pain people have died in the attention center. Ah for things that should be treated. People should not die of pneumonia like no one. No one dies by pneumonia there is the. Statistics by the CDC are very low of people who will die and most of them who have you know very you know are elderly or have many other long problems. But someone who is None to use. All should never. Had died by pneumonia but this happened at Stewart detention center. a Cuban men died of pneumonia because just didn't receive the proper attention.

50:17.20

lovelightstories

There is so much that I want to talk about in this episode on this topic of immigration and detention and I had the chance to visit with El Refugio um Stuart Detention Center and got to spend an hour with an immigrant. Um, who had crossed oceans and countries and countries spent nine months trying to get here and just talking with him he was in tears saying that it would he would rather die than go back to his country and.

50:51.84

Amilcar Valencia

Are.

50:52.37

lovelightstories

He had left his country out of desperation. He was seeking asylum and only to be met here in the United States where he thought he would you know if he made it here. He could he could start his life again. Was met with detention and I think he was in there for a year and a half before he was deported and um in talking to him and visiting Stewart it just really opened my eyes to know that this is a for profit entity. Across the country in Stewart specifically and I learned to correct me if I'm wrong, but that Stuart detention center was created as a prison initially and lost their contract and so it turned into a detention center. So not only.

51:36.76

Amilcar Valencia

Right.

51:42.19

lovelightstories

Are these people who are not criminals necessarily they're coming for other reasons or detained as immigrants they're treated. They're kept in a prison and treated like prisoners and like you said it was um when I visited with the immigrant that I met. We were between glass with a phone just like in a prison and to learn how like you say inhumane. We're treating these people who essentially need help and are like desperate for help to live to fleeing. So for safety um, it just really opened my eyes and to here in the detention center like people getting sick from the water and food that is not enough and not substantive and um, there's just so many accounts and perhaps I can link a few. Um, different reports or at least some information on Stewart Detention Center in the show notes of this episode. So those listening if you're interested. You can dive deeper into this topic because it's very eye-opening and it's not something that I think we understand enough about and even understanding immigration. Personally I believe it is that double-edged sword like there needs to be some sort of policies to be able to manage immigration in a humane and appropriate way and manage borders and everything because we can't have the whole world living in the United States right but the reality is the whole world doesn't want to live in the United States a lot of people are happy where they are and those that have to leave are leaving for good reasons because they feel forced to a lot of times so it's just a very. Difficult topic. But at the end of the day I feel like what this episode is about is just understanding immigration better because as you are saying we don't we don't understand it and when we don't understand we just we can't empathize. We can't um, make informed. Decisions we can't um, have informed conversations and um, this is definitely not an all encompassing episode by any means but hopefully it starts the conversation to understand that differently so real quick Amilcar, I want to just talk a little bit about and ask you to share more about El Refugio just briefly kind of circling back how you come alongside immigrants to support them through this immigration process and um, maybe you know, um, a specific example of.

54:25.78

lovelightstories

How you've been able to help someone and help them find that light because this whole issue isn't just while it's a tough issue. There is progress being made which is so exciting and you are right on the front lines making that happen.

54:28.59

Amilcar Valencia

Ah.

54:37.40

Amilcar Valencia

Um, yeah, yeah, um, the work that that we do as we started it as said at the beginning is it's really to see people as they are as a human being a company then but what that really means. Ah. We kind of touching this day topic before like we had done accompaniment visits at the detention center that's something that very complete thing that we do to visit those who are attained to ah understand you know their stories their struggles. Um. Some people share these horrible things with us but some people just want to have that human connection. They just want to have someone from the outside who comes again insistent as persons as human beings and have that connection and that's a very concrete thing that. We do the attention center bring people to this space to encounter that person to see that person to learn from them and that hopefully allows people let you Stephanie and others to have a broader understanding of the issue. Of immigration attention. Um, that does that's I think key for our work. It just making sure that we establish relationship with people none um, we have a hospitality house as well. So families of individuals who people who are detained at store. Can stay at our house for free and we offer meals and support friendship while they're at the at the house and the house again offers free lodging to them while they're visit their loved ones at Stewart. They are allowed to receive one visit per week so 1 hour visit a week so most of the times and families come on weekends and do visits unfortunately throughout this pandemic these None particular things that we do hospitality have been suspended and because this. Until today there is no visit station happening at Stewart detention center but you know we hope that we will continue to do that in the near future. Um, we what we have been able to do during the pandemic is to open. Ah. Helpline for people so people in the attention center. Loved ones you can contact us and that's how now we get more information about what's happening connecting with them making sure that we're there to ah, just to let them know that we are here and that we listen and that we.

