

Gloria Sosa: [00:03](#) Okay. Thank you for giving me the time to do a follow up interview. So, last time we were talking about your experiences in high school and your experiences across LA and how your activism shaped a lot of the stuff that happened in SURGE. So I wanna go back a little bit, through the years when you were in high school. So you shared with me that throughout your life you knew that you were undocumented....knowing that you lacked the financial resources and the legal status. You told me that you did really well in high school. Can you share with me what motivated you to do well in high school, knowing that all these barriers were coming up?

Fermin Vasquez: [00:51](#) Yeah. Well, I put it in the context of...it's like a before and after. Because in El Salvador, I grew up there until I was like 11. So I was a bad student over there.

Gloria Sosa: [01:06](#) Really?

Fermin Vasquez: [01:08](#) I flunked first grade, in fact. So, you know, like my other cousins, they would do really well, like in school. Cause I grew up with three of my cousins. We grew up together in the same household. They were all older than me. So the oldest, and then the youngest of my aunts, they would do really well in school. And then the middle and me, the little, I was the youngest. We would do really bad in school, you know? So I think that I didn't come to this country just for a better life. I think it has, it actually saved my life. I would have probably ended up being in gangs, you know, or just being not a productive member of society. I think coming here, I think it was a shift.

Fermin Vasquez: [01:59](#) My mom was pretty strict, my stepdad as well. And they always taught me the value of education. You know, even though they couldn't help me with homework or things like that, they were always on me and they would go to my student parent conferences. So they were involved, yeah, they were just very strict. So I sort of like, made a huge change of how I was over there. And here. I think it had to do a lot with teachers, with my mom being very strict and things like that. So I ended up doing really well here. And I think it was due to that, like just being scared of my mom. She's very strict. Yeah. And I think it was also like, you know, they tell you, right? Like, oh, te trajimos aqui so you can better yourself. And to this day, I'm think I'm one of the only persons in my family to go to college here.

Gloria Sosa: [03:13](#) Oh wow.

Fermin Vasquez: [03:13](#) And a bunch of people have come over, but nobody has attained a degree.

Gloria Sosa: [03:20](#) And have they come...have they arrived about the same age as you did?

Fermin Vasquez: [03:27](#) Different ages. Some older, some around the same age. Yeah. Yeah. It's just been difficult.

Gloria Sosa: [03:37](#) So when you -

Fermin Vasquez: [03:38](#) - older than couple of years long,

Gloria Sosa: [03:42](#) But still school age?

Fermin Vasquez: [03:44](#) Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Gloria Sosa: [03:45](#) So -

Fermin Vasquez: [03:46](#) - some and then some had arrived like later.

Gloria Sosa: [03:51](#) Right. So, when you were in El Salvador, you stayed with your aunt, right? Once your mom migrated. So then your aunt wasn't as strict as your mother?

Fermin Vasquez: [04:02](#) No, I mean, I think it was just a lot more freedom out there. Just do whatever you want. Cuz you would go to school from like...all of us would go in the morning. So there was two shifts in school. It was one in the morning, which was from seven thirty or eight o'clock to like 11:45. And then it was like 12 or like 1, 12:30 to like 5:30 was the afternoon shift. But yeah, I just had a lot more freedom over there. It was like playing with kids, you know, hide and go seek, biking, just going everywhere. Just hanging out in the neighborhood, playing soccer. So I wasn't really interested in school, just having fun as a kid.

Gloria Sosa: [04:49](#) So then, once you moved here, you didn't have time to have fun anymore?

Fermin Vasquez: [04:54](#) Well, here was very different cause we lived in the house in the neighborhood that everybody knew each other and here was like a single apartment. There was nothing we to do. It was just like, watch TV or movies or video games, you know. But I was not used to any of that. So it was just like... I guess it was just like focusing on school was like...<Laugh> and plus like living, it's like one of those things. I'm reading this book called David versus Goliath, which talks about...by Malcolm Gladwell. He does this analysis of like, what may seem as a disadvantage, you know, in this case for me was like living in a single apartment with my stepdad, my sister, four of us, you know, sharing a

studio pretty much. But what that allows is that, everybody knows what you're doing, you know, they know if you're not at the house, you're doing homework.

