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Hilary Stern

SUMMARY

Born in Los Angeles, Hilary Stern spent her early years in Maryland before her family moved to Seattle when she was seven years old. The daughter of a University of Washington physics professor, she spent formative years in Israel as a teenager and Nicaragua after college, and has worked her entire adult life to make a difference for underprivileged and undocumented immigrants in Seattle. Since she founded Casa Latina in 1994, the vibrant worker rights organization has helped thousands of day laborers find work, learn English, and fight for their rights, bringing them off the streets and into a three-building campus in Seattle's Central District. In addition to directly serving the Latino community in King County, Casa Latina has also had national impact, providing programs, curricula and operations models for day worker centers throughout the country.

Jeff Schwager: And that seems to be going as well. Okay, I'm going to put them both close to you because I don't need to hear my own voice. And we'll just get started. So tell me first your name and address and serial number. No. Okay.

Hilary Stern: Well, my name is Hilary Stern.

Jeff Schwager: Yes. And you are the founder of.

Hilary Stern: Of Casa Latina?

Jeff Schwager: Yes. And welcome.

Hilary Stern: Thank you.

Jeff Schwager: So, um, we're just going to have a casual chat here. And I've got a few subjects that I want to go over, and, um, then we'll wrap it up.

Hilary Stern: Okay. Sounds good.

Jeff Schwager: Good. So first, um, tell me your background where you grew up. And, um, that.

Hilary Stern: Okay. Well, I grew up in Seattle. Um, my mother was born in Seattle, and my her parents immigrated here from, uh, from Eastern Europe and from Poland, Russia And her actually her mother emigrated from Wales, but they were on their way from Poland, Russia, over to the United States. And um, and, um, they um, um, and so my grandmother went and I think my grandfather maybe did too, went to Garfield High School when they came over. And my mother went to Garfield. They lived in they lived in the Jewish neighborhood in the central area. Um, and then my mother met my father, who was, um, getting who was getting his PhD in physics in Los Angeles. And they got married and his first job took them to Maryland. And I was born, um, in Los Angeles and moved to Maryland when I was six weeks old. And then my father, um, had, um, um, and then my father, uh, stayed there for seven years, and then, um, the travel back and forth between Seattle and Los Angeles to see family all the time was getting really tiring. So he decided, um, they decided to move to one of those cities, and my mother was more convincing. And so they got they moved to Seattle when I was seven. Um, and so that's basically where I grew up. I think the other thing about

my upbringing is that, um, because my father was a professor, we went on sabbaticals. Uh, and so the first sabbatical year we spent when I was six years old in Cambridge, England, but then the next one was in Israel, and that was when I was 13 years old. Um, and that was very transformative for me, um, being in Israel that at that time in the 70s and also, um, um, and then also, uh, just um, um, at that age when I was such a formative time of my life and it kind of sparked in me the desire to go back and to live in Israel. And I went back several times after that. Um, and, um, and I had decided at one point to drop out of college and go make Aliyah. But then I realized and I stayed there for a year, um, I realized that I wasn't going to get very far. Um, if I, if I, um, unless I went to college and it would be easier to go to college back in the States than in Israel. So I came back, but I decided to go into teaching English as a second language, um, because I wanted something that could transfer to my life, my what I thought was going to be my life in Israel. And so that's really why I got into that field of teaching English as a second language, where I got my master's at the University of Washington and that and, um, and then became, um, but that was my entree into the immigrant community, um, in, um, in the, um, in the States. And through that experience, I became very involved in, um, sort of Latin American liberation struggles. Um, went to Nicaragua and spent a couple of years there in the 80s after the revolution. Um, and, um, um, and then kind of just became very committed to, um, adult education as a sort of part and parcel of, um, of liberation of poor people. And that's, um, that experience is what I brought back when I came back, ended up eventually coming back to Seattle. Um, and, uh, that was sort of my perspective and, um, that was shared with other, other Central Americans when we founded Casa Latina here.

