

My Experience in Immigration Detention

By Omar Hassan



Omar Hassan came to the United States from Somalia in 1996 to apply for political asylum. After an immigration judge denied his application, his case was on appeal for 14 years. During that time, he worked 12-hour days as an electronic technician in Austin, Texas, and Phoenix, Arizona. In October 2010, he was suddenly picked up and detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for five months. Since his release, he has been living at Casa Marianella, a homeless shelter for immigrants in Austin, Texas, begun in 1986 by the Austin Interfaith Task Force for Central America. On April 18, 2011, Omar Hassan provided Sue Weishar, JSRI Migration Specialist, a detailed account of his experience in ICE detention and how his detention senselessly derailed the life he had built for himself in the U.S. Excerpts from that interview follow:

A Bad Feeling

I am one of those people who have what you call a sixth sense. When I went to work on Thursday, October 1, 2010, I was feeling that something was not right for some reason. At a quarter to two my boss and two guys walked into my work area. My boss said, “Omar, these guys want to talk to you.” They were ICE agents. They said, “We are going to have to take you to the station so we can talk more.” I knew that my work permit had not expired and that I was not illegal in the system. I thought they were just going to chit chat with me. They took me to downtown Phoenix and I sat in a little interrogation room. One of the ICE agents said, “You know you lost your last appeal in November 2009, so now we automatically have to detain you.” I said, “OK, why don’t you give me a couple of days so I can take care of my apartment and my car?” The other one said, “I don’t think so. You ain’t going nowhere today.” I told them I have a car sitting at work and I have an apartment with all my things in it. Their response was, “We don’t care about that; we care about you.” So they took me and searched me. Then they put me in a cell, with some people from South America. They said we were all going to Florence.

Florence, Arizona

I had never heard of Florence before in my life. In the immigration area there, they strip searched me. They took my clothes and gave me a green uniform. Now I have flip flops with no socks and am sitting in a cement room with cement benches, not even a chair. I was there for 24 hours and by the end about 30 people were in that room. At five o’clock in the morning they drove us to another place in Florence where they held me and about 300 people for two days. They took me to the medical area to give out blood and urine. Then I had to take a shower and put on some powder so you don’t get an infection.

Another Planet

I had never been in detention in my life. I had never even been in a police station in my life. I am scared. They don’t tell you what they are doing. You feel that you are at the mercy of someone else’s hand. It makes you feel like someone from another planet. There was no humanity in it. There was no nothing in it. For two days they kept moving me around. I don’t have a criminal record. I don’t even have a traffic ticket. And all I did since I came here was work. If this is happening to someone like me, it can happen to anyone else.

After the two days in the immigration area they shackled me and took me to another area in Florence, a private detention center for immigration only. When I walked in my cell the guard said, “Here is your room you are sharing with seven other people, and that’s your bed.” He gave me a booklet and that was it. I am too tired—I haven’t slept for three days—so I slept till around 11 o’clock the next day.

In detention the day pretty much revolves around the meals served, with lock downs three to five times a day to check for food and drugs. During free time you can watch TV, buy stuff at the commissary, take a shower, or talk to the other guys. I used to take three showers a day—why not?

A Whole Different Level of Racism

I’d say pretty much half the guards were racist. And they acted like they’d never seen a Spanish person in their life. Some of them came from North Dakota straight to Arizona. Some of them came from Idaho. Ohio. They’ve never been exposed to other cultures at all—you can tell. I have been in the United States for 15 years. Racism in the United States is something that is there. People can deny it. And especially at work, you see that all the time. But what I’d seen outside and what I saw in there—that was a whole different level.

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One time I remember I was serving food with other black guys. One of the guards inside the kitchen—he had tattoos all over, and pretty much everyone knew what kind of person he was—he goes, “Hey, I didn’t know we had that many Negroes in here. I knew we had wetbacks. I knew we had Chino-town, and Wetbacks-town, but we have to make a Negro-town, too.” It obviously spelled out exactly what he was thinking about. I just turned around and looked at him and he’s just laughing at me. What are you going to say to that person?

When it’s his turn to search the rooms he purposely does bad things to people—like to the Somali guy who prayed five times a day. After that guard searches the room he finds his Koran on the floor.

Racist Taunts to Phoenix

After five months a guard came and told me, “Ok, Omar, you are in roll up.” So I got my stuff from my room and went upstairs to say good-bye to everyone. Then I got in a van with six other detainees and five ICE guys. The ICE guys taunted us all the way to the bus station in Phoenix. To the Chinese guy they said, “You little Chino, we’re going to pick you up while you are driving someplace.” To the Pakistani guy they said, “Yeah, you are a Taliban. If you don’t leave the country we are going to be doing this and this to you. We know where your family is.” I went off! You rednecks! They didn’t like that so they said, “Hey, nigger. We are going to put you in your place.” I mean they were going at it. They were having fun.

When they stopped at the gas station they told a lady, “We’re going to take some scumbags back to society. But don’t worry, we’re going to pick them up soon.” You know what I mean? Is that professional?

When we got to the bus station in Phoenix one of the ICE guys said, “Let the dogs out.” So they opened up the door and they let us go outside. As soon as we were outside, one of them tells the Chinese guy, “You keep that up and I’m going to come after your family next week.” Then they closed the door and they’re gone. That was it.

A Refuge in Austin’s Casa Marianella

I got a ticket to Austin and when I got here I heard about Casa Marianella. If Casa Marianella was not here for me, believe me, I don’t know what I would have done. All I did was work hard and try to make a better life for myself, but ICE came and took it all away from me. I have no family in the United States, I have nobody. The people at Casa Marianella are beautiful, caring people who try to help others. Words cannot express the love and thanks I have for all they have done for me. Soon I will be getting my work permit and will try and re-build my life. I am one of those persons who believe that things happen for a reason, so I hope that something good will come out of my detention experience, so no one ever has to go through what I did.