- Fermin Vasquez: [05:53](#) They know cuz there's no space -
- Gloria Sosa: [05:55](#) No privacy.
- Fermin Vasquez: [05:55](#) - yeah. So what may seem as a disadvantage in this case, living in low income community, single apartment, turned out to be an advantage to me. And then, because it was like, just being there, you know, and everybody knows what you're doing - if you're doing your homework or not., like my stepdad would come home like around 4, 4:30, around the same time I would be there. My mom at that point wasn't working, just my formative years. So we had her at home, she would cook and all those things. So I think that made a big difference. Plus then, doing activism I met some really great mentors that helped me along the way to apply to college, with my personal statement, all of that.
- Fermin Vasquez: [06:48](#) So I think it was a combination of a lot of different factors...but it's just so interesting cuz the research that Malcolm Gladwell does is around how sometimes Davids, right? The -
- Gloria Sosa: [07:02](#) mm-hmm. <affirmative>.
- Fermin Vasquez: [07:03](#) - be Goliath. And it's like, sometimes things that may seem as disadvantaged turn out in life to be advantages.
- Gloria Sosa: [07:14](#) Right.
- Fermin Vasquez: [07:14](#) And it's just so interesting. It's not always the case, but I think with my case, I'm beginning to look at it through those lens...
- Gloria Sosa: [07:26](#) right? And then you don't notice, you reflect-
- Fermin Vasquez: [07:29](#) - and the same thing with undocumented sometimes...you know, because undocumented students, like we talked about last time, also don't have student loans at all. I never did. So many people have gone to like law school without no student loans, medical school. Like, you know, and then I hear some other people that are citizens... like, I just read on somebody's Instagram, they were like, 'I'm \$250,000 in debt', you know?
- Gloria Sosa: [07:57](#) Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

- Fermin Vasquez: [07:58](#) That's a house <laughs>...not in LA, but, everywhere else, in most places. So it's like those things, you know, I think that we have to look at 'em from a holistic approach. It's not just like, 'oh, poor kids that don't have papers'. It's like, so many of us in the stories that you are probably hearing have been able to shift those seemingly insurmountable odds to like really great advantages. You know, the ability to lead people, the ability to adapt to a new environment, the ability to work as a team, the ability to be resourceful. Like those are all skills that you need in the job market of today. And it just feels like, man, that was great. Being undocumented was great preparation for survival skills, in a creative way...and finding solutions to things that other people may not see, you know?
- Gloria Sosa: [09:01](#) Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yes. Jorge shared something that he said, that being undocumented was the best thing that happened in his life, and it resonates with what you just said. But I do think that it's a common thing that's coming up in these interviews with other folks, is that it is a blessing in disguise. And it sounds like it's only when you have a strong support team, like a supporting network, like someone who's supporting you, right? You have your caring parents who make sure you did well, you found the mentors, the right mentors...you share your story with the right people. So I do agree with that. It's just like, finding the support group, right? To help you go through everything that you're going through, and at the end you reflect on it, then you understand it was a disadvantage, but it helped you, right...foster your growth.
- Fermin Vasquez: [10:07](#) Yeah. I'll just mention one caveat. I don't think it's the best thing <laugh> that ever happened because it can't be, you know, but I also don't want it to seem as if we're masking the structural oppression and racism that exists in our immigration system because we have to talk about that. And too often we see personal stories through the lens of overcoming odds and this American narrative of like, despite all the odds they overcame and now we achieved this, why can't you do it? Right? Why can't you like, pull yourself up by your bootstraps. And that's one thing that I also disagree a lot with Jorge and some of the business people, <laugh>, like Norma and them, because they saw the world as that. Like, 'you could do it if you..' Like, this narrative of, 'you can be anything you want', you know, if you just set your mind to it, if you work really hard. I reject that narrative completely and as this lie that the US tells you like...the rags-to-riches kind of story, right? And I don't agree with that at all because it masks the structural racism, and the structural systems that keep people oppressed, right? Like the fact that a cadre of activists at Cal State LA are quote unquote

'making it', or just thriving, doesn't mean that the hundreds of thousands of other undocumented students, like I just mentioned, my family, haven't...you know...and you're right, like, the stars really have to align for some people to succeed. But I reject that narrative of, 'if you just put - set your mind to it, you work hard, you know...it's not as simple as that. And I think we still need to change our immigration system, that's connected to our prison system, that's connected to our healthcare system. I think we have to approach the research in this case from that sort of lens and not through, oh, you know, 'Fermin made it', or 'Jorge is making it', or 'Norma's doing well'. It has to also be the voices that are not in this space.

- Gloria Sosa: [13:40](#) Right, I totally agree with you. Like that's what I say, you know, you had to have the right support group behind you helping you get through this because a lot of the people lack that support group, and that's, you know, when they are unable to fulfill their goals. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I totally agree. Okay. So thank you for sharing that. That was really meaningful. So again, I wanna move a little forward, to your activism efforts, because that really came in high school, right? So -
- Fermin Vasquez: [13:20](#) It started in high school.
- Gloria Sosa: [13:21](#) Yeah. Started in high school. So, did it start freshman year or closer to applying to college?
- Fermin Vasquez: [13:30](#) Around my junior year. Yeah. Sophomore, junior year.
- Gloria Sosa: [13:35](#) Okay. And you mentioned that you met someone from CHIRLA, from the CDN Network, the Wise Up! part of CHIRLA. So a lot of the things that you did was involved with CHIRLA and some other coalitions, right? Did you continue to work with them?
- Fermin Vasquez: [13:57](#) Yeah, when I went to college I was the community affairs representative or community liaison. So I would be the representative to CHIRLA for the California Dream Network. Yeah. We organize all kinds of stuff. And yeah, I've been sort of involved with CHIRLA for a long time. Then in my professional career, I also had a job in different organizations. Like when I was at SEIU Local 2015, which is the largest union in California, with over 385,000 members, I was in the communications department and I worked very closely with CHIRLA and their communications team to do campaigns around the Dream Act, you know, or worker rights. So they've always been a part, even if I'm in another professional setting since I have those relationships that go back like more than a decade now. It's

always really great to work with them in a different capacity. More in like a professional space.

