

EL REFUGIO

In the lexicon of Christian faith, it might be said that saints do good and prophets confront evil. In a tiny little town in rural Georgia, a lot of people are doing both.

Welcome to Lumpkin, Georgia where a little ministry is making a big difference. The ministry is called El Refugio, and it provides a welcoming space, warm meals, and overnight hospitality to hundreds of families who make the trek to this far edge of Georgia. They come to visit their family members in the Stewart Detention Center (SDC), where up to 2000 men and women are detained.



El Refugio is also confronting a system of injustice, dehumanization and violence where human beings are held without due process or adequate medical care, pressed into forced labor, subject to abuse, and able to receive a one-hour visit only once a week.

El Refugio began in 2010 by a small group living in Atlanta including PJ and Amy Edwards. PJ and Amy Edwards had gone through the JustFaith program in 2008; it was a transforming experience for them. PJ recalls, “JustFaith inspired me to seriously begin thinking that my sense of self should not be rooted in *me* at all but that my center should be in serving others.”

Around the time PJ and Amy were finishing JustFaith, their parish experienced radical change due to an increase in Latino families, growing to over 50% of total parish families. PJ and Amy befriended several of these families, many of whom had husbands, brothers and sons being held at one of our country’s largest immigrant detention centers 2.5 hours away.

They were moved by the stories of separation, suffering and disruption to family life, and realized that this pain was worsened because these families had no idea as to when their ordeal was going to end, or how it was going to end. Sudden deportation of their loved one was a real possibility! PJ states that “although I had become quite familiar with the unjust nature of our immigration situation on an intellectual level, it became very real when families I knew were caught in a system that traps people who fled poverty and had no option for documented entry into the U.S.”

Amy and PJ recall their next steps:

We started out by offering immigration 101 sessions for the U.S.-born and dialogue sessions that brought recent immigrants and the U.S.-born together to hear from each other about immigration, learning from our JustFaith experience that helping the privileged see the world from the perspective of the marginalized is a mighty motivator for the work for justice.

We learned from our immigrant parishioners that many had family and friends that the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was detaining in the largest immigration detention in the country located 2.5 hours away in rural South Georgia and that the conditions were horrible in the facility run by a for-profit corporation. It turns out that the U.S. government says they detain immigrants to ensure the immigrants will show up for their immigration hearings, but there are proven, more humane, and less costly ways of ensuring people attend their hearings.

Again, learning from JustFaith the power of immersion experiences, in 2008 we started taking groups down to visit people the government is detaining so that people new to the issue could make a personal connection and see the systemic injustices firsthand. Over the years, we have taken thousands of people to visit.

In 2010, we opened the hospitality house in the spirit of radical hospitality so that family and friends of people detained could have a safe and free place to stay. Indeed, many of our founders, volunteers, and supporters were and are JustFaith grads. We were fortunate to have so many JF grads in our area that we knew we could depend on to join us on this journey and help sustain us.

Over the years, El Refugio has worked with thousands of detained immigrants and their loved ones, accompanying them during what many say is the darkest time in their lives. El Refugio is the only nonprofit organization providing direct services outside of legal support to people at SDC and their loved ones. People who call the volunteer-run bilingual helpline often say that El Refugio is the only organization that answers their call.

In recent years, El Refugio has served hundreds of people through hospitality, visitation, post-release support, and additional services. The numbers from 2021 show how they have adapted during the global pandemic:

- Calls to our helpline from people at SDC: 1,307
- Plane and bus tickets for people released from SDC: 222
- Commissary deposits for people detained at SDC: 813
- Books sent to people at SDC: 395
- People impacted by detention who received up to \$1,500 in financial

assistance: 43

- Families who received care packages and holiday gifts: 44
- Bags of clothing and shoes delivered to SDC, in partnership with Koinonia Farm: 221

Additionally, El Refugio advocates for people detained at SDC. As a direct result of their advocacy, four people with health conditions have been released from SDC this year. They were able to return to their families and seek medical care outside the confines of SDC. We provide people who wish to advocate for their release with the tools to do so, including information about documents to file and the opportunity to be part of a civil rights complaint.

