

Justin Bullock:

Hello everyone. This is Justin Bullock, cohost of Bush School Uncorked. I'm here today with our podcast producer, Faith.

Faith:

Hello everybody.

Justin Bullock:

You may recognize Faith if you've been listening to our recent episode, where we were giving her quite a hard time about being on this journey down to Brownsville without a passport. So she was unable to join us for all the pieces of the trip. And we gave her a pretty good hard time last [crosstalk 00:00:27] night, I think.

Justin Bullock:

We're recording this today and the day after our episode with Jonathan Coopersmith, and I thought I'd set the stage for you a little bit as to what we're talking about today, and what our trip was about, and why we're taking the time to do this interview. But we're going to get to ... Faith has a few questions for me. She'll be the interviewer as we move on, asking about some of my perceptions of the trip we took.

Justin Bullock:

So I wanted to take just a few moments and give you a little bit of background information about this trip that we're going to be referring to. So through the podcast, we've been talking about that we're going to do a short series, it's probably going to end up being two or three episodes on asylum seekers at the U.S. Mexico border. And we'll have some other opportunities where you'll get more details about the numbers and some of the policy specifics.

Justin Bullock:

But the big overview, as you may or may not be aware, is there's been an influx of asylum seekers from Central and South America into the U.S. And we'll talk to some experts on that, about what those situations are, and maybe what's led to some of that. But to cut to the chase, this has led to the migrant protection protocols, which began earlier last year.

Justin Bullock:

And the migrant protection protocols, and this is coming from the Department of Homeland Security's website. They describe it as a U.S. Government action whereby certain foreign individuals entering or seeking admission to the U.S. from Mexico illegally or without proper documentation, may be returned to Mexico and wait outside of the U.S. for the duration of their immigration proceedings, where Mexico will provide them with all appropriate humanitarian protections for the duration of their stay.

Justin Bullock:

And this is something instituted by the DHS, which we'll talk more at a different time about some of the challenges with this, how this actually fits in with U.S. and international law, about how asylum seekers are to be treated. In general historically in the U.S. and what's become the international norm from the U.N. and from the Organization of American States, is that when asylum seekers show up at your door, you process them in your country.

Justin Bullock:

The code in the U.S. essentially says, that anyone that has a set of credible fears and the credible fears include persecution related to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. The way it's worded on the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services website, is that every year people come to the United States seeking protection, because they have suffered persecution or fear that they will suffer persecution, due again to one of those categories. And my read of the U.S. Code, and again, we'll talk to other individuals, legal experts about this, is that anyone within a year of arriving in the U.S. can apply for asylum.

Justin Bullock:

The migrant protection protocols, have taken a different approach to this, which is the way it's playing out on the ground based on our read and based on what we've been able to read from the Human Rights Watch Organization, is that they're blanketly sending those seeking asylum in the U.S. where their case isn't 100% clear cut, which these cases rarely are. These people are people that are fleeing their countries for a variety of reasons. These people are then being sent back to Mexico from usually where they enter into Texas or Arizona and few other places. They're being sent to Mexico to wait.

Justin Bullock:

There's a nice report that we found from the Human Rights Watch Organization, that actually was published just a few days ago, about one week ago, as we were getting ready to take our trip down to the border. The title of the article was, U.S. Remain in Mexico Program Harming Children. Again, this is the migrant protection protocols as the official name for them. And it says, families seeking asylum are exposed to violence, illness and trauma.

Justin Bullock:

And just want to start with reading a few pieces from this article at the Human Rights Watch Organization. The United States government program, the one we've been talking about, exposes children as well as their parents seeking asylum to serious risk of assault, mistreatment and trauma while waiting for their cases to be heard.

Justin Bullock:

Human Rights Watch said, "Today," again this being February 12th for this report in a joint investigation report. "Human Rights Watch working with Stanford University's Human Rights and Trauma Mental Health Program and Willamette University's Child and Family Advocacy Clinic, found that the U.S. migrant protection protocols program commonly known as, Remain in Mexico, compelled families with children to wait in unsafe environments in Mexico for many months. Parents said that prolonged immigration court proceedings, fear of being incarcerated, and uncertainty about the future took a toll on their family's health, safety, and wellbeing. Many describe changes in their children's behavior, saying they became more anxious or depressed after U.S. authorities sent them to Mexico to await their hearings."