Jeff Schwager: Did you learn Spanish while you were learning ESL to while you were getting your master's in ESL or.

Hilary Stern: Well, the Spanish learning was kind of just coincidental. Um, the, um, um, um, at one on the way back from Israel, when I was coming back after having dropped out, I traveled through Europe with an Israeli boyfriend, and we were, um, in Spain, but only for three days. And I just loved Spain then, and I wanted to go back, but I had. But people didn't speak English, so I thought, well, I better learn, um, I better learn some Spanish so I can go back and travel. And then when I, um. So then I just started taking Spanish classes in college, just as not as part of my major, just for my interest. And, um, and after two years of Spanish classes, I still couldn't speak. Um, I was a really good student, but I wasn't learning how to speak. I was reading and writing and, um, and, um, uh, and one of those classes, my last class that I was going to say, this is the last one, I'm not going to, you know, it's not working. So I better go live somewhere. It turns out that that I ended up, um, it was being taught by, uh, a man who, um, was a grad student who I ended up falling in love with. And, um, and then we, um, after class was over, um, we ended up dating and, um, and then, um, and living together. And he is a person who I nursed at the end of his life. Um, so, um, so that relationship is kind of, um, you know, I've known I've knew him for about 40 years, but he didn't speak English. This is going back to the question of how I learned Spanish. He didn't speak English. So we, um, so I was a faster language learner than he was, and I've had more base to more of a basis to start, and I ended up learning Spanish from him. Mhm.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. So you talked about uh, when you were in Israel, uh, thinking that you would stay in Israel and that that was a transformative experience for you. Um, was that transformative experience somehow connected to your interest in social justice and.

Hilary Stern: No. Not really. No, I don't think so. I think it was more, uh, were.

Jeff Schwager: You interested in the religious aspects of living in Israel, or what was it about Israel that fascinated you?

Hilary Stern: Um, well, there was there was quite a lot of idealism, um, there at that time. Um, um, it was before the Yom Kippur War and, um, just, um, the So the, um. Well, for me, it was living in a country where everybody was Jewish. That was really a different experience for not being a minority. Um, like, you know, as I felt growing up in Seattle and, um, and also, I think maybe it was in some ways, in some ways it might have to do with my social justice. Um, um. Uh, orientation. I think it was very exciting to be part of a bigger thing, you know, a part of constructing a a new society, a new country. Um, there was a lot of idealism then. And, um, and so I think that that partly that I think, um, did impact me. Um, also, just personally, I was very shy before I went there and, um, I had to, um, not only make new friends, I had to make new friends in a different language. So I was like, really challenged a lot. Um, and that, um, kind of shook me out of my shyness because when I came back to the United States, it was like, you know, if I did that, I can do I can do anything. Um, so I think that that, um, gave me a lot of confidence.

Jeff Schwager: Um. Okay. Um, so tell me about founding Casa Latina and how you came to do that. Uh, and just tell me that story.

Hilary Stern: Okay. So I had come back from Nicaragua living there for two years. Um, and I, um.

Jeff Schwager: And what were you doing in Nicaragua?

Hilary Stern: In Nicaragua? I was, um, um. Let's see. For the first year and a half, I worked, um, in this project that brought Americans to live, um, to sort of do these six week study tours of Nicaragua, where they learned they lived with Nicaraguan

families in a in a city that was part of the. It was kind of in the middle of a war zone. And, um, they, um, um, experienced firsthand the effects of the US policy of, um, funding this Civil war.

Jeff Schwager: And what years were these.

Hilary Stern: Uh, '85 to '87? So, um, the Nicaraguans went through a revolution, and in 1979 was when the revolution happened. And in the beginning, um, and the, the, you know, the Sandinistas were socialist. And so in the beginning, um, it was during Carter's time and he was more, um, um, uh, let's say, well, it wasn't such an anti-communist as, as Reagan was. And so when Reagan got into power, he really wanted to overthrow that government. So he funded a covert covert war. Yeah. And so, um, that, um, so there were a lot of people in the United States who didn't agree with that, um, intervention. And so they would go, um, they wanted to go to Nicaragua and get firsthand experience, take a lot of photos, come back and do slideshows with photos. And it's kind of funny to think about that now, but, um, and, um.

