

Gloria Sosa: [00:03](#) Okay, so we left off talking about how you always wanna give back to the community, and I think that's so great. Thank you for sharing that. So I wanna get back to the questions. What did you learn as a student activist at Cal State LA, and what [else] would you have wanted to learn?

Fermin Vasquez: [00:28](#) [Pause] Ah, man, that's a good one.

Gloria Sosa: [00:46](#) Take your time.

Fermin Vasquez: [00:46](#) I guess I'd say that I learned that change doesn't happen in a vacuum just because you're at a university where you're learning about new things, new research, new how to write, all those kinds of things. It doesn't mean that other people outside share your worldview. And I learned that the university, it's a very small group of people relative to the whole city and state and country. And sometimes you're talking to the same people that agree with you already, because those are your friends, those are your professors, you know? I think just knowing that prepared me to be better outside of school. I learned people skills. I learned that intellectual sort of rigor that you need to be able to go out into the world and face it, you know? And [to] learn different things from different people. Having that diversity of perspective, it's really important.

Fermin Vasquez: [02:11](#) What I wish I would have learned, well, I also learned [about] the resilience of people like me, right? Just being able to interact with a lot of undocumented students who shared a common goal of improving their lives and giving back to the community or doing different things, you know? That's one thing I also learned, [it] was that it's okay if people wanna do different things, not everybody has to be an activist like me. Some other people wanted to be teachers, other people wanted to go into business, into accounting, real estate. And I feel like people can make an impact regardless of their field. And that was something that...I was like, 'no', you know, 'we need everybody to go out into the streets and protest the system, burn it down!' It took me a while, just like, developing that patience for people who didn't wanna do activism.

Fermin Vasquez: [03:26](#) You know, I always felt like, well then shit is not gonna change. The fact that you're changing your life, you know that you got a Erika Glazer scholarship. Like, okay, great. You know, so you have a scholarship, but what about the thousands that can't [get one]? And we can only arrive at that change if we all come together and organize and like really build something up. But some other people just wanna do bake sales, you know, they wanted to raise money for scholarships. I wasn't as interested in

that, so I just kind of learned that that's fine. That's all part of building a movement...people have different roles within movement building work. Yeah, it just took me longer <laugh>, than I expected to learn that. And to just, you know, roll with the people that are gonna roll with you. Like, don't spend as much time trying to convince other people that your worldview is right. You know? The people who wanna do the work are gonna do the work.

- Gloria Sosa: [04:39](#) Right. So you wish you would've learned that sooner.
- Fermin Vasquez: [04:44](#) Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yeah, definitely.
- Gloria Sosa: [04:48](#) Right. And was it like a specific thing or experience you had that made you realize this?
- Fermin Vasquez: [04:59](#) No, I think it was just different moments. At meetings with SURGE, sometimes like, you know, 40 people will show up or more...or certain things, like at meetings or a conference, you know, a lot of people will show up...or like if we were talking about scholarships or something, a lot of people are interested...or we'll have a workshop on resume building or like network[ing], more people will show up. Right. But when it came to like, 'we're gonna go protest the president's office', or 'we're gonna go out on may day [and] march', you know, 'we're gonna go do something political'...sometimes, it wasn't the same turnout that we would get, like if it was just a fundraising event or something else. So that would rub me the wrong way. I'm like, why are people not down? You know? Like, <laugh>, come on. We need to not just look at ourselves, but we're part of a larger system. So that was sometimes a frustration that I had.
- Fermin Vasquez: [06:13](#) And I'll be very blunt about it with other people. I'll be like, 'dude, like why are you not...', you know, stepping up or like... Yeah. <laugh>
- Gloria Sosa: [06:26](#) When you shared this frustration with other SURGE-istas, would that bring some sort of conflict?
- Fermin Vasquez: [06:34](#) Probably. Yeah. I'm pretty sure. Yeah. Yeah. Cuz they didn't wanna step up, or a lot of times they also didn't have the political analysis, you know...of understanding, like they hadn't...yeah. I think that people have different majors. So like for me, I did political science or sociology classes, you know. Like there was a class through Summer Bridge, which Steve Teixeira used to be the director of, there was a class called

"Race, Class and Gender in the United States", and they would teach you about all the systems of oppression that keep people of color down. And that was a really big eye opener for me. Cuz we don't get that in high school. And a lot of people don't get it in college because they don't take those sort of classes, you know?