Gloria Sosa: [15:06](#) Okay. So you're continuously working somehow with them, right?

Fermin Vasquez: [15:12](#) Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yeah.

Gloria Sosa: [15:15](#) And now that you have this capacity to reach more people through your job, what are your...the activism that you pursued?

Fermin Vasquez: [15:28](#) Yeah, I mean, the activism is really centered around low income communities, communities of color, and uplifting their voices through social media organizing, coalition building, policy campaigns, all of that. I think just being part of the communication space really allows you to, one, be creative, but two, be a driving force in how to shape the conversation around immigration or around any social justice issue. Like I said, when I was at the Union, we were at the forefront of shaping the conversation around workers rights and what it means to be a caregiver. Cause we work with caregivers and healthcare providers. So the union is made up of almost like 80% women of color, you know, especially Latina, Filipino women, black women. So it was really great to have the immigrant experience working in that space, but also being able to just share their stories and work in coalition with them. One of the campaigns that we won was raising the minimum wage to 15 dollars an hour. It's like a couple years ago. We raised wages for 5 million people in the state, you know, which is huge, right?

Gloria Sosa: [17:01](#) Yes.

Fermin Vasquez: [17:03](#) Like in college, we're organizing hundreds of people, but now we're organizing and impacting the lives of millions of people, you know? And I think that's really a testament to building power. I mean, just being with an organization that's one of the most powerful innovations in the state, and having that sort of financial backup, people power, you know, that's like real. Like, we would go to the board of supervisors in Los Angeles to win a contract for like 180,000 healthcare workers, you know, and that would be like a year, or two year campaign, but we would have an impact in the pockets of real people, getting money in their pockets. And that's something I feel super proud of. And sometimes we don't celebrate that. But like, man, we've impacted the lives of millions of Californians here, you know, through some of the organizations that I've been a part of.

Gloria Sosa: [18:12](#) Yes. Yes. I, agree. I could see that. So it sounds like you're always working to help others, right? Whether it's immigration or workers' rights, and technically you could have chosen to work in whatever you wanted. It didn't have to be this organization that's helping communities that come from this Spanish background. What do you think motivated [you] to stay in this fight and keep working to help folks?

Fermin Vasquez: [18:48](#) I think it's just has been my politicization as a young person. I would never, I mean, never say never, but I guess it's not attractive for me to use my skills to go sell you like a Coca-Cola bottle or work for McDonald's, you know, or work for like any of these multinational corporations, work for a bank or whatnot, like I think my values and political analysis that I developed in high school and in college is what has kept me in the movement. Like looking at the systems that keep people oppressed and like in your place, you know, sort to speak. Right. And looking at my own story as sort of point where I know that US foreign policy had a lot to do with why my family came here.

Gloria Sosa: [19:51](#) Right.

Fermin Vasquez: [19:51](#) You know, and I don't wanna waste my energy, time and creativity, and skills perpetuating those systems that lead to mass migration. And so understanding those systems allow me to keep the fight. You know, I'm committed to being a lifelong organizer and movement building person. I don't see myself, at least in the short to midterm, I don't see myself like going anywhere <laugh>. I think I've tried...like it has come to mind, at certain points, like, yeah, I should just go to the private sector and make money <laugh>, but [that] has not been my goal, you know, I still think you could live a good comfortable life working to improve the lives of other people. That has been an internal struggle for a while. But I think that money isn't everything for me. I'm not like, 'I gotta start a business', 'oh, I gotta start that'. What I do wanna start is spark change. And it's just different ways of looking at life, I think.

Gloria Sosa: [21:26](#) Right.

Fermin Vasquez: [21:28](#) It doesn't mean [that] through a business you can't impact people's lives. I just don't wanna perpetuate capitalism, <laugh>, it doesn't mean folks that are starting like small businesses...I'm very pro small business. If you're starting a taco stand or you know, you're hustling out there to provide service for people, that's great. But I think when it comes to multinational corporations and the way they seize power and the way they use their power to influence the tax system, to

influence foreign policy, trying to get cheap labor, that's where I'm like, we cannot be part of that. We have to in fact fight against that.

Gloria Sosa: [22:12](#)

Right. Right. Just give more power to the people. Right.

New Speaker: [22:17](#)

END OF TRANSCRIPT