Jeff Schwager: And then did you see Jackson Brown down there?

Hilary Stern: Um, I heard of him, but I didn't actually see him. Um, he stayed in Managua most of the time. But when he was there.

Jeff Schwager: Because he did a couple, he did a couple of albums.

Hilary Stern: Right? Yeah, I knew some musicians. I knew some musicians who had worked with him. Um, and, um, but, um, um, but I was really, um, not in Managua very much. They were all in Managua. Um, so, um, um, so, yeah, that that, um, So my role in that was I was the language coordinator because the, the, um, the students that were they were adult students who were mainly there are a lot of them were journalists or other activists from the United States. And um, and so they um, um, they took Spanish for hours a day and they were taught by Nicaraguan teachers. Um, but the Nicaraguan teachers, um, had never taught Spanish as a second language before they started to, uh, before they started to work with us. So I did the teaching teacher training and also, um, uh, ended up rewriting their curriculum, too, um, because we had our own curriculum for, um, that was, um, I mean, it was basic because it was hard to find a curriculum that wasn't, um, you know, textbooks that were kind of based, sort of like in college life in the United States was not at all the reality there. So it was more based on the, um, the, uh, the reality of being in Nicaragua during those times. So people could talk to their families and talk to other people about their experiences.

Jeff Schwager: So you did that in the mid 80s, and then you came back to Seattle.

Hilary Stern: I came back to Seattle. Um, I met my my first husband there, and, um, we he was from Mexico and we came back to Seattle. Well, first we went back to Washington, DC, which was I kind of skipped over, but I was living in Washington, DC before I went to Nicaragua. And then, um, um, and then went back to Washington, DC. Then when I had my first child, I felt that I needed to be closer to family. So we moved back to Seattle and, um, and I, um, first started working at the University of Washington in the ESL department. And then I moved into the. The YMCA. Metro YMCA had an adult ed program for, um, mainly out of school youth, but then they just started a program for ESL for homeless Latinos. And so that, um, my predecessor had written the grant and and then when I got in there, I started implementing it. So, um, um, so as part of that work, we were going out. Um, so this sort of coincided with a new wave of immigration coming to Seattle of Latino immigrants who were had been, um, had been recruited by the fishing companies in Alaska from California. And so they most people had they had they had first migrated to California and then they started coming, you know, the first wave came up from there. Um, other people were just, um, kind of moving around, you know, had recently immigrated to the United States and they were moving around by, um, uh, riding the rails on freight cars. And then they would just ask people, you know, where is their work? And people were saying, you know, go to Seattle because you can get work in fishing. So, um, so a lot of people came up here, but, um, and the fishing companies did hire a lot of people, but they didn't hire them necessarily immediately. And the people that came, um, didn't know anybody here. Um, and they didn't have a lot of money, so they just were staying out in the streets downtown or in the shelters. And, um, the people who were, uh, there were, uh, the Seattle sort of shelter, homeless, um, service community was completely unprepared because nobody spoke Spanish. Very few people spoke Spanish. So um, and um, and so they so they started to so people started hiring like one person who was a Spanish speaker for different the different shelters and different programs. And then in, um, there was one person who was a Spanish speaker who was um, like from El Centro de la Raza and one person from Consejo, which were the organizations that worked with the Latino community, but one person focusing on the homeless. So there was like this, you know, in each organization, there was one person for, um, kind of this new group, and we ended up joining all these one people together and, um, figuring out how we could, um, create a new organization that would specifically focus on this group. Um, um, and, um, so that's, um, so of that original group, I was the only person who was not Art Latina, and also the only person who was not who wasn't doing direct service at that time because I was coordinating, I was a administrator. And so I am an had the administrative experience and the fundraising experience and the contacts, um, to be able to kind of take on the role of the executive director