Fermin Vasquez:

[07:36](#)

So a lot of people didn't have that analysis. They just came with their lived experience, you know, the things that they wanted to pursue. Yeah. I think it definitely created conflict for me specifically with a lot more of the business majors. Just folks that were more focused on the business, capitalist side of things, you know, and I had a critique of capitalism. So I think that naturally was a conflict there, because in college we're idealists, and I wanted to end capitalism. That was like the whole thing, you know? And it's the root of all evil, so to speak. Yeah. But the business majors in SURGE, they wanna perpetuate capitalism. They wanna go into the system and they have this thing, like, 'oh, if I make money'...'if I make it and I start a business, then I'm gonna be able to give back to the community.' And, you know, 'if I become rich', right...'then I can give, and I can start my own scholarship fund at the end of the day.' Like, how many of them have actually started a scholarship fund is my question. You know? You might be able to give back here and there. But I think that again, that has to do a lot more with conducting an analysis of an individual as opposed to tackling a problem [at] its root causes and the system that it perpetuates, you know? So yes, there was conflict, especially with me with others around that, because I didn't agree with it. Like, I don't agree with just saving the individual. Right. And like, you making it, or you making money or, [just because] you are doing a business doesn't mean that it's gonna change the lives of hundreds or thousands of people. Just like we've been able to do through the union or through other community organizations where we fight for policy wins and policy campaigns and raising wages for 5 million people. Like if we raise wages for 5 million people in California, that costs like, what, maybe 2 billion? You know? Like how rich do you have to get as an individual for you to create that sort of change? Right? And so that's where I didn't agree with some people and there was a back and forth, because I was like, we need to change the system, not make you rich <laugh>.

Gloria Sosa:

[10:16](#)

Right? Yeah. So there were some sort of conflicts, right? Because the different ideologies, the different ways that you envision changing the world to become a better place.

Fermin Vasquez: [10:29](#) Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, but yeah, just took me longer to understand that at the end of the day, we should meet people where they are. You know, that's my analysis now. It's like, yeah, they were business people, they were only interested in scholarships and the financial aspect of SURGE, but that's okay. You know. I should have approached it like, 'oh,' you know, 'they don't have the political analysis yet. Let's do workshops', or 'let's do trainings', or 'let's do more of that....awakening their political horizons or, expanding the political horizons in that way, you know? But it just felt at the time that we didn't have the time, that we were constantly in a mode of crisis, especially around immigration. And I see now that that's intentional by the other forces that we're fighting...the right wing conservatives, they're always manufacturing a crisis at the border, you know. It always feels that we're responding to things. But sometimes we need to take a step back. And it's something that I think I've learned, when I became a more mature organizer. It's [to] meet people where they are and slowly try to shift them, and having a lateral engagement...like that's a model of organizing that I've used ...they start here, you know, little by little, people take different actions. That's [done] to activate people to create change, you know? But at that time, I don't think I had those tools or that understanding. It also comes with age and [with] being in the field for a lot longer. I wish I would've learned that, you know...just having more of an organizing model to follow, understanding that not everyone's an activist and we should meet them where they're [at]...like, if they come in with homophobic views or with like white privileged views or like white supremacist understanding, you know, or they don't like black people or whatnot. Like all those things make an organization really messy. And at that time, I didn't have the tools to really express it or just look at it in a systematic view, you know, this is where people are coming from. I was just more focused on like, 'let's do shit now!' <laugh>, because the world is burning and we need to take action. You know? And I felt like in that process, I was trying to motivate people, but they probably saw it as, like, 'oh, este <inaudible> esta bien loco!'

