The letters flooded into the post-office box. Written in Spanish and English, in pen and pencil, in looping letters and scrunched up print, their sentences filled pages of paper that they’d purchased from the commissary.

The detainees wrote about the family they hadn’t seen and the months they had passed behind bars. They wrote about missing meals and missing home, about the hefty cost of a phone call. They sent along ephemera, too — a dreamcatcher; a butterfly scribbled in colored pencil; a pair of baby shoes, woven from gum wrappers.

Sent from a lonely place — the Otay Mesa Detention Center near San Diego, Calif., — these letters are destined for a broader audience. Week by week, the pages are being uploaded to a free online collection, overseen by San Diego State University. It’s a living archive, maturing with each new correspondence.
Last summer, as the Trump administration intensified its crackdown on migrants crossing the southern U.S. border, a few San Diego State faculty members and their friends decided to write to people who were detained by immigration agents at the prison, located about 25 miles southeast of campus.

People wrote back. The project ballooned. As of February, volunteers have received more than 400 letters from about 245 people.

Lots of universities could replicate this, said Joanna Brooks, an English professor and associate vice president of faculty advancement. The concept is simple enough. Prisons are ubiquitous across America. And academics, she said, are especially well-trained in the art of bearing witness.

Though the project "solves almost nothing," Brooks said, scholars have a responsibility to document and amplify the stories that will be critical to history. The trials of immigrants during our current moment, she said, make one such story.

'Begging to Have Their Stories Told'

It began with just 30 names.

In June, the cohort of faculty members and community volunteers, who call themselves Detainee Allies, sent an introductory letter to 30 people held at Otay Mesa. The goal was to foster a human connection, to extend a kindness. These are "very vulnerable human beings" who are "locked inside a concrete box, with no oversight," Brooks said.

The prison, owned by the company CoreCivic, can hold up to 1,572 people and is planning a 512-bed expansion. According to data from June 2018, about 960 people being held at the facility were in the custody of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The majority of them — about 560 — had not been convicted of a crime. They hailed
Kate Swanson, an associate professor of geography, is leading an effort to put hundreds of detained migrants’ letters online.

San Diego State U.

With time, Swanson said, volunteers noticed repeated complaints about life in prison. "We suffer a lot seeing how difficult they've made it for us to communicate with our families, and the food they give us often isn't enough," wrote a man named José.

So the allies examined the letters as data. They coded each correspondence for specific grievances and compiled a report, released on February 1, that details what the group calls the "inhumane conditions" of the prison. Migrants wrote about being forced to work without compensation, served rotten food, and medically neglected. They described prolonged or indefinite detention, and a lack of access to basic items.

from all over. Most came from Mexico, while others were from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Eritrea, and India, among other countries. A few people had been in ICE custody since 2013.

Many of the letter writers had approached the border seeking asylum, while others were picked up by immigration enforcement inside the U.S., said Kate Swanson, an associate professor of geography and a leader of the project.

In their letters, detainees jotted down the details of their past and current lives. They wrote Bible verses and poems. "We are the hope that won't stop shining," wrote a detained person named Luis in July. "We are the light that won't go out." One volunteer sent back doodles drawn by her child. Others sent news articles, soccer-league scores, and World Cup standings.
Senators have previously called for more transparency from CoreCivic and another company that have contracted with the government to hold ICE detainees. An Office of Inspector General report documents similar concerns — old and moldy food, subpar medical treatment, and significant delays in getting detainees basic products, like toilet paper.

Rodney E. King, a CoreCivic spokesman, disputed the claims in the Detainee Allies report. CoreCivic "provides three nutritious meals a day that members of staff also often eat," he said in a written statement. Detainees have access to a "robust grievance process" and any claims of "wage theft" by detainees are false, he said. King directed questions about medical care and the length of detention at Otay Mesa to ICE. The agency did not respond to a request for comment.

In the nine months since the project began, volunteers have collected a sea of heartbreaking letters, Swanson said. They try to help, when they can, by donating money to commissary accounts to help pay for phone calls and basic goods. Brooks said she recently got in touch with a detainee's family to let them know that he was all right. She passed along a photo of the man that he had mailed. He was pictured standing in a prison jumpsuit, surrounded by Christmas decorations.

It's hard, Swanson said, because the people locked inside are begging for help — help that's often impossible for volunteers to give. But they're also "begging to have their stories told," Swanson added. "They want people to know what's happening to them."

'On the Outside, Rooting For Them'

As the letters piled up, Brooks began to worry. Pages of precious testimony were being kept in her house, in a black Office Depot crate. They needed a suitable home, Brooks thought. So the group, which now includes about eight San Diego State faculty members and 10 student interns, reached out to administrators at the university to see if the library could preserve the archive, and they agreed.

Now, each week, the letters are redacted for any personally identifying information and uploaded to an online digital archive, which went live on February 1. Volunteers also sent notes to the detainees to let them know that their correspondence would be added to the
collection, Swanson said. Preserving their privacy is essential, she said.

Hopefully, Brooks said, the archive will give faculty members across the country, and their students, a chance to "engage directly with a humanitarian crisis that is unfolding right here, right now." Same goes for researchers and for journalists, she said. It's a powerful primary source, Swanson said, not just a textbook's summary.

After reading a letter, Tori Mullenix decided to volunteer. Mullenix, a senior majoring in international studies and conflict resolution, said she read aloud a letter from a young gay man who had fled El Salvador. Mullenix was immediately struck by their closeness in age, she said, and the divergence of their life experiences.

That letter, and others, have stayed with her. Mullenix thinks about the person who wrote about being depressed because detainees rarely get to feel the sun. She thinks about the woman who wrote that she was raped as a preteen and couldn't breastfeed when the baby was born.

Sometimes, Mullenix said, those stories weigh on her. She has to take a step back. She's been thinking about going to therapy. A graduate student involved with the project, Ivette Lorona, said she's had nightmares that mimicked the violence described in some of the letters.

At tough moments, Mullenix said she tells herself that, as hard as reading those life stories can be, it doesn't approach what living them must have been like. She reminds herself of her role. "You're someone on the outside, rooting for them."
"This is not easy work," said Sam Orndoff, a graduate student who studies geography and helps redact and code the letters. The detainees are familiar with trauma, he said, and are still experiencing it now, in detention. It takes courage to delve into their stories, Orndoff said. But that courage is needed, he said, especially when studying marginalized populations.

"I've never taken the stance that science, especially social science, should be indifferent, or pretend that it's innocent about the things that are happening," Orndoff said. "Because it's not, and it hasn't been. It probably won't ever be."

Brooks believes the same thing. San Diego State isn't unique. Other universities can replicate this model, she said. Scholars, especially those who study the humanities, should know that the work they do, and the training they have, "matters immediately," she said, "and can be put to work immediately."

Being idle isn't an option. Just look around, she said. "We're needed."

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