

The “D.C. 211”
By Larry Kleinman
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On the late afternoon of Tuesday, October 8, 2013, the U.S. Capitol Police arrested 211 people. All asked for it and, in fact, came to the District *expressly for that purpose*. A few even traversed the entire continent.

Immigrants’ rights groups, led by Casa de Maryland and SEIU, set October 8th as the date for a concert, march and mass civil disobedience action, all to boost the sense of urgency for immigration reform. Planning had started July 31st. October 8th would serve as the capstone to the “forty” actions that FIRM—the Fair Immigration Reform Movement—and allies would organize in localities across the country on the preceding Saturday. That day, October 5th, marches, rallies, vigils, and the like, actually occurred in 183 cities.

October 8th began with a concert and rally on the Mall attracting 10,000, fired up by the classic *corridos* of *Los Tigres del Norte*. So etched were the *Tigres*’ lyrics in the minds of immigrants, that the band actually stopped singing, mid-tune, to listen to thousands in the crowd belting out the words.

Chanting “*This is what democracy looks like!*,” 10,000 marched on the U.S. Capitol, the DC 211 leading the way. The 211 came in all colors—of skin tone and t-shirts. The Labors’ Union, LIUNA, in orange. AFSCME green, SEIU purple, UFCW yellow, Casa de Maryland white, Make The Road New York light blue. And red: UNITE-HERE, United Farm Workers, and PCUN. Among the 211 were ED’s and “No ‘d’s”—organization executive directors and immigrants with no documents. There were young activists—the “DREAMers”—in their trademark caps and gowns, and activists, like me, who had started young, decades ago.

As the marchers turned onto First Street, the thousands peeled off onto the wide walkways. The 211 continued down the middle of the street that presidents gaze down upon as they take the oath of office. Our column, five across thinned out to three and halted, some standing, some sitting. At the center, stood eight members of Congress who had left the House floor, just up the rise, to *get arrested* protesting their own chamber’s shameful lack of action on immigration reform.

As it happened, I stood right behind the eight: among them, Rep. Charlie Rangel of Harlem, Rep. Luis Gutierrez of Chicago, Rep. Raul Grijalva of Tucson, Rep. Keith Ellison of Minneapolis (the only Muslim member of Congress), and Rep. John Lewis of Atlanta. John would later point out that this was his 45th arrest for civil disobedience. Like all his other arrests, this one was necessary because, as he put it, “we can’t be patient anymore.”

The crowd erupted as Charlie and John were led away in zip-tie handcuffs, the first arrested, followed by Raul, Keith, Rep. Joe Crowley of New York, Rep. Jan Schakowsky of Chicago and Rep. Al Green of Texas. The last to go, Luis Gutierrez, channeled the people’s outrage (and his own), shouting: “comprehensive immigration reform has the votes to pass the House *today*; the leadership is not listening in there so we’ve come out here to add our voices to yours and demand a vote *now!*”

One by one, officers cuffed and led each of us away. The hour it took proved to be the most expeditious stage of the odyssey that followed: transport to police headquarters, unloading, seating, body search, property confiscation, cuff removal, numbered bracelet (to go with the colored bracelet attached to the other arm while we were first arrested), recording identification data, photo, interview, application for “post and forfeit”, outstanding warrant check, thumb print, tendering the \$50 fine as “final disposition,” receipt, removal of bracelets, return of property, and...at last, freedom.

Interspersed were periods of waiting that seemed to get longer as the night wore on. All 211 cooled our heels in a cavernous, well-worn concrete block building probably built for car repair. We were “guarded” at all times by a dozen officers while another dozen worked the paper when the computer system cooperated. While we were a compliant bunch, we had to be reminded to sit down, quit clapping or chanting (hand-raised finger-wiggling was substituted), not mix genders in the sections of seating, and request accompaniment to the portable toilet whose door remained open at all times. The squad was professional, some even friendly, even though the partial federal government shutdown had them on the job with no assurance of pay. They distributed water, punch, and sandwiches (two slices of white bread with either bologna or cheese).

The members of Congress received standing ovations as they were released—the first to exit—well after 10:00 PM. By midnight, only a handful of other protestors were freed.

The glare of the fluorescent lights, the metal folding chairs, and the strains of a long day’s journey into night all took their toll. The buzz, generated early on by dozens of animated conversations between long-time colleagues and complete strangers, gradually faded. Boredom and weariness took over.

Officers’ shift change around 1:00 AM underscored that the end was not near. By 3:00 AM about half of us were left. As detainee #155, I wouldn’t walk out until 5:30 AM, leaving forty still waiting. The depressing image of being the last one “sitting” stifled the finger-wiggling applause; fortunate were those who had managed to doze off.

Still, we were altogether in the same space, we had fresh (city) air—thankfully 25 degrees cooler than two days earlier. We had amazing support organized by Casa de Maryland (who had negotiated the arrest choreography and the \$50 no-court-appearance fine) and the Center for Community Change, vigilant through the night just beyond the gate with (real) sandwiches and coffee, holding our cellphones, and providing a couple of hotel rooms across the street for groups of protestors from out of state to wait and reassemble.

We also had a Cause critical to the security and well-being of eleven million immigrants and their families, a Cause that united us, that gave us purpose. And we left bonded to 210 others with whom we now share the unique place in our struggle’s history: participants in the *largest civil disobedience action ever in the immigrants’ rights movement*.