Gloria Sosa: [13:39](#) So do you think that that hindered some of SURGE's achievements, having those internal conflicts?

Fermin Vasquez: [13:50](#) I would say probably yes and no. Like, I feel like...there were other counterbalance forces in SURGE that had a different perspective and then they would do their own thing. It wasn't like fundraising was always a top priority, you know, like raising money for scholarships for people to stay in school. I wasn't opposed to that, it was just not my...that's how we had like

chairs, you know, those particular brackets of the organization. Other people are really great, like, about giving business advice on how to start your own business...very specific skills, like Jorge was really good at that..Norma, they were always really good about, like, oh, if you have an ITIN number, how to start a business, how to do your taxes. Like very specific things to improve people's lives, you know? So I felt like we had that...There was like different people that would play different roles in the organization and yeah, of course, I think it did create friction because there was different worldviews, like what you said, you know. Different ways of looking at the world, so to speak. But that's okay. I think it was always gonna be there. It's probably still there right now, you know?

Gloria Sosa: [15:22](#)

Right.

Fermin Vasquez: [15:22](#)

Of like the people that are probably saying like, 'fuck the system', you know, 'fuck white privilege, let's not work with white people.' <laugh> That type of stuff. And then other people are like, well, no, you know, we could have white allies, or, you know, we should do more...like, making sure people stay in school. Well, I'm sure it's still there. It might take different shapes, forms. But I think all those things are always in an organization, right. But by all counts, <laugh> from the outside, the organization's still there, so we did something right. <laugh>. We won awards, you know, we had a voice in student government...[it] has always been a respectable organization. I guess by all those metrics, it's been pretty successful.

Gloria Sosa: [16:24](#)

Right. And then you all created this family, right? This community, <inaudible> which sounds like all the other SURGE-istas that I have talked to.

Fermin Vasquez: [16:38](#)

Definitely, yeah. I've gone to SURGE people's weddings, their kids, you know?

Gloria Sosa: [16:45](#)

Yeah. That's so cool. Yeah. So see, I heard the stories and...even between siblings, right? We have these conflicts and confrontations, but at the end of the day, we are family and we work together to push forward.

Fermin Vasquez: [17:00](#)

Absolutely. Yeah.

Gloria Sosa: [17:01](#)

Yes. Okay. Thank you for sharing that. Okay. Coming back to the questions, how did your participation in student activism at Cal State LA shape your personal, professional, political, [and] . philosophical growth? How did it shape your activism within the

immigrant rights movement after graduation? We talked a little about this but, how did your experiences at Cal State LA with your activism make you get here? I think that's the question, right?

Fermin Vasquez:

[17:37](#)

Yeah. Well, we talked about that already. I felt like I was pretty connected to the community organizations because of the work that I was doing at SURGE. I got to meet a lot of different elected officials, community leaders, community organizations. So I developed this network of people that I knew. And so after college, I went immediately to it. It wasn't hard for me to find a job after graduation, I started working at Californians for Justice, which is a statewide youth organizing, community organization. So it was like a reflection of a lot of work that I was already doing or that I did as a young activist. And it was just a matter of transferring my skills and building a movement. But it was more like outside of school, right. It was like creating power for young people across the state, to push to end the school-to-prison pipeline, to give a voice to students in the classroom...a lot of the harsh school discipline policies that existed at Long Beach Unified and LAUSD...we won like several bills in Sacramento to ensure that young people are not criminalized, that [the] behavior of students of color is not criminalized, but [instead] it's looked at through a fuller lens of understanding where folks are coming from...being late to class, you know, like you shouldn't be suspended or given detention for [that]..we're looking at family backgrounds, making sure that we have more mental health services for students, more counselors, that sort of approach.

