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News Story

### “Detained”

On February 6, Boston College screened, “Detained,” where Emmy-nominated journalist and filmmaker, Emily Kassie, discussed her interactive documentary that explores the history and current state of immigration in the United States.

Kassie’s documentary is a collaboration between The Marshall Project and *The Guardian*. “Detained” documents the history of immigrant detention from the Carter Administration to the multi-billion dollar business that the Trump Administration now abuses.

As the nation heads into a crucial election year, Kassie’s exposition reveals the expansion of the crisis during the Trump presidency: hundreds of thousands of immigrants detained in the US in 2019, Trump’s travel ban expanding, cruel family separation, and a potential border wall.

“Although we think of [Boston] as very progressive, there is this fear about taking jobs... but education is our major industry... and we are seeing around 30% loss now of international students who pay the full rate and that we are really going to lose massively,” said Susan Akram, law professor and director of the International Human Rights Clinic at Boston University.

“The high tech industry, the medical industry, the healthcare industry... What are those dependent on? These brilliant international students... The economy connects all of us,” Akram said. “One has to find the right conversation [for each region] that strikes close to home.”

What was around 2000 detainees nationwide in 1985 is now 52,000 with 1000 detainees in Massachusetts alone, said Heather Friedman, former detention attorney and now Supervising Attorney at Boston College’s Center for Human Rights and International Justice (CHRIJ).

“Trump has tapped into a particularly simplistic and... racist strand of this discourse... This is the quintessential American debate... it’s a fight for the soul of the country... It’s not only legal, but it’s political, it’s moral, it’s ideological,” said Dan Kanstroom, co-director of CHRIJ and immigration law professor at Boston College.

“I had started to realize this massive machinery,” Kassie said. America was “a beacon of hope... Donald Trump exacerbated the system, and now things are pretty dire.” A nation of immigrants is turning its back on those seeking refuge and stripping them of their humanity.

“Everyone actually does know an immigrant... People are afraid of the other... and that is really about education... that the other is not different from us... but that requires a more nuanced public conversation than we are having right now,” said Akram.

The obstacle of “Detained” was “how do you tell such a nuanced history that would still be palatable (to the general public)?” Kassie said after presenting her work to the Department of Homeland Security and being nominated for three 2020 National Magazine Awards.

While trying to “give a voice and shine a spotlight” and “be as open and transparent as possible,” Kassie said that “people can look at the numbers and make of it what they will,” aware of the fact that people might only take away the message they want to hear.

“The power of using documentary and visual storytelling to do journalism is that people spend... most of (their) time in bed, watching movies or television on (their) computer because it’s captivating and it’s human and it transports us,” Kassie said.

Sandra Schwab, a Boston resident, spoke up during the Q&A: “If you don’t have a skill, this is not the innocent country for you,” adding that “there are a lot of horrible things to worry about,” echoing Kassie’s theory that many middle class Americans are not personally concerned

Kassie said that one of the biggest issues is people don’t understand the history, and there is a lack of understanding of the scope of the problem. As explained in “Detained,” immigration reform was set aside by both parties to push legislation Americans would actually rally behind.

The documentary also discusses the growth of toxic nationalism stemming from the wars of the 20th century and how the tragedies of the Oklahoma City Bombing and 9/11 escalated the public opinion into the “America First” racist perspective Trump has capitalized on.

“Detained” presents the history of how immigration detention, as a mirror image to the mass incarceration of Black Americans, has become a privatized prison system that is run by major corporations who turn a blind eye to human rights violations for investment.

The United States has become “a global leader” in detention and deportation, said Kanstroom. “25 billion (dollars) per year” is spent on immigration in the US, and now the imprisonment of immigrants, both illegal and legal, is seen as “big business.”

“There is, and indeed there must be hope,” Kanstroom said. However, “if there’s going to be a solution, it has to come from the executive,” indicating that the 2020 presidential election will be crucial in determining the direction of the system.

“The system had a bad cold,” Kanstroom said. “Now we are facing life threatening pneumonia.”

Sources:

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Sandra Schwab, Boston Resident / attendee of “Detained” screening