El Refugio educates the community about immigration detention, conditions at SDC, and ways to support people at SDC and their loved ones.

Over the years, many people we have served inside SDC, at the house, and in the community have shared with us how El Refugio was there for them. Here are a few examples:

- From a person detained at SDC during the pandemic: “Some goodwill people, which we are all guessing could only be El Refugio, put some money on our phone accounts, and it has helped us to reach some loved ones.”
- From a guest who stayed at our hospitality house with her two children: “El Refugio was there for my family during the darkest time in our lives. Everyone was so nice, and the house is beautiful.”
- From a wife and mother who needed financial support during the pandemic: “Thank you so much for helping my family and me during this difficult time. We are very grateful for your help. You are truly our angels during this pandemic.”
- From another wife and mother who received support during the pandemic while her husband was detained at SDC: “Thank you for the good help. May God bless you all so that you can help more families just like ours. Thank you again for your kindness.”

El Refugio is a bridge between people impacted by immigration detention and people who believe immigrants deserve respect, dignity, and freedom. Through El Refugio, many friendships have been formed. Harvey Kaufman, an El Refugio volunteer, bonded with S., an immigrant from an African country who was detained at SDC through El Refugio’s visitation program. Several people from S.’s country of origin were granted asylum, but S.’s case was denied. Harvey prepared additional information about S. and his country of origin and sent the information to the judge, who then granted him asylum and released him! S. and Harvey have become so close that Harvey and his wife consider S. their son. With Harvey’s support, S. is studying for the LSAT. He

dreams of attending law school and becoming an immigration lawyer. This is but one of many examples of the deep, lasting connections made through El Refugio.

Graduates of JustFaith Ministries have made an impact at El Refugio. Kimberly Nigro serves on the visitation committee and leads the technical operations, making sure their database maintains records of abuses reported by people inside SDC. She offers this moving testimony:

My JustFaith journey has opened my eyes to injustices in many areas in the world around me, and the scale of the problems can often feel overwhelming. Fortunately, JustFaith also inspires reflection and concrete action, giving many powerful examples of grassroots organizing and advocacy efforts with the collective ability to chip away at unjust systems. El Refugio is one such example of an organization engaging in critical advocacy work in the area of immigration detention.

Volunteering with El Refugio has taught me the incredible impact of hospitality as a form of resistance, and the importance of showing up and being present, even if there is nothing else to offer. It has given me the opportunity to build relationships with those who may have been considered “the other” in another context, and allowed me to provide hospitality, educate others, join protests, participate in successful advocacy campaigns, and even involve my young daughter, who decorates cards and sends them to SDC through El Refugio’s letter-writing campaigns.

Through my JustFaith journey as a participant in the program many years ago and more recently as a co-facilitator of the three racial justice modules, I continue to learn the necessity of putting our Christian faith into action—that complicity itself supports the unjust systems within which we find ourselves.

Since El Refugio started maintaining records, more than 3,300 volunteers have been awakened to the injustice of immigration detention by having the transformative experience of coming to Lumpkin and visiting detainees and/or by volunteering at the hospitality house. El Refugio provides people with privileged perspectives the opportunity to view the world from a different perspective. El Refugio engages volunteers in the work for justice *and* direct service alongside marginalized communities. El Refugio gives volunteers the opportunity to engage in direct service and in systemic change.

Many of the initial leaders, supporters, and visitors were JustFaith graduates, and JustFaith graduates continue to serve today. Currently, three JustFaith graduates are on the board. Over the years, El Refugio has hosted many JustFaith groups, giving

participants the opportunity to talk with people supporting marginalized communities.

JustFaith Ministries Executive Director, Susie Tierney, notes that “El Refugio is the classic David and Goliath story. Sooner or later, the message of justice and compassion is going to win, despite the apparent odds. We stand in solidarity with all that El Refugio does for those whose lives are disrupted by the dehumanizing detention system of this country.”

JustFaith Ministries is inspired by the great work of El Refugio Ministry, celebrates the vision of PJ and Amy Edwards, and rejoices in the courage and commitment of all involved.



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