Fermin Vasquez:

[19:49](#)

So I felt like SURGE, activism at Cal State LA, they really gave me the tools to be able to fit right into my professional career. You know, and just like with SURGE, we were always organizing events, making flyers, writing a grant. And I remember we wrote a grant for this documentary that I'm telling you...So grant writing experience outta college is super cool, you know, to have that on your resume. We got funded through our foundation for that. So that was super dope. I felt like it gave me so many tools in terms of meeting people, but also like hard skills. Yeah.

Gloria Sosa:

[20:47](#)

Yes. It sounds like SURGE was the perfect transition into your work life, right? After graduating.

Fermin Vasquez:

[20:58](#)

Yeah, I was pretty much doing the same work except we got paid <laugh> after graduation,

- Gloria Sosa: [21:04](#) And so you got paid, and then you worked on different issues, right? Not just within that community of helping the students, but also the other students in California, the workers and all that. So just making a bigger impact, I think.
- Fermin Vasquez: [21:21](#) Yeah. It's like...we talked a lot about intersectionality, right? How different issues are connected. So like the school-to-prison pipeline, the people who usually get suspended and they enter the prison system because they skipped school a few times [that] the bus was late. You know, that has to do with transportation justice, like being poor. Like they can't afford their families to drop them off at school. You know, things like that. People act up because of shame or, you know, anger that they have about the systems of oppression that they face every day. So it was like connecting a lot of those different dots. For me. It wasn't just working on, we gotta get papers in immigration, you know? It's like, yes, our stories are much more than being an immigrant. Regardless of citizenship, people are facing underfunded schools. Schools in Beverly Hills are funded way better than like schools in South Central. You know, schools in La Cañada have the best teachers, qualified teachers. The schools in Pico Union don't, you know, so it was like connecting a lot of the dots and building a mass movement, right. That's more like a united front of different people doing different struggles, but all with the sense of justice and trying to do paradigm shifts and changing policies, you know? I felt that was really important, like after college, cuz in college we're very focused on undocumented students and DACA-mented students because that was our own lives, you know? But I feel that we should have talked more about having that broader sense of movement, building solidarity with other movements.
- Fermin Vasquez: [23:37](#) We sort of did with some of the groups on campus. But again, I feel like the university is just...there's great ideas at the university, you know, like professors sometimes have really great research. They write a paper and it gets published in an academic journal, you know, but [only] like 20 people read it, like their students, you know? But imagine taking that piece of research and then creating a video that goes viral or making sure that that research is part of a policy campaign that we could use when we go talk to legislators in Sacramento, you know, talking points for when folks go up to Capitol Hill, when they go on TV and they share their story or they get interviewed by MSNBC, or CNN, or whatnot. I feel like that's a piece that's missing in academia. It's like, well, 30 people read it cuz they were the only ones who had access to that academic journal, <laugh>. And you need like a student account, you know? And a

lot of times academics are not connected to community. It's very rare.

Gloria Sosa: [24:55](#)

Yes.

Fermin Vasquez: [24:55](#)

Like at Cal State LA, there's only a few people that I've seen, like, Mel Abdullah, you know, from Pan-African Studies. She's the co-founder of Black Lives Matter. She's probably the most visible professor, at Cal State LA. She's a really dope organizer, you know, but we don't have a lot. And I just feel like, yes, sometimes there was that piece missing...like, great, we're doing things at the university, but in the larger scale, are we really moving the governor, for example, to do something and moving congress and moving senators, you know, to actually implement some of the policies that we want?

Gloria Sosa: [25:52](#)

Right, right. Yes. And I feel like a lot of the new researchers like myself do see these gaps and hopefully...this next cohort is able to change things up. I totally agree with that. I think we need to <inaudible> bigger. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> it's that time.

Fermin Vasquez: [26:17](#)

Yes, absolutely.

Gloria Sosa: [26:18](#)

Yeah. Okay. So again, coming back to the questions...and we're almost done here, this has to do with the changes that occurred at Cal State LA as part of SURGE and you being part of it. What do you think were the impact[s] of the activism you all did to the bigger picture of immigrant rights for students?