and the rest of them became the board, um, and also had the support of the YMCA to move some of the funding over to do some seed funding for the organization. Um, and, and so that's, that's kind of how it started in 1994. We, we, um, kind of officially began it. We were organizing in 1993 and then officially began in 1994, when I quit my other job and went over to this, to the new organization. And we got we were fiscally fiscally sponsored by Northwest Immigrant Rights Project in the beginning. Um, and, um, and, um, our original budget was $25,000. Um, and it was most of it was one grant of $23,000 from the federal government, which bad timing. Um, the following year, um, that was when Newt Gingrich became the speaker of the House, and, and, um, took and the Republicans took over the House and the Senate and eliminated that funding from the whole country. That was adult education for homeless, along with a lot of other funding programs for social services, social programs. And so we we lost it after one year. Um, and, um, but we're able to then get money from the city, um, and uh, and then also did other fundraising, but we stayed kind of at a low, kind of low level under the radar for five years until we started organizing, um, workers who were who were waiting on the street in front of um, in front of the millionaire club looking for work. And we worked with the downtown business or with the Downtown Business Association to, um, to figure out how to get them off the street and, um, um, and ended up, um, being able to start a worker center in, in a parking lot, got some support for that. And that just kind of, um, launched us into the public consciousness because there was a lot of controversy around, around, um, um. Basically around, um, you know, the whole question of, you know, a lot of people just didn't like having them there at all. Right. So they, um, so some people think that, you know, if you just make life hard enough, they're going to go away. And then other people are thinking that, well, you need to, um, give them an alternative so they won't be on the street. You know, but then, of course, you can't force everybody to come in. Um, so their whole question of like, if you make it, I mean, the whole same thing about homelessness here, you know, that people think that, you know, if we if we invest more in helping people, then people are going to come from all over the country to come, you know, right, to be homeless here. Yeah. Um, so because we're so nice. But that was the same issue there, you know. And so, um, when we.

Jeff Schwager: Want to make it too appealing for them.

Hilary Stern: Right. Whereas, you know, whether we did something or not, people would become becoming because there were a lot of jobs at that time. Um, because it was the it was during the tech explosion here in Seattle, um, in the 90s. And it was just like going strong. And, you know, what people were doing was, um, helping was working, um, in helping people, sort of homeowners. And it was basically either residential construction or or gardening or, you know, um. Basically that residential construction and gardening. And so, um, since people had, um. You know, had more money, the price of housing was going up so that people were taking out, um. You know, um, getting home equity loans and doing a lot of renovations on their houses. So they.

Jeff Schwager: I am familiar with the phenomenon.

Hilary Stern: Yeah. So that really, um, you know, until there was a crash, um, that. That that's what's attracted people to come and whether they were going to, you know, whether we were going. To be nice to them or not, they were still going to come because there were jobs. And so, um, um, so we did. So I think that that, um, you know, allowed us to be able to gain the support and on, um, in, um, organizing them into a parking lot. And we stayed in that parking lot for ten years.

Jeff Schwager: And that was.

Hilary Stern: Where it was on Western and Battery. Um, and um, um, and during the time that we were there, of course, more people came. So, um, so we never really completely got rid of people who were on the street, but, um, um, but we decided that we needed to, um, you know, we needed to find a place that people could be, um, look for work with dignity and a place that we could, um, have, um, an indoor space where they could, you know, both look for work and also have better, um, better facilities for our education programs. Um, because we were we actually did build a structure out there to have an ESL classroom, which we heat it with a space heater. You know, it was just like it was a it was pretty rustic. Um, where we where we were.

Jeff Schwager: So was it like a tent?

Hilary Stern: No, it wasn't a tent.

Jeff Schwager: It was. I mean, it was it covered.

Hilary Stern: Well, um, yes, it they had a roof and had walls and a door and windows. This little tiny, the classroom, you know. Um, but the.

