DOLORES HUERTA INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Dolores Huerta
Activist
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Interviewed by David Bender
Total Running Time: 52 minutes and 5 seconds

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ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Story Features
Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Dolores Huerta
Activist

Dolores Huerta

Activist

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DAVID BENDER:
Dolores, it's a joy to see you always. I knew you've been arrested a lot, but I want you to tell me, you actually booked people, you took their fingerprints. Is this true?

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DOLORES HUERTA:

I used to work for the sheriff's department in San Joaquin County, Stockton, California. And they hired me because I was bilingual, because I could type and I knew how to file. What I had to do was to interview them, make sure I got their name right and their dress right. And then I had to ask them if they had any marks on their body that would identify them. It was a very painful process for me, because often the people that I was interviewing-

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-were people that I knew, people that I grew up with, that had somehow fallen into the trap of addiction. And it was a very painful process to see all these poor people that went through the line there that I had to interview.

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DAVID BENDER:

It was that same insight into people who were suffering, that when you started out, it was very hard for you. I think you were teaching, and then this whole idea of seeing people, your students who were in such terrible conditions, made it painful for you to teach. Am I understanding that properly?

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DOLORES HUERTA:

Well, it made me understand that teachers need a lot of support. So it's not just about the teacher, they need to have social workers in the schools. They need to have nurses in the schools and give teachers the kind of support that they need. Because as teachers, when we have children in our classrooms, and if you see a child that needs more nutrition or they need better clothes, or that they have some issue that is troubling them, teachers can identify this.

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And this is why I believe teachers are so important, but often they just don't have the backup that they need to be able to solve any particular child's issue that they're having.

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DAVID BENDER:
I want you to take me back to when you were a teacher, when you were young. Tell us from your point of view, what that was like. What was that like for you?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Well, as a teacher, I really fell in love with the children that I was teaching. I really cared about them, and I cared about their parents also. And when I would go to my principal and say to them, we need an extra lunch voucher. We need some kind of a voucher to get them some shoes that they don't have

and some kind of support for their parents. And of course, back in the day, people didn't have that kind of support.

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It was pretty much up to the teachers and to the principals of the school. But my principal was not very supportive. And these children were the children of farm workers, and what he would say to me is, "Well, the reason they don't have enough food is because, you know what they do, these parents, they spend their money on alcohol, and they drink up all their money." And I knew that that wasn't true, because at the same time that I was teaching, I had always been organizing, doing canvassing, going door to door.

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And when I went to a farm worker's home once, and there was only a dirt floor. The furniture that they had were orange crates and cardboard boxes. This was their furniture, and this was all that they could afford. And seeing again that that family had so many needs, and at the same time, knowing how hard they worked as farm workers, that really made me very, very determined that I had to do something to help not only my students, but also the families, their parents.

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DAVID BENDER:
Is this why you left teaching?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
This is exactly why I left teaching. I had the good fortune of learning how to organize from Fred Ross Sr. who taught us this method of getting people together, house by house, family by family, and in convincing them that they themselves had the power to change their conditions. And so, when I saw all of these problems in my mind, there is a solution. We just have to get all these farm worker families to come together and then start thinking about how, and acting on how we're gonna be able to solve their issues.

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DAVID BENDER:
Talk for a second about Fred Ross. You were 23 when you met him, the Community Service Organization? Talk about that for a minute.

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Well, Fred Ross was a person who had been a teacher, I think, at the University of Southern California. And he worked in many, many projects helping people. One of his first projects was to be the camp manager at the Weedpatch Labor camp. And this is the camp where actually *The Grapes of Wrath* was filmed where John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie, Henry Fonda, all of these great people were there. Weedpatch is a little town south of Bakersfield, maybe about 15 miles south of Bakersfield,-

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-and that was Fred Ross's first organizing experience when he had a deal with all of these families. Mostly they were coming from Oklahoma, from Arkansas, from the Midwest, because of the dust mold of what happened there, where all of them lost their farms because of these big dust storms that they had. So that was his first experience. But from there, he actually helped the Japanese people, when they were putting them at the internment camps, and Fred Ross went on to help them, to see what he could do to help them.

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Then he actually organized in Orange County, California, where they had the school segregated. They had the Anglo children in one school, and they had the Mexican children in another school. Needless to say, where they had the Mexican children was very much inferior or to where they had the Anglo children. And so, Fred Ross was hired by an organization called the Council of Pacific Unity, to go into Orange County to desegregate the school.

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This is in Westminster, this is where this happened. So most of the people that he had to organize were farm workers, they were orange pickers, but then, he had a hard time, he said, because he got together some of the business leaders of the community, but he said that when he got them together, they just started arguing about, who's gonna do the work? Who's gonna take credit for the work? And so, he was very discouraged. But then one of the farm workers said to him,-

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-“Mr. Ross, come to my house. I'll get some of my friends together who have the children in the school, and we can talk about how we can make this happen.” And Fred said, when that farm worker told him this, he said that a light bulb went off in his head, and he said, “This is how we do it. By meeting with people in their homes, little by little.” And of course, he organized the community, and they were able to file a lawsuit, and they desegregated the schools.