Fermin Vasquez: [26:49](#)

Yeah. I think it really positioned undocumented young people at the forefront of the immigrant rights movement. I don't know if that's a different question, like whether it was good or bad, but I think for a while, people thought about undocumented or, people without papers as like, you know, a farm worker or somebody who just got here, they don't speak English, they're working as a security guard, like very stereotypical Latino jobs, you know? So I think what it did is [it] really shifted the narrative and what it means to be undocumented students, and by default, expanded the definition of what it means to be an American. Because a lot of young people who are undocumented, some didn't even speak Spanish, you know, but they didn't have a lot of connection to their country of origin.

Gloria Sosa: [27:58](#)

Right.

Fermin Vasquez: [27:58](#)

They just have family, but they have never visited. So I think it really shifted the conversation, especially in California, because



students were the ones really that were holding accountable elected officials in Sacramento, you know, and in our city in LA to really create and implement change. Plus young people had the tools, you know, they have the language, they have the resources and the time, because as a student you do have more time than if you're a single mom working two jobs. Like, you know, you go to CVS, then you go to like McDonald's or something, right? And then you have kids at home, you have a husband or you know, whatever. Like people are super busy. As a student you have the tools, the time, the creativity and imagination to really bring about change. And I think that's probably like the biggest shift that happened.

Fermin Vasquez: [29:03](#)

And you can see before and after, like in California, we were able to win the California Dream Act, driver's licenses, push back on ICE, you know, advocated for DACA on a national scale. California, you know, was an anti-immigrant state with Proposition 187. This was in the nineties, you know? And the shift that it took, from the nineties, 187, to the two thousands, was monumental. Pete Wilson was governor of California, one of the most anti-immigrant governors in history. It was pretty much like Sheriff Joe Arpaio in Arizona, you know, that's how California used to be. But the shift that took place was in large part driven by young people of color and young immigrants, you know...it took [them] to shift the tectonics of the state in a way that we have never seen before at such a rapid pace.

Gloria Sosa: [30:17](#)

Right. Yes.

Fermin Vasquez: [30:18](#)

In-state tuition, you know, financial aid, access to scholarships, driver's licenses, <inaudible>..healthcare has been a big-ass win...providing access to medical, access to food, like all kinds of public benefits has been a remarkable achievement. And I'm not saying it is all because of the actors at Cal State LA, but I think it became a pillar of creating this massive change in California.

Gloria Sosa: [30:56](#)

<Inaudible> to vocalize your stories and sharing them with people to see the other faces, as you mentioned, what it means to be a new American, and what it really meant to be an undocumented person.

Fermin Vasquez: [31:12](#)

Yeah. But it is also creating real change, real policies that benefit hundreds of thousands of people. And that's a shift that has happened in California, incredibly rapid. You know, like California is still anti-immigrant, but you didn't see the change that you saw in California in other states and...it's just incredible I think.

Gloria Sosa: [31:44](#) Yes, I totally agree with that. So we are done with the questions. I wanna thank you so much for giving me the time to talk to me and share your experiences, your stories with me. Is there anything else you would like to add? Some thing that you feel we didn't cover?

Fermin Vasquez: [32:12](#) No, I'm really happy you are doing this research and documenting and...[continuing] that story and that history, you know?

Gloria Sosa: [32:27](#) Thank you.

Fermin Vasquez: [32:28](#) So I appreciate your work and everything that you're doing and the team is doing to make this a reality.

Gloria Sosa: [32:37](#) Yes. And we hope - thank you. Thank you. Gracias. So yeah, we hope to elevate this work and this won't be a paper that's going to sit and only 10 people we're going to read it. I promise that it is part of a bigger vision and a bigger product. Thank you so much for that time.

New Speaker: [32:54](#) \*END OF TRANSCRIPT\*