Jeff Schwager: People would come. They were looking for work. And would they schedule time to do the ESL, or would they do the ESL if they didn't have work that day?

Hilary Stern: Yeah, we had we scheduled the basically 100 people would come every day looking for work, and there was no room for people to be indoors. Um, everybody to be indoors. So there was one room where people just wanted if they just want to sit and have coffee, they can have that. Um, that was, you know, for some that was pretty small and stuffy. So some people were just outside in the, the rest of the parking lot. And then we had, um, a space at, um, where the classes class was. And so some people could go into the classes if they wanted to, um, while they were waiting for work. And, um, um, the workers, the thing about this program or about the organization really Is that, um, it, um, it was a social justice organization, not a social service organization. So, um, we really approached it by from an organizing perspective. And, um, instead of us, um, determining what all the rules were and how much the salaries were going to be and basically doing, you know, doing everything, feeling the responsibility to, to run the programs ourselves. We, um, we, um, organized the workers to make all the decisions that affected them. They had to collectively decide how the work was distributed. They had to decide how, um, the, um, what the minimum wage was, um, the working conditions, if we would, you know, also minimum number of hours they made all of those decisions. Um, and um, so, um, so the, um, um, um, so everything kind of evolved as time went on, but, um, the, um, they also were very conscious of the desire of the neighborhood to not have people out on the street. So they, um, um, one of the things that we. So one of the things that we did to try to keep people in is that we, um, they did a lottery. They couldn't do. And they thought about, well, how do you distribute work the most? Everybody always thinks, well, first come, first serve is like the most fair way, right? But then they, um, by that time, we actually had found other organizations in Los Angeles who had had worker centers for longer and saw with that same philosophy, and they saw that they had tried that. And what happened was that people would start camping out and waiting all night long to be the first in line. And so we didn't go there. So we decided that everybody who got in by 6 a.m. at that time, it was 6 a.m. then we would, um, they would all get a ticket and we'd do like a lottery, but we'd only, um, pick out ten people because, um, once we started dispatching those ten jobs, we do it again so that people would stay there, because otherwise they would say, oh, I'm number, you know, I'm number 50 on the list, and it's, um, you know, it's it's the winter time. And I know there's never more than ten jobs, so I'll just go out on the street somewhere and try to or try to flag down the employees before they get to custody. So, so we were, um, so we were, uh, you know, so that's how we, um, that's the system we used there. We changed. And of course, once we got into a building and that wasn't the same issue. Um, so then, you know, there was no pressure to stay. You don't have to stay inside. I mean, you can go if you, if you you know. So there we would do it. Actually we did we did a lottery with everybody so they know where they were on the list and decide they wanted to stay or if they want to not. So like, for example, somebody who's number 50 on the list and they know that, um, um, chances are pretty slim that they're going to get work so they can go to class instead. Um, or if they're number three on the list, they know that, um, you know, usually that only the most motivated people would actually go to class then, but they would say, you know, call me. We'd call them if they if the, you know, was their their name came up or it was time for them to go. So, um, um, so yeah. So that's people were just basically learning English while they were waiting for work.

Jeff Schwager: That's how it must have been a real challenge for you to make a living wage while you were.

Hilary Stern: Yes.

Jeff Schwager: Managing this organization and getting grants and trying to carve some money off that grant for yourself, but so that you could live.

Hilary Stern: Right, right, right. Well, the first, um, when we first, um, uh, let's see, um, in the beginning, there was actually, uh, little it was $23,000 from a grant. But then we also had another grant that that lasted for six more months through the YMCA, um, where I had hired somebody half time through that. So, um, so we had but she worked with me, so we had I also worked half time, so we had two half time staff. Um, and then her money ran out. So then I end up going on unemployment for eight months and, um, so that she could have my, my salary.

Jeff Schwager: Then you would just continue to.

Hilary Stern: Just continue.

Jeff Schwager: To work here.