57:26.26

Amilcar Valencia

Want to elevate their stories. Um through that we've been able to put commissary support people especially in the pandemic people didn't have any items mask or soap or hand sanitizers and most of them said. We like to have you know some funds in order to ah purchase some of these things and then we started to put in funds into their commissary and then we had done that and continued to do that we send donation of along with we partner with another organization. Ah, in Americas Georgia which is about 45 minutes away corona farm um and they are the ones who come and bring the bags of clothing for those who maybe be deported and they want to at least have a change of clothes and shoes when they're. Ah, send back or if they're released right? They don't have any other clothing. Maybe they were detained at the border or maybe here and they were detained and they'd have anything like I don't carry any other change of to clothing with me and if you're traveling crossing borders. You know that? ah clothe. Or shoes might be in in good shape and they want to have something where they go back. So we do that for families we send books as well. So a lot of books for people who detain who as. You know one two they're not there. There's some there is a library in the attention center. But it's limited in what materials they have and especially in their own language. So a lot of people you know want to read just have something else to do besides being there or watching Tv or watching the news. Or doing so exercises. They also want to read and educate in cells many people ask for English learning books dictionaries and we send those people ask for religious books as well and we send those with loved ones again. Well before I go to loved ones. We also advocate for people who are again going through this reality of maybe neglect abuse in the detention center and we have put many complaints out there more recently we just put a complaint about sexual abuse. That women for women face at detention center and this ah there people can look into that for de attention center. There is a report from the intercept about this and then along with other organizations.

01:00:00.42

Amilcar Valencia

We are lifting up those stories accompanying those who were detained those were victims the survivors in advocating for them to be released as that's also important in our work because we know that how difficult it is and we want to make sure that people have the opportunity to. You know, go to your loved ones. Go to their communities you to night with them. Um, for families. We again. We have a help line and provide much needed support that sometimes families just need information. They just don't know where is the store What I can do you know do I need a lawyer. How do I pay a bond. All those questions that people have so our support is very critical and here is the whole organization doing that specific work adds to our detention Center. Of course there is SSplc that provides Legal Support. We don't provide Legal support. But we connect within and other organizations in another. Pro Bono lawyers that that that that work do that work. So um, for us our role is again to see people as human beings to support them to elevate their stories and make sure that we do everything we can to. Ah, you know fight for them along their side because that's what they want they because we have formed those relationships with people then then we can understand it a bit better. What is it that is that is going. What is it what they want and then we'll elevate those requests to the public and. To the authorities that can do something about it.

01:01:33.14

lovelightstories

Right? Wow when I think of our refuge heel. It's just that it's an organization that's advocating for the human dignity of each person and also one that is just advocating for. The rights of them to um, be able to be treated better and to share the stories with everybody else. All of us to be able to understand and have a window into this issue. Um a deeper dive into what is happening. Ah, beneath the surface that I don't think we have the opportunity otherwise to understand. So. Thank you so much Amil car this has been so informative and I hope for everyone listening it is. It has opened your eyes a bit to help you understand this issue. This is not an all-encompassing episode by any means there's so many angles and perspectives to this issue but this is this human dignity piece from my perspective is very hard to ignore and um. If you feel the same I would just encourage you to check out the show notes below um and Amilcar, How can they get involved with El Refugio if they would like to either learn more or do something about this issue?

01:02:55.37

Amilcar Valencia

Yeah, we welcome anyone who wants to get involved with El Refugio So right now. Um you know people can visit our website elrefugiostewart.org. but can also look it in our follow us in our social media @elrefugiostewart on Instagram and Facebook. um and support the word that we do I mean like advocating for people and also to be Able to make sure that people are treated with dignity and respect and these other specific things we do and we need you know to have we are non profit and we don't have government funding. We don't have you know a lot of grants that that give us money to do this work. We really. Ah, depend on the university of the people in the community so you can go and donate and support our work and if you want to learn more go to our website you can contact us as well. If you're in Georgia or maybe you're part of a group and want to have you know. None of us is speaking at your maybe congregation. Maybe your family group friends. Ah maybe your workplace who maybe you know you think that that's an opportunity for other people to kind of open their eyes to this reality or just to learn more about. What is happening currently at the detention center. So be glad to connect with anyone. Just one thing to add. Um, we're talking about and I know I talk a lot about policies and how many people and um.

01:04:47.36

lovelightstories

Wow.

01:05:03.89

Amilcar Valencia

How many people are detain and what happens at the border I think the main message that we want everyone to take away is that we're talking about human beings. We're not talking about the statistics and number we're talking about people who deserve an opportunity to want to be treated. To be seen as human beings. Um, and just to put. None example we we've been advocating for someone who is currently detained at store and we put a um, ah campaign last year and a complained with different departments of civil rights and civil liberties. Um to get them release and his 10 year old daughter wrote a letter I'm not going to read the letter but in the letter she said you know he's a good person. His family misses him. This is a letter. She wrote to the judge giving him reasons why Ricardo should be released from attention and she's naming all these things and None of the things she said is I want to pain with him. Um I want to bake with him. And this breaks my heart I want to have a father daughter date with him. You know this is again. We're talking about human beings people whose life is upside down because we have these.

01:06:24.93

lovelightstories

Um, wow.

01:06:39.92

Amilcar Valencia

Detention system that is dehumanizing this process that that don't see then as human beings and our goal is to make sure that people see immigrants as people as serving as complete human beings no matter where their country. Of origin the language then speak the color of their skin people have rights and they should be Protected. It should be allowed to stay here. They should be allowed to ah have a right a process that dignifies them.

01:07:09.95

lovelightstories

Right? Wow that is just an incredible ending. Thank you for sharing that I can't imagine being that 10 year old girl and um, having to write a letter like that to the judge and just wanting to have a daddy daughter date again. Um. Thank you Amilcar for everything for sharing this perspective for sharing the great work that you do at El Refugio and for sharing how we can all get more involved and just share and advocate alongside of you. So Thank you again and we will talk next time.

01:07:46.70

Amilcar Valencia

Thank you. thank you Stephanie.