

Op-ed: Why You Should Help Me Get LGBT People Out of Detention

The stories of his LGBT friends motivate Raúl Alcaraz Ochoa to work as an activist for ending detentions and deportations.

BY RAÚL ALCARAZ OCHOA
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I am a queer man born in Jalisco, Mexico, and raised in the San Francisco Bay area. I have been working on getting detainees out of detention for the past four years. I first got involved when the detentions and deportations began impacting my family and community.

Recently my friend Marichuy Leal Gamino let me know, for example, that she was raped while in detention at Eloy, Ariz., in a detention center run by the Corrections Corporation of America. Marichuy, a 23 year-old transgender woman originally from Mexico, has been in detention for a year with an all-male population. Although she complained to guards that she was sexually harassed, bullied, and threatened, the on-duty detention officer told her to "deal with it."

When her cellmate sexually assaulted her and she reported it, the staff pressured her to sign a statement saying that the rape was consensual sex. Now, as advocates call for her release, she has been placed in solitary confinement, a practice that instead of “protecting” her is shown to be psychologically harmful.

Another friend, Jazmin, a transgender woman from Honduras, also wrote to me about her experiences in detention: “One time, I was ordered to strip off my clothes in front of all men. They [the guards] didn’t care that I had undergone hormone treatment and had breasts. They violated my body.”

In another instance, Jazmin’s HIV-positive status was recklessly disclosed by guards in front of a large group of detainees. Jazmin told me she wanted to crawl under a rock and that she often contemplated suicide. This isn't what she expected when she crossed the scorching Arizona desert, leaving behind family abuse, social discrimination, HIV stigma, and persecution based on gender identity and sexual orientation in Honduras for what she hoped would be a better life in the U.S.

The letters and calls don't stop. As a result, I cofounded Mariposas Sin Fronteras with my friend Rachel Winch to help people like Marichuy and Jazmin get out of detention. Our work is a constant battle of raising funds to pay bonds to get detainees released from detention, working with other groups, like the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Project to help support their asylum claims, and the Arcoiris Liberation Team in Phoenix to do public advocacy campaigns to apply pressure on Immigration and Customs Enforcement to release our friends and change the abusive conditions. We also write letters of support, do visitation days, accompany detainees to court, and listen to gripping stories of fear, isolation, and resilience.

Since 1996 when the federal government expanded its policies of mandatory detention, more and more LGBT people have been detained in a system that structurally fails to protect them. According to a November 2013 report from the Center for American Progress, LGBT detainees are 15 times more likely to be sexually assaulted than heterosexual and cisgender detainees. This system of detention and deportation is fed by our tax dollars and all of this is done in our name — and that's why you should help me.

There are things we can do to reverse this trend. I hope you will join me and visit our Mariposas Sin Fronteras blog, like our Facebook page, or donate toward the release of LGBT detainees through our Rainbow Defense Bond Fund. You can also support the Phoenix-based Arcoiris Liberation Team in their efforts to call for Marichuy's release.

The struggle for a world in which LGBT people can live without fear has to be a movement for all of us, including those of us who live the intersections of gender, class, immigrant status, and other realities. I fight for a world where no rainbows and butterflies are caged in detention.

RAÚL ALCARAZ OCHOA is a queer man originally from Jalisco, Mexico who cofounded Mariposas Sin Fronteras, working for an end to detention and deportations.