Justin Bullock:

"The conditions threats to safety and sense of uncertainty asylum seekers face while waiting in Mexico, creates chronic and severe psychological stress for children and families," said Dr. Ryan Matlow, Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Stanford School of Medicine. Dr. Matlow went on to say, "We know that these forms of pervasive, unresolved, complex

trauma can lead to significant, longterm, negative consequences for child development and family functioning." Just a little bit more here and then we'll move on.

Justin Bullock:

The article goes on to say, "Human Rights Watch and other investigators interviewed parents and children from 60 families seeking asylum between November, 2019 and January of 2020. Most families were from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala with a few from Cuba, Ecuador, and Peru. The investigators also spoke with lawyers, doctors, shelter providers, faith leaders, and Mexican officials." They go on here to say, "Under the migrant protection protocols, U.S. Immigration officials have required most Spanish-speaking asylum seekers who arrive in the U.S. through Mexico to go to Mexico while their cases are heard. Parents said that while waiting in Mexico, they or their children were beaten, harassed, sexually assaulted or abducted. Some said Mexican police harassed or extorted money from them. Most said they were constantly fearful and easily identified as targets for violence."

Justin Bullock:

Just a couple more pieces here. "Asylum hearings under the migrant protection protocols raised various due process concerns, according to "Human Rights Watch. To get to court hearings in the U.S., families must report to a designated border crossing point, which sometimes requires them to arrive as early as 3:00 AM in unsafe locations. Those sent to Mexicali or Piedras Negras must make journeys of 100 to 340 miles to reach their designated border crossing point.

Justin Bullock:

All family members, including young children, must appear and sit quietly for each court hearing. Families interviewed said that they were frequently required to wait for hours for a brief hearing. And agents have told parents they risked being sent back to Mexico without seeing a judge if their children made a noise or could not sit still.

Justin Bullock:

Families said that after each hearing, they were locked up in very cold, often overcrowded immigration holding cells, with men and teenage boys held separately, sometimes overnight or longer before U.S. officials returned them to Mexico. Some said they were considering abandoning their asylum cases, because their children were afraid of being detained again."

Justin Bullock:

Another note here, "All governments are obligated to respect the customary international law principle of non-refoulement, the prohibition of returning a person to a country where they are at risk of persecution, torture, other cruel or inhumane treatment. Governments are also obligated to extend specific protections to children whether traveling alone or with families, including by giving primary consideration to their best interests."

Justin Bullock:

Here's some more on this that we'll come back to, in terms of numbers. But I just wanted to give you an overview before we jump into some of our experience there this weekend, to what Human Rights Watch and Stanford had found, literally at the time this report came out. We were traveling on what? The 13th?

Faith:

Yes.

Justin Bullock:

And this report came out on the 12th. So it gave us a good detailed study that was done again, in conjunction with Stanford and Human Rights Watch about some of the conditions for the asylum seekers that have been sent back to Mexico to wait on their cases.

Justin Bullock:

We were in Brownsville, Texas, which is where we were staying to help serve some of these asylum seekers food and education. Over the course of the weekend, we worked with World Central Kitchen, which is a nonprofit organization. It's about two full time staff in Brownsville that coordinate with volunteers to take about 1500 meals over the border into Matamoros seven days a week. We help prepare those hot meals and then help deliver them over to the refugee camp.

Justin Bullock:

On Sunday, we also helped Team Brownsville, who is also partnering with the World Central Kitchen to help provide relief and aid into the encampment. We worked with them on Sunday morning at what they call The Escuelita, which was in four separate tents, helping provide some basic education for the children while they're being held in these tents to wait on their immigration hearings.

Justin Bullock:

So that is the background. Faith has agreed to lead the interview asking me a few questions to report back to you about our experiences. Go ahead Faith.

Faith:

All right, so going down to Brownsville, we had about eight hours to just like mentally prepare ourselves for everything. And you had mentioned actually, that even beforehand, you were still trying to put yourself in a frame of mind where you could actually handle everything. What were your initial thoughts of everything? And did your initial thoughts meet the expectations that you had?