Hilary Stern: Volunteer, right? And I never worked. I worked 30 hours a week. But, you know, I got paid for half time, and, um, and then I, um, and then I then I wasn't, you know, I just got paid unemployment. But the unemployment had always also was also calculated on what I'd been making me for as full time, um, when I worked at the YMCA. So I didn't really get too much of a reduction in income by going on unemployment. And, um, and then, um, it was just really uncomfortable having to go every week. And they would always ask me, how many jobs have you applied for, you know, are you looking for work? Yes, I'm writing grants.

Jeff Schwager: And so is that. I mean, is that just a commitment you made to yourself when you were young that you weren't going to worry about, uh, trying to make money? You were going to do whatever it took, or. I mean, how did how did you arrive at that place in your life?

Hilary Stern: Well, I was at that point. I mean, I was, um, you know, I was supporting my daughter and my, um, uh, and my former husband. He was going to school. So, um, so I was able to, um, um, and then, uh, let's see. Well, actually, no, let me think about this for a minute. That was when I first was in the YMCA. But then at that point, actually, he had finished school, so he was working already. But also I had gotten pregnant, which I didn't know. Um, in, uh, I started I told you I started in January 1994. My son was born September 1994. So, um, um, so I don't know if I would have made that decision to do what I did and take the risk. Um, but since I was already doing it, you know, I did it through my pregnancy and and, um, and then having him as.

Jeff Schwager: An infant after that.

Hilary Stern: Yeah. Yeah. 22 years after that. And. But I think that the main reason was, um, I don't think I, I ever worried about money. I think it was mainly because I had the luxury of, um, um, coming from a middle class family. And I knew that, um, worse comes to worse, you know, they could, you know, I could fall back on my parents. Um, so I really had that privilege in being able to, um, take those financial risks. I didn't have to do that. Um.

Jeff Schwager: Did you? How did your parents feel about your career and what you were doing?

Hilary Stern: Um, they were really proud of me. You know, my especially my dad. Um, um, I think my mom was worried about at the UW. I think my mom was worried about my financial security more, um, and um, you know, was um, I think and was more, more worried about that. Um, but my, um, but my dad was, um, I think he, he also did the same thing. I mean, he he got a PhD in physics, and he could have earned, you know, a lot more money if he'd worked in private industry. But he wanted to work and preferred to work in academia. Um.

Jeff Schwager: Was your family religious growing up at all?

Hilary Stern: Um. Um, they we were conservative Jews, and my, um, my, uh, they were very active in the Jewish community. My parents were one of the founding families of Beth Shalom. Um, and so, um, the synagogue played an important part in my life. And, and, um, you know, the value of tikkun olam played a really important part, um, was something that my dad, um, both modeled and talked about with us, you know, and he was really involved in other issues, different issues than I was. But he was always involved in social issues too.

Jeff Schwager: So I'm from a totally secular background. So if you could just tell me, define that for me.

Hilary Stern: Yeah. Um, well, it means repairing the world. And it's the idea that, um, sort of. And I'm not even quite sure if where it comes, if it, um, where it comes from, if it's, um, I'm not sure it's a but it's definitely a Jewish concept that, um, um, that, um, the world, um, when it was given to us was in an imperfect state and that it's everybody's responsibility to, um, to do something, to repair it and that you can't, um, um, that nobody can repair it completely by themselves. Um, but, um, but because you can't finish the work, it work. It doesn't mean you can't do something to help.

Jeff Schwager: And so that was an important concept to your parents.

Hilary Stern: Yeah. Especially my dad. Mhm. And um, and so um, yeah, my dad actually has um he has a taped interview here and um, the Washington State Jewish Historical Society because he, um, was he was a change maker too. But um, it was mainly around his work with Soviet Jews. Um, so, um, but anyway, he, you know, I saw that growing up with him. And I also saw another thing he modeled for me was, um, that if you that whatever you decide to do is work, you should really love it. Um, because, um, you spend, you know, most of your life doing it, and it should be really, you know, something that means a lot to you and something that you love doing. And I think that that. really guided me in where I wanted to go. It wasn't just because I want to be altruistic. It's just I love I, you know, that was I wanted to do something I really loved and that was more important to me than something that was, um, had financial security.

