



2017 George B. Brooks Award recipients Joe and Selena Keesecker

Specific Activities in Areas of Human Rights/Social Justice:

1. In Local Church: Both Joe and Selena are active at Guadalupe – Joe is the Moderator for Session and Selena is pianist.
2. In Other Judicatories of the Church: Joe works with FC Presbytery with Hispanic Ministry.
3. In Community Activities Beyond the Church: Extensive work with Florence Project, attending court hearings with detainees, amazing follow-up on people around the USA who have gotten out of detention.

A major focus of their recent work, in addition to visits and accompaniments, is establishing a letter-writing program to reach out to people in detention. These letters of encouragement help sustain the detainees in hope and Christian faith.

The work of Joe and Selena Keesecker is an incredible account of faithfulness and bringing hope to people. Their calling began during the Civil Rights movement 50 years ago. When Joe and Selena retired to Phoenix in 2010 it was after a long history of service in PC/USA as community organizers in San Luis Valley (Colorado), Director of the PC/USA Hunger Program, Director of Ghost Ranch Missionaries in Guatemala, and Director of Agricultural Ministries in NYC. A year later, in the spring of 2011 they were invited to a workshop led by staff from the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project. This workshop prepared people to write letters to persons held in detention and possibly to begin visiting. They wrote letters for a couple of months and then were asked to visit a young man who had just turned 18 and had been moved from the Children and Youth Program of Foster Home Detention to the Adult Detention Center of ICE in Florence. Thus began what has become their central ministry for the last 6 years.

Joe and Selena shifted their visits to the Eloy Detention Center, where more immigrants are held, and for longer. For three years they went nearly every Saturday to visit during regular visiting hours and were able to visit up to a dozen people each time. When the Detention Center began to place more and more restrictions on visiting hours and numbers of people visited, Joe and Selena joined with the Casa Mariposa Detention Center Visitation Program. Now they are able to visit on weekdays through a special arrangement with the Warden. They continue to visit, averaging about three visits a month and they have recruited others to join the program as well, recently gaining the involvement of a Haitian Church, Haitian Christian Ministry, to visit the numerous Haitians coming to the U.S. border.

Joe says, "Since beginning the visits, we have visited and developed relationships with about 250 people held in detention, coming from 30 different countries. Many have never been in the U.S. illegally, having come to the border seeking asylum from conditions in their own countries. Some have been living in the U.S. for some years, some even brought here as young children or babies by their parents; and some who have been apprehended soon after crossing the border without documents, often in remote and dangerous sections of the Southwest desert."

Selena has especially taken to writing letters and has giving workshops to encourage and help others write letters. "While we who live near detention centers can go to visit people, anyone can write letters and develop "pen pal" relationships. We have learned that persons in detention

are very grateful when receiving cards or letters, knowing there are people who care about them and have not forgotten them.”

In addition to the visits and letter writing, Joe and Selena attend countless bond and asylum hearings and pick up people who have been released and abandoned at Eloy and/or the Greyhound Bus Station in Phoenix. They furnish backpacks and suitcases, offer counseling and even some shelter for the night and assistance to get transportation to family in the U.S. When they travel throughout the U.S., they continue to visit former detainees whom they have gotten to know.

Joe has become a pastor to the people in the program and has helped register children to become DACA participants. Together Joe and Selena bring hope to people who are marginalized, lonely and without advocates.