Justin Bullock:

Yeah, that's a good question. So, we had a guide who had been down there before. Faith is a current Bush School student, but a former Bush School student, by the name of Mary Lu Hare, had been down to the camp with Team Brownsville and served before. So she said to us, "There's some things you can expect. One, it's really impossible to describe the situation with any degree of visualization before you arrive." So I had mostly kept my expectations about what the scene would be, kind of open. I didn't really know what to expect. I had some visions of what a tent city might look like, but it wasn't completely clear to me what we might find ourselves seeing. One of the helpful things that Mary Lu did, was described how the process affects you emotionally as you go in and participate in serving in this environment.

Justin Bullock:

So her advice to me was, "Hey, on the first day, we're going to be working a lot. We help prepare the meals." We worked from about 1:00 PM to 5:00 PM preparing the meals. I guess the first day was only

till about 4:00. And then we met at the International Bridge at 5:00. We actually met at the bus station in Brownsville and then carried the food over on the International Bridge. And so she's like, "This is a lot of physical work. You'll be very engaged with the team." There was probably about 20 additional volunteers that were with us on the first day. She said, "Look, the first day is, you just go into service mode." Which is something that I have some familiarity with.

Justin Bullock:

And so when we got there, we just went into work mode. And as that was happening, it felt a little weird. Because you're in this big tent they had set up to feed people. And you're laughing with the people, you're serving them meals, you're talking to them, you're saying hello, asking them how they are, playing with the children, trying to just bring smiles to people's faces. And that is its own type of exhaustion, after several hours of that.

Justin Bullock:

And so Mary Lu had said, "Look, the first day you're just going to be tired. You're going to be able to process what's going on or what you're seeing. And you're just going to try to get through the work." That's exactly what happened to me on the first day. I was tired at the end. We gathered with our team and had some dinner and tried to debrief. But more was like, I guess how people describe shock. Like you're seeing all of these people being held in a tent camp that have fled their countries and are trying to get to the country in which I live, right? And our country has responded by sending them back, sending them to Mexico to wait for six months, eight months for their first hearing, and a longer process for actually being granted asylum.

Justin Bullock:

So first day, as Mary Lu had warned me, you're just tired. And she had said, "Day two, when you get up in the morning and you have some quiet time," because we didn't start our activities till 1:00 in the afternoon, "That it will hit you, that what you were actually doing was at a refugee camp and serving refugees." And that's exactly what happened to me. As Faith witnessed, Saturday morning, I was on the phone with my wife, we were getting ready to meet up with our team. I was just checking in with her, and I was trying to explain to her what we had done the previous day. And about two thirds of the way through the conversation, I actually was not able to finish describing the events from the previous day, and found myself in tears.

Justin Bullock:

And again, the next day on Saturday evening, as we were gathered as a group, having our final meal together with Faith and I and Mary Lu and her father, who had traveled down as well, and a friend of hers, Angela.

Faith:

Angela.

Justin Bullock:

And yeah, so the five of us that we're spending a good bit of time together. And so, in some ways, it's what you expect, right? You're showing up, you're serving some people with food. In other ways, it's traumatizing I think. I mean, it's certainly more traumatizing for the people there, but you get some sense of the trauma. And in the days following, Mary Lu and people that served before, say it sticks with

you. And I've said to a couple of students here that have asked about it and a couple of people since, that it feels like how people describe a traumatic event. So I've had flashbacks, I've had dreams the last couple of days that are very vivid. Just this morning, I was trying to relate the story to a lady we work with here. And couldn't finish the story this morning as I was trying to tell it.

Justin Bullock:

And so yeah, from the mental side of it, we had some preparation from Mary Lu. And it was exactly as she described it, which was helpful to me. And I wanted to share that first, so I didn't forget to anyone that does choose to serve in these kinds of environments, that you do go through a little bit of your own process.

Justin Bullock:

So I didn't have good ideas. There are tents everywhere, so that looked like what I had expected. They have gotten some donations. There's a big tent where we served the food that housed probably 1000 people at one time to have meals together. So they do have some space for that. They have some modest-sized tents to hold the children for school time. So those were things I didn't have a reference point for.