Jeff Schwager: Can you say what? Excuse me? Can you say what specifically you loved about it?

Hilary Stern: Um. Well. Let's see. Um, it was in line with my values. Um, and, um, I loved being able to start something new and, um, um, before I, before I started working at Casa Latina, I had had, like, a resume that was like, three pages long, and it was only over, like six years, you know, because I just jump around from job to job because I really liked getting in there, you know, and fixing everything. And then once it got, like, running pretty smoothly, I'd be kind of bored and I would leave. And so, um, um, so

my, I was telling myself that my next challenge is to be somewhere for seven years because it seemed like an eternity to be at the same job for seven years. And then that's when I ended up founding Latina and being there for 22 years. Um, and I think that I worked a lot in other nonprofits, and always when I was trying to do was fix something that somebody else had started that, you know, somebody else had messed up. And so I kind of liked being able to start all over and use what I knew and, um, and realize that the only mistakes I'd be fixing were my own, you know, which is not exactly true as the organization grew bigger, but definitely was true in the beginning. Um, and so, um, um, so I liked I really liked that, and I liked being able to create an organization that was really in line with my values and, um, and that I could attract other people that shared those values. Um, and I had just a great group of colleagues that I was privileged to work with over the years.

Jeff Schwager: Um, so this is Agents of Change, the exhibit. So, so tell me the, um, changes that you were able to make through your organization that you're the most proud of.

Hilary Stern: Um, well, I think that what I'm most proud of is really lifting up, um, the voices of a group of people that was that really had no voice in Seattle before, um, and that they were only seen, um, from the outside as kind of objects that they were, you know, um, that they were, um, um, a new, you know, public nuisance. And, um, people who, you know, wanted to help them had their ideas of how they wanted to help them, you know, what was best for them. And, um, and they also felt, um, kind of, uh, you know, they also felt that they were in the margins and had no, um, you know, had to just figure out how they could survive within the confines of what existed here. Um, and, um, and then really being able to create an organization where, um, um, they were able to, um, gain a voice and, um, and um, um, be able to know, you know, figure out how the system works, um, know how they can advocate, you know, before we started, before we started, I mean, it was, um, you know, you didn't see, The other. Latinos. Spanish speaking immigrants. Lobbying in city Council or in um. In the state. You know, state legislature and, um, in Olympia. Um, now it's like the most normal thing because, um, there are so, you know, we know a lot of people who have been who have done that, you know, and also, I remember so many times when we were down there, like down there in Olympia, particularly all the, the, you know, the, the legislative aides would say, can I take a picture of you with, you know, can I take a picture with you? Can we you know, and they were like, we were such a novelty in the beginning. Now we're not you know, the good thing is we're not a novelty anymore. Um, and that that's not unusual to have poor people going to the state Capitol and lobbying even poor people that don't speak the language. Um, and, um, and I think that that, um, you know, we were I think that a lot of, um, city policies that have been instituted, that have made Seattle much more of a welcoming community is because of the participation, excuse me, of the of the immigrants that I work with and being able to participate in, in, um, in pushing for things like, um, a higher minimum wage on the, you know, city level. Um, we've also been. Excuse me, leaders in issues around wage theft. Um, because because, um. Um, unfortunately, there are many unscrupulous, not many, but there are some unscrupulous employers who will take advantage of people who they think can won't complain and are too afraid to complain or they don't know how to complain. And, um, and just don't pay them, you know, um, and, um, they or they underpay them and so, um, what they're legally owed. And so, um, so we have, um, had that experience over the years of creating a program where, um, uh, first it was sort of like a legal sort of just like, you know, like you're like an American helping somebody to, you know, to advocate because we were, um, knew more about the system and then moving into, uh, moving into like a legal aid type model. And then we moved into organizing model where people are. Excuse me. Um, are working in a group to figure out strategies that include legal strategies, but usually usually, um, I mean, the legal process takes a really long time. So usually they would use other strategies that would be more effective, like, um, going to talk to the employer with a big group of people, you know, or or or picketing outside of the employer's place of business. Um, basically doing a lot of, um, uh, social pressure to get people to pay, um, what they were, what they were legally. What, you know, what they legally owed the employee. And so, um, so that, um, anyway, that, um, that type of work gave us an expertise that helped in, um, in, um, being able to, um, improve the enforcement of wage and hour laws here in Seattle. Um, and, um, and because of that, also, you know, we were instrumental in, in, um, getting Seattle to invest a lot of money in, in that, including a way including, um, uh, the Office of Labor Standards. That's a new, relatively new department in the city. Um, and so, you know, I think that I think the biggest thing is really having, um, you know, having that voice and that perspective, but not just perspective of somebody like me representing it, but the same people that.

