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Kathleen O'Gorman on the Conditions at US Immigration Facilities

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Charlie Schlenker: Illinois Wesleyan Professor Kathleen O’Gorman spent her summer on the frontlines of America’s broken immigration system. O’Gorman is fluent in Spanish. She interviewed children detained at U.S immigration centers on behalf of the center for human rights and constitutional law. Their mission is to ensure children are being treated properly and in accordance with the Flores settlement—a 1990’s heir decree—that governs how we treat minors trying to enter the U.S. O’Gorman tells WGLT’s Ryan Denham why she volunteered for the work last year, and how things changed this summer when she finally got to see border patrol facilities.

Kathleen O’Gorman: That is where what we saw was so . . . egregious, so horrifying, that we had to go public. We had to – we had to save these children’s lives. There were children that were desperately sick, and, so that was clear.

Ryan Denham: Obviously wanna get i—into the conditions that—that you’re witnessing. Uh but first, talk a little bit more about the actual work you’re doing once you’re at one of these places. So, you—you said six different visits to various places, what are you literally doing, while you’re there.

O’Gorman: We inspect the premises in terms of visiting where they sleep, where they eat. We meet with people who are – usually the director and other personnel who are directly involved with working with the children—and we have an opportunity to ask them questions, they can ask us questions. There’s a representative there from the U.S. Department of Justice. They are making sure that we don’t violate the Flores Settlement Conventions, and we are there to make sure they’re not violating the conventions. So, that’s what we are primarily doing, is to see if the agreement – the Flores Settlement Agreement – is adhered to by the Government, and the way in which we do that is checking the facilities, as I say, speaking with the personnel, and then most importantly meeting with individual children who are detained there. So, we get a census, we get a list of all the children who are detained in the facility on that day, and then we select which children we want to see or they have been asked in advance if they would like to speak with us. And then the people at the facility go and retrieve the children bring them to us and we interview them.

Denham: What are the types of questions that you ask these kids?

O’Gorman: We have a list of questions that we’ve been given by the center for human rights and constitutional law and they’re all keyed to the Flores Settlement. So, we’re asking them about their treatment, we’re asking them about how – where they sleep, how they sleep, what kind of discipline is used with them, if they have um – access to clean . . . facilities, if they are being given adequate time to go to classes, if they are having recreational opportunities all of the elements that are keyed to the Flores settlement. If they can um – attend services for their religious faith if they have any kind of problems. We ask them if there are questions – [O’Gorman clears throat] – excuse me that they have for us, obviously, or if there are things they wanna tell us. And we give them as much control as possible over the interview, they don’t have to answer anything, they don’t have to meet with us if they don’t want to, so it’s important for us to give them control, and they know that they can stop at anytime – they don’t have to start. So, it’s – it’s very much an opportunity for them to tell us what they think we should know.

Denham: How old are they?

O’Gorman: When we have visited the facilities – other than the border patrol facilities and I’ll talk about those in a minute because that’s different—we typically – we can only see children up to the age of 18, then they are moved to the adult facility, so we see them under that age. Up until we visited the border patrol facilities, we did not interview children typically under the age of 10, and the reason for that is we didn’t want to re-traumatize them for one thing, and ask them all kinds of questions about their circumstances. But, we also felt that they wouldn’t really be able to give us the kind of information that would be helpful for us to determine the broader sense of things in terms of the facility. The older children – by older, 10 – 10 years old – [O’Gorman chuckles while talking] – um they could, actually be a little bit fuller in their explanations of things. The children at the border patrol facilities, we wanted to see how the youngest were doing, so that meant we got the infants and their teenage mothers. So . . . in McAllen, Texas we did infants and teenage mothers, in Clint – the second border patrol facility that I went to – we did not interview because there were not many teen mothers with infants. So there we saw children who were, 2, 3, 4, 5 um – we went for young children but we also had teenagers there.

Denham: So there’s been a lot of reporting um – from the government facilities at the border, I think in the last several months there’s been media outlets that’ve tried to paint a picture of . . . uh how bad the conditions are in some of these places. I know you’ve seen a lot of different places, and a lot of different types of facilities – not all of which were at the border itself – but um – in your own words, what were the conditions like in some of the places you were in, how bad was it really?

O’Gorman: Worse than everything you’ve heard, it was shocking, it was . . . really difficult to spend time in those facilities. For many reasons, I mean emotionally it was very very difficult to continue the conversations when you knew, because of what the children were saying, what the conditions were. And I’ll give you one example, one of the things that doesn’t show up in the reports that you see – the reports will document the facilities – but you don’t see, for example, that the toilets, in many of the cages, are in the middle of the cage. And there’s no privacy, so these children every single day, multiple times a day, are humiliated by their own bodies, by that lack of privacy, by that lack of dignity, to have any privacy. And imagine what a teenage girl is experiencing in that condition, she gets her period, how do you manage that in public in effect? And in some of the cages they were close enough to the boys cage that they could see one another. There were so many cases of interviews that we came away from and it was clear to us, it was certainly clear to me, the cruelty is the point. There were so much – there were so many different elements of it that were gratuitously cruel.