Justin Bullock:

The other thing that struck me, I don't know what this says about me or about the refugee camp. But, they're just people. Right? They're just people who look like they're going through a hard time. They look like you and I, they're dressed similar to you and I, they [inaudible 00:17:09] they're just people. And so, it's not that wasn't what I was expecting, but sometimes in some parts of the world where refugees exist, there's a lack of clothing, people aren't able to have access to basic hygiene. And at least in this case, there are places to bathe and wash your clothes. And in general, people have clothing. Shoes are kind of hit or miss across, particularly some of the children. So not everyone has access to shoes or the appropriate clothing for weather. But it was, I guess, unnerving, in some ways about how these are just unlucky people that look just like you and I. So I guess ... I don't know if that answers your question or not, but that's my long winded response.

Faith:

Yeah. So as a student, from the student perspective, and I told you this while we were actually in Brownsville, I thought it was really interesting just seeing a lot of the things that I've learned in the classroom for the past year and a half, actually being applied in a real world situation. So from an educator's perspective, how are you going to implement some of the lessons that you've learned from this experience into your teaching? What are some ways you would do that?

Justin Bullock:

Yeah, so a couple of things from the educator standpoint that stuck with me. So one, it highlighted the importance of on the ground experiences. So experiential learning, like even for me studying the asylum seeking situation in the U.S., being there on the ground and seeing it firsthand is a very different experience.

Faith:

Oh yeah.

Justin Bullock:

So one, I think it highlights the importance within the school of public service, within the school of public administration, of getting as much experiential learning as possible. So from the Bush School standpoint, I think it highlights even more the importance of our internship requirement, the usefulness of the capstones when they're structured that way. So it made me want to think about ways to get our students who do a lot of group work in group projects and research projects, but how to actually get on the ground and see how these organizations interact.

Justin Bullock:

So another example of that, is we got to see firsthand how nonprofits coordinate.

Faith:

Yep.

Justin Bullock:

And so it was really a fascinating study of how Team Brownsville, is essentially just a few educators, public school teachers who are like, "What's going on is awful and we got to do something about it." And so they started taking meals across, they started trying to provide some basic donations to the camp. And then they were able to bring in over time, other nonprofits that specialized in different aspects of helping.

Justin Bullock:

So for example, the World Central Kitchen is this organization that shows up in disaster relief areas and crisis areas and provides meals. And they do it really, really well with quality food, and healthy food, and fresh food, fresh meals that they cook every day for the people on the ground. And Team Brownsville has to merge their volunteers to volunteer with World Central Kitchen and help coordinate the volunteers showing up for the World Central Kitchen's calendar dates. Just like that piece, they're working right now we were told, with a nonprofit called, Yes We Can, which is going to hire full time teachers to show up every day in the camps and have schooling every day for the children, instead of being once a week.

Justin Bullock:

So experiential learning and then seeing kind of on the ground how organizations interact. You're getting some of this in your capstone experience with how multiple departments in the local government interact and all the different coordination and communication opportunities and challenges that come with that.

Faith:

A lot of moving pieces.

Justin Bullock:

A lot of moving pieces. And so I think from an education standpoint, getting students opportunities like this, that you got to experience that Mary Lu got to experience, is vital. Not just to see what a picture of what service looks like, and who needs service and what that looks like, in comparison to a national narrative. But also just on the ground, how the administration of public service works, to your point,

brings home all the theories that we've been teaching you in the cases. When you can see it firsthand, when it's, our buddy Dan from World Central Kitchen is organizing us and using what we know are some good administration tactics to keep us all organized.

Justin Bullock:

And Andrea, the leader of Team Brownsville working with people on the ground, actual refugees who have become leaders in the camp, to organize the food distribution. These are all things we talk about in class, but then you have persons that you can see doing it in real time. So the big takeaway for me is more opportunities for experiential learning.

Faith:

All right. And another big question that I had is, whenever people hear the words asylum seekers or refugees, automatically, something political comes to mind. And I think that's really sad and disheartening, because this shouldn't be a super political thing. And because like you said, they're humans, they're people, they want food.

Justin Bullock:

Indeed they do. Yeah.

Faith:

Heaven forbid. So what are some ways as public servants that we can, I guess neutralize these ideas of, this is super political ... This shouldn't be a Democratic or Republican thing. How can we just humanize it in a way?

