After several days as a volunteer Spanish-language translator in a federal detention center in Texas, Judy Elliott thought she could no longer be shocked. She had listened to the stories of dozens of mothers and children who’d fled horrific violence in Central America in order to seek political asylum in the United States.

She’d heard about gangs who cut off the limbs of anyone who opposed them and sent the body parts to their victims’ families. She listened as women described traveling for months through Central America and Mexico, being robbed along the way and hiding in the desert to avoid murderous gangs. She heard of families finally reaching the U.S. border only to be penned in metal cages that look like dog runs before being split up, with the women and children sent to Karnes County Residential Center outside San Antonio, while the fathers and adult children were imprisoned elsewhere.

But the story of one Salvadoran family “was beyond belief,” said Elliott, a member of the UU Congregation in Santa Rosa, California, who volunteered for a week in June 2017 at Karnes.

The notorious Mara Salvatrucha gang, or MS13, one of the deadliest gangs in the world, had kidnapped the woman’s husband and tortured him for ten days while demanding more and more money from her. She sold everything they owned but still they threatened to kill him. The gang eventually released her husband, and the family fled immediately from El Salvador. When they made it to the U.S. border weeks later, they turned themselves in to U.S. Immigration and Customs officials—and were immediately separated.

The woman’s oldest son, who is over 18, went to a men’s detention center with his father, who was in “bad shape” from his treatment by the gang, Elliott learned. The younger son, 17, was at Karnes with his mother. When Elliott helped him prepare for his “credible fear” interview with ICE, in which he would have to describe why the family was afraid to return home, “he sat there sobbing,” Elliott said. “They’re all dealing with PTSD. Such tragedy—they have to pick up in the middle of the night, gather their children, leave everything. As they cross Mexico they have to dodge Mexican gangs the whole way up.”

And then they landed at Karnes, which is run by the GEO Group, a private, for-profit corporation that operates a number of prisons and detention centers across the country under contract with the government. On any given day, Karnes houses hundreds of women and children seeking political asylum. It has been the subject of controversy and a federal lawsuit over the legality of holding children under such circumstances.

Yet despite their circumstances, every time Elliott saw the woman over the next few days, “she was always smiling, always grateful to us,” said Elliott, who was one of five UUs who volunteered that week in June.
including her daughter, Jasmine Elliott, 22, who is also fluent in Spanish and worked with a legal team at Karnes.

Unitarian Universalists voted overwhelmingly at General Assembly 2015 in Portland, Oregon, for an Action of Immediate Witness calling for the closure of family detention centers. Since 2015, the UU College of Social Justice (UUCSJ) has sent a total of forty-nine volunteers to do weeklong service projects in Texas with Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), which provides a variety of legal services to immigrants and refugees and which has a longstanding relationship with the UU Service Committee. First UU Church of San Antonio has been deeply supportive of RAICES, including offering home stays to UU volunteers, hosting trainings for them, and supporting families released from Karnes as they travel to join their families or sponsors. The partnership with RAICES has been so successful that the UUCSJ is ramping up the Karnes project and actively recruiting volunteers for November and December projects, said Deva Jones, the UUCSJ’s senior associate for Service Learning and Volunteer Placements.

“I really don’t know where we’d be without the UUs,” said Barbara Pena, volunteer coordinator for the Karnes Pro Bono Project at RAICES. “We rely on volunteers, and knowing we can count on their help—especially in the summer, which tends to be one of our busier times—means so much to us. We know they’re going to come in ready to roll up their sleeves, ready to get to work, and they put their hearts and souls into it.”

Volunteers for the Karnes project must either be fluent in Spanish or have significant legal education as a lawyer, paralegal, or law student. After training by the UUCSJ and RAICES, volunteers assist the women and children with their petitions for asylum, including preparing them for their credible fear interviews. They also prepare the women and children for the next steps in the process, including emphasizing that if they are released but not deported, they must report for regular meetings with ICE.

But family detention work is only one part of RAICES’s work.
It also runs a short-term shelter for women and children released from detention and needs volunteers for other programs as well, Pena emphasized, where a legal background or Spanish fluency are not necessary.

As far as the Karnes project, "We tell all our volunteers that it's not pretty to be asylum seekers, that the stories are shocking, troubling," said Pena. "These are stories with incredible amounts of violence, especially from the moms coming out of Mexico: 'My son and I were walking along and saw several decapitated bodies.' You're often dealing with people traumatized by what they've seen. It is very shocking for folks to have to take all that in and synthesize it in a way to be able to help that mom."

While hearing the stories was hard, Jasmine Elliott wrote in a post on the UUCSJ's website that working with lawyers to help the women was "amazing." Ninety percent of women prepped by RAICES pass their credible fear interviews, she noted, at which point most are released from Karnes, providing they have a sponsor. "The best part for me was going to the Greyhound bus station the last day to hand out RAICES backpacks full of supplies and food, and seeing some of the families I had worked with. They seemed so much happier and hopeful, on to the next step of seeking asylum," she wrote.

"It was such meaningful work; it was truly a privilege to do it," said Judy Elliott, who plans to do work locally in California assisting refugees. "You really did feel like you made a difference, even if it was only to give them an outlet for their feelings and to have a positive experience with a U.S. citizen."

Keeping an open heart

As a Jewish UU, I delve into the layers of white supremacy culture without and within.

by Dara Olandt

How do I keep my heart open?" a college student asked me. As a chaplain on a college campus, I often get asked interesting questions, but this one stopped me for its radical honesty.

The student had been consumed by a Facebook conversation that had turned emotionally toxic. She had been trying to name how antisemitism functions, but ended up feeling piled on in such a way that after responding she was exhausted, facing emotional burnout for trying to engage in the social justice dialogue she craved.

I appreciate this student's concern for how to remain connected with herself and others while grappling with significantly painful online conflict. Figuring out a personal rhythm of activism that is sustaining and not life-depleting is a contemporary challenge for many, whether on Facebook or face-to-face.

As a chaplain and director of spiritual and religious life on a college campus, I often talk with people about connecting actions and values, the importance of spiritual practices, and becoming linked into communities of support in order to sustain work in social justice struggles.

I was stopped by this student's