Denham: This is sound ideas, I’m Ryan Denham, I’m speaking with Kathleen O’Gorman a professor from Illinois Wesleyan University who recently spent time interviewing children being held by federal government officials – uh in immigration centers on behalf of the center for human rights and constitutional law. So Kathleen, would any particular children that—that have stuck with you, you know individual stories, things that you’ve heard, kids you were sitting across the table from that, even today, are still with you?

O’Gorman: Oh yes, all of them are still with me, but some of them that really stand out [O’Gorman’s voice begins to crack] – you can hear my voice starting to get a little . . . a little emotional – um yeah there were several one was . . . a little boy – whom I was not interviewing, there were many of us in the room at the time we would conduct several interviews simultaneously—but there was one little boy who was five or six years old, and he just stood there sobbing and sobbing, and he couldn’t even tell us

his name. It was so awful to witness this raw trauma, and this little boy just stood there, and it ended up that we couldn't interview him. The lawyer that was trying to talk to him, tried to console him as best she could, and ultimately, we couldn't – we couldn't talk to him because he—he was unable to talk, he was so traumatized. We also had children who were silent, we had several children who were – well for example one child who was two years old, he had been separated from his aunt and put into this room full of children, of young girls, and the guards had said "Somebody needs to take care of this child." And so an eight-year old girl took care of him for a little bit, then she got sick of it, so then a 10 year old child took care of him. We interviewed a child who was 13, she was the third child now taking care of this little boy, and this little boy never spoke, and he knew how to speak, but she said to us he doesn't speak. So, we had brought with us some bubbles and some crayons, and some things to try to get some of the kids to relax and just remember what it's like to be a child. . . And, there was nothing we could do to reach this child. So, yes there – there are some that really stand out. There was a young mother in . . . McAllen who had an eight-month old daughter and her daughter had been ill when they crossed the border. The border guards took all the medicine – they do that routinely they take every person's medicine and extra clothing, anything they have with them is confiscated and thrown away – and this little girl was sick she had medication so it was taken away, so she got sicker, and she vomited all over her clothes and her mom's clothes, and they took off her shirt, and border patrol would not give her clothing for four days. So, this child slept, naked, on concrete, for four days. Sick and getting sicker.

Denham: So obviously, you raised your hand to do this work. I can presume that you have a level of empathy for uh – for immigrants and those who are going through this, that already existed before this. But how do you think it's changed your – your view of our country's immigration system, and the way it's currently functioning. Seeing these six places, interviewing these children, where are you at today that you weren't a year ago?

O'Gorman: I feel as if, when I think about my experiences. This feels like, Argentina in 1976 when people disappeared off the streets, or people were in detention facilities and nobody knew that this building had children in it, or that this place was a place of torture. And it's surprising to me that I would ever say that, that seems like such an extreme statement to make, but my experiences really do validate ways that I never expected the worst of what humans are capable of.

Denham: So in your – uh – your academic work at Illinois Wesleyan University where you're an English professor, I've read that you're very passionate about travel, and study abroad. Why is it so important in your view – uh – to have these conversations, these understandings about life and people from places other than – than where you're from.

O'Gorman: I want to give a shout out to the Rotary Club. [O'Gorman laughs] The – Rotary international sponsored me as an exchange student when I was a senior in high school, and there's where my passion for study abroad came from. And, I spent a year in Bogota, Colombia in South America, and that's where my passion for all things, South-American, Central-American, Latin-American came from that's where I learned Spanish. So, when I see how transformative that experience was for me, as a human being, as a citizen of the United States, as someone who considers herself a citizen of the world, I really want to share that with my students and I want them to have as much of that kind of an experience as possible. I think getting outside of our comfort zones, whether it's linguistic, or intellectual, or imaginative, in whatever way that happens, I think to demonstrate to students that I'm willing to do that, and to give them whatever help I can to move them to do what they're capable of doing. I think it makes them so

much more . . . capable and – um as – as people, but I also think, because what I teach is in the humanities and because what I teach is paying attention to language, to silences, to stories, I think it helps students really understand in a much more nuanced and advanced way . . . what it is that we're all doing with one another here.

Denham: That's Kathleen O'Gorman, a professor from Illinois Wesleyan University, who recently spent time at U.S. immigration facilities interviewing children on behalf of the center for human rights and constitutional law. I'm Ryan Denham.

Schlenker: O'Gorman has made six visits to U.S. Immigration facilities, trips she sa—pays for on her own. She offers a disclaimer she speaks for herself not on behalf of the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law.