Justin Bullock:

Yeah, I think that's a real important question. I too am struck by the politicization of refugees, in particular. So I do think there are real immigration challenges that the U.S. experiences and that the U.S. experiences at the Texas, Mexico border. I think there are real questions about, what should our immigration policy be? What is the process for citizenship in the U.S.? What should those numbers look like to overall strengthen the country and the U.S. way of life? I think there's useful debate to have about what level of immigrants from what countries do you allow in through a process of citizenship.

Justin Bullock:

So I don't want discount that there are real immigration policy concerns about how the U.S. should think about immigration more generally. Okay. So I said that.

Faith:

Yeah.

Justin Bullock:

And I believe that, I do think that's true.

Faith:

Yes.

Justin Bullock:

Refugees is a whole different thing. And the groups we were working with, were people that have showed up at the U.S. border and said, "I'm fearful for returning to my home country for these reasons. I want to seek asylum in the U.S. because the situation in my home country is so desperate. And my personal situation in my home country is so desperate, that I have what I believe to be credible fear of remaining in my home country." Okay.

Justin Bullock:

So these are the most vulnerable people in their own society that have trusted the international order and the U.S. way of life, to help out the most vulnerable in the world as they need it, right? And so, I'm with you, and that everything's political today. And in general, politics plays a role in everything. But the partisanship related to the issue of refugees, is one that is disheartening. It's one that is troubling. And it's one that we have clear historical parallels for other times when we turned refugees away, that were shameful experiences for our country.

Justin Bullock:

One example, people like to use World War II examples. I think it's the most clear one for people. The U.S. turned away Jewish refugees during World War II for people that were sent back, had no other places to go, and things didn't turn out so well for them. When I was growing up in rural Georgia, we covered this case and this was a case that we were all horrified by. That, how could we have treated Jews at that moment in history that poorly, okay?

Justin Bullock:

So you look at 2020, and you have some situations in some countries in South America and in Central America that are not great right now. And for particular groups of people who're even worse, they're not safe in their home country. So they come to America for a better life. And independent of what the legal code says, which legal code suggests that these people should be given due process and given an opportunity to make their case, International Law and Customs, as we were reading from the Human Rights Watch Organization's website report earlier, dictate and demand that they're given due process and taken care of as part of that process.

Justin Bullock:

These aren't really partisan issues, in my mind. There's some clear established legal precedent for these things. And the legal code is pretty clear on these things. Our obligations historically are pretty clear. So it doesn't strike me that it should be that partisan.

Justin Bullock:

Now to your question of, from a public service standpoint, how do we de-politicize or de-partisan these issues? I don't know. I'm hoping that some of the information that we can share being from Texas A&M, being from the Bush School, from our podcast here. Saying, there are immigration policy issues here. But what we're really concerned about, is how we treat refugees and asylum seekers that have showed up at our door asking for help to live.

Justin Bullock:

And all I know to do is share the human stories, talk about them as humans, share our experience, try to highlight that this is a subset of the broader immigration issues. Talk about all the families and children that we saw, and try to touch on the humanity piece of it. But to your point, I think, as we both encountered in sharing our stories with friends and family and colleagues, not everyone seems to understand that because of their partisan lenses. And I think it's tough to be hopeful about trying to break through that narrative, when our own close acquaintances and friends and families sometimes have a hard time seeing the value of feeding refugees, because of their political lens, right?

Justin Bullock:

So I'm not super optimistic on our ability to change the narrative. It's a little frustrating how hypersensitive the American dialogue has been to this, because we don't actually take in a lot of refugees in general, that are bothering to go through the process. In fact, in our own state of Texas, our governor, Greg Abbott earlier this year ... This is from an NPR article, January 10th. The headline is, Governor Greg Abbott Says New Refugees Won't Be Allowed to Settle in Texas. So, it is becoming a political issue, because our governor is saying that we're not going to let any of these asylum seekers in our state to settle.