Jeff Schwager: Get out of the white savior model and into the sort of self-determination.

Hilary Stern: Right, exactly.

Jeff Schwager: That's great.

Hilary Stern: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Um, what what percentage would you say of the people you've helped have been, um, undocumented immigrants?

Hilary Stern: Well, we've always made a policy of not asking, so I don't have any, um, you know, I don't have any, um, uh, firm

statistics on that. Um, I can only say that, um, since there hasn't been there isn't there haven't hasn't been a way for people to for people who are, um, poor, um, um, you know, poor people basically to immigrate to the United States for work legally. Yeah. Um, then, um, um, so, you know, most of the people who have come in the last 25 years, um, have been undocumented, um, um, or they I mean, they may have come on a visa, but they work without a work authorization. Um, so that's the only way I could know is basically by how long they've been here. Um, and I would say that, you know, um, um, you know, but then, of course, longer people are here, the more possibility they have of maybe getting married to somebody who is an American. So they, you know, so some people, um, or sometimes they've gotten other types of visas, um, for, um, for victims of domestic violence or crime or, you know, so so there are people that I don't really know. I only I'm more let me just put it this way. I'm more surprised when people tell me they're documented than.

Jeff Schwager: So you think probably more than half of the people. Oh yeah. Yeah. And how many people do you have any estimation of how many people over the 22 years that you were at Casa Latina.

Hilary Stern: Have come through Casa.

Jeff Schwager: Latina have come through?

Hilary Stern: Yeah. Oh my gosh. Um, um, yeah, we we've been seeing about a thousand a year, but sometimes they're the same people. So, um, and and new people really, uh, you know, um, since the border has been virtually sealed since 2001, we haven't gotten so many, so many new people that have crossed the border. So I would say maybe 10,000. Mhm. Yeah. Okay.

Jeff Schwager: Good. Um, I think that covers what I wanted to ask you. Um, do you have a future plans that you'd like to talk about at all? And how how you're going to continue to be an agent of change moving forward, or is that sort of up in the air right now?

Hilary Stern: Well, um, well, I am one of the things I'm doing right now, um, in this sort of transition time for me, you know, that I, um, since I've, um, not able to work full time, um, is that I am, um, doing different project work. Contract work. So, for example, um, um, I write grant proposals for the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, um, which is a network that Casa Latina, um, and I was, um, helped found, um, and um, and it's, it's has 42 organizations around the country that are member Our organizations. Um, and um, um, and we did it so that we could have a larger impact, not just an impact in, in our local areas, but also because some of the, the issues that come up, like you mentioned, immigration issues, something we can't solve here in Seattle, it has to be solved at a national level. So that gave us more sort of more power on that, that level. Um, so I so I am doing grant writing for them. So that's one thing I'm doing. Um, also I'm was just, you know, I might be doing some helping, some organizing work in Yakima. Um, just as, you know, other organizations. I think part of it is using the expertise that I've gotten to help other organizations that are, um, um, that are doing, you know, that are actively doing the work and trying to help them out as much as I can.

Jeff Schwager: That's great. All right. Um, fantastic. I'm so.