Justin Bullock:

Now there's questions about how many people you should resettle in any given state, and I think that's a reasonable question. I was just looking today at what's going on between the Syria and Turkey border. And Turkey is now housing 3 million Syrian refugees. And when you look at the number of refugees that are being accepted into the U.S. for example, in 2019, according to the same NPR article, about 30,000 refugees were expected to resettle in the U.S. That is down from 110,000 in 2016. So in 2016, we had 110,000. Which in a country of over 350 million, I think, it's not a huge percentage, particularly when you compare 3 million in Turkey. 30,000 in 2019 given the amount that we've seen that are here claiming asylum as an asylum case. 30,000 refugees is a third of the number of people who show up for a football game on game day in Aggie Land, right? We have almost 100,000 people that are in that stadium on game day. This is one third of the stadium of one football game that shows up to our town on any given Saturday.

Justin Bullock:

So, I'm not super hopeful about de-politicizing this, in part, because it's being made political by both parties. But the governor of our state is saying that he's going to allow zero refugees in. That makes it political. That makes it partisan.

Faith:

Yeah. It was definitely a humbling experience. Makes you realize that your problems aren't as big as you think they are. And so, also while we were discussing in Brownsville, no one wants to make this journey. No one wants to do these things, but they have to because they're scared. So with that, with with everything that we've experienced over the past week or so, what is probably the most rewarding thing that you encountered?

Justin Bullock:

Yeah, so it's weird, because I think the most rewarding is also maybe the most traumatizing at the same time.

Faith:

Answers both questions.

Justin Bullock:

Yeah. And the most rewarding thing I think, was on the first night, my job was to pass out water bottles to people before they got to the food. And so I'm passing out water bottles, and one young girl refugee who is probably eight, insisted on standing next to me. And at the table we also had, where I was passing out waters, we also had a big bottle of sanitizer, so people could clean their hands before they ate. So she insisted on standing ... She was like known in the World Central Kitchen people that someone that wants to help. So she stood next to me, and every person that came up before I could give them water, she sanitized their hands, right?

Justin Bullock:

So then as she was doing that, two other girls, who were probably six and seven, wanted to help as well. And so, they wanted to help pass out the waters, they just wanted to feel like they were doing something helpful. And so I let them help pass out some waters. And then on the next night, as we were setting up to serve, several of the children wanted to put on the gloves and serve with us. And so you had to put some parameters around it, for a variety of reasons. And so they were allowed to do some things, but not others. But the children, even with everything they have going on fleeing their homes, all they wanted to do was help everyone out.

Justin Bullock:

And yeah, that was probably the most rewarding thing. There were some other moments that will stick with me that are kind of burned into my brain from helping teach. The morning I helped teach, most of the children are pretty well clothed and clean and things, but not all of them. And so there was one little girl that just had snot coming out of her nose, and was missing her shoes, and had a dirty face. And she was really excited to have the crayons to draw the pictures on her hand, and was wanting to love on us and stuff.

Justin Bullock:

And then as we're getting ready to leave out, one of the ... she was probably four or five, one of the little girls is wanting to play. And so part of her wanting to play is like hanging onto my leg and wanting to be swung around and played with. So those aren't really rewarding, is not the word I would use for those. But those are some of the things I take away. But it was nice to just give people food. And it was nice to see the children receiving the food wanting to help. That was probably the most rewarding.

Justin Bullock:

And it was also really rewarding to see your response and see you, because I'm a professor by nature, right? So watching how you respond and how you learned from that, and watching how our team of people that we were working with, how it impacted them and got them to want to do more to help asylum seekers and refugees. Which again, to your point, has become politicized. But there, it was hard to imagine why.

Justin Bullock:

Cool?

Faith:

Yep.

Justin Bullock:

I think that's probably good enough for now. And we'll have another recording, maybe go in to some more of the statistics. We're also going to have a chat with our friends that we served with, Mary Lu and her father Scott, and-

Faith:

Our squad.

Justin Bullock:

Yeah the squad, and Angela. And so we're going to be some conversations with them, and hoping to talk to some immigration experts as well, to get their take on what the asylum seeking process has looked like historically, where we are now, why? And then probably another conversation with me about discretion and decision making at the administrative level. That's my expertise. And how some different tools are being used to different ends that we might talk about from an administrative discretion standpoint.

Justin Bullock:

So Faith, thanks for interviewing me. It's fun to be interviewed instead of being the interviewer. And we'll have more coming to you soon.