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And there's a documentary that has been made about that effort, and it's called Mendez vs. Westminster, and the Mendez family is the one that he got to file the lawsuit. There had been a lot of problems in the Latino community in Los Angeles. There had been what they called the Zoot Suit riots, where people in the Navy would come into the Mexican barrios and beat up the Mexican kids, because they were wearing zoot suits, right?

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And so, the city council of Los Angeles wanted to do something about the “Mexican problem.” So they called Saul Alinsky up in Chicago, who had been very successful in organizing the Back of the Yards movement to come in and give them some advice. So Alinsky told them, “Well, what needs to happen here is you have to help the people organize in the neighborhoods.”

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The City Council of Los Angeles did not wanna hear that message about organizing people in East Los Angeles, the Latino community. But one of them thought, well, he reached out to the Senior Lastro, who was the head of

the City Mattress company, and a few of the Jewish friends of Saul's got together and they raised money to hire an organizer. And someone told him about this guy named Fred Ross.

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So they hired Fred Ross to come into East Los Angeles to help organize the Mexican American community. There was one person who had run for the city council Los Angeles, his name was Edward Roybal, but he had lost his election. So Fred came in and he showed them how to organize, and they had a group called the Community Service Organization, CSO, and most of the leaders of that group were labor leaders.

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They were Tony Rios from the IUE, Gil Anaya from the Steelworkers Union, and so most of the leaders came out of labor, and a lot of them were veterans also, 'cause they had also served in World War II. So, that group organized the Community Service Organization. And one of the issues that was very prevalent in the Latino community was that a lot of the elders could not get old age pensions from the state of California, because they were not yet citizens.

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So one of the first issues that the CSO worked on was to pass along that people who had their legal immigration status to the United States would be eligible for public assistance. So in Los Angeles, they organized, they got Edward Roybalelected to the city council. And then to try to pass this

measure, they started organizing chapters of the Community Service Organization up and down the state of California,-

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-and Fred Ross, of course, was the organizer. And when he came to my town, to Stockton, California, to start a chapter of the Community Service Organization, this is when I met Fred Ross Senior, and I became one of the founders of that chapter of CSO.

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DAVID BENDER:
You were in your twenties.

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Yes.

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DAVID BENDER:
And do you remember that first meeting? How did you happen to go there?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
One of my friends, who was a teacher there at the College of Pacific, invited me to come to a meeting. And she asked me if I could bring a couple of my

friends with me, because she wanted me to meet this man, Fred Ross. Now, there had been announcements on Spanish radio that this man named Fred Ross Sr. Was gonna be coming to Stockton, California, to organize a chapter of the Community Service Organization.

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So, I had heard it on the radio so I had a little bit of sense about this man that was coming to help us organize. And so when I went to that first meeting, my teacher friend, Marita Carly, and I invited a couple of my friends, one of them was a teacher, the other one was a probation officer, and we went to this meeting with Fred Ross.

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DAVID BENDER:
So this is the fifties, and of course, anything that sounded like organizing also sounded radical and Saul Alinsky, there was a lot of feeling that radicals were anti-American, were communists. Was that ever a concern that this was something that was putting you at risk for safety in those times that these were the Red Scare fifties?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Well, of the two people that I invited to come with me to that house meeting, they got very freaked out. They were afraid. And in fact, later on when we tried to invite other people in the community to come and join us, one of

them who was a good friend of my mother's, he was a business person also, he called everybody in the community to say, “Do not go to these meetings. Fred Ross is a communist.”

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So, I was working for the Sheriff's Department at that time, and of course, I had all of my friends from the FBI that would go into our offices all the time looking for records for different individuals. So I called my friends in the FBI and I asked them, “Could you check out this man, Fred Senior, and then the fellow that was working with Fred, the fellow named Jean Lowry, could you check to see if they're communists?”

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Well, then they called me back and said, “No, no. This is fine, that Fred Ross Senior is not a communist.” And, so of course, I was unable to tell a lot of people, “No, they're not communist,” but the damage was done because many other people that I wanted them to invite and to have house meetings, they were afraid. They would never give us a house meeting. But the port people in the community, the farm workers in the community, yeah, they were very open, and they trusted me when I told them that Fred Ross was not a communist.

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DAVID BENDER:

Were you still a Republican then? Because there were liberal Republicans, Dr. King was a Republican. When you started out, were you still a Republican? I know you started as one.

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Yes. When I was 21 years old, that was the age that you had to be then, my mother went and registered me as a Republican. And the reason for that is because I'm from New Mexico, and everybody in New Mexico, they registered as Republicans because they knew about Abraham Lincoln. But of course, once we found out the difference between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party, we all re-registered as Democrats.

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DAVID BENDER:
I asked you about your mother being able to take over that hotel because of the Japanese internment camps. So, you understood that injustice early on against Japanese Americans. Do you remember how you reacted to that? How did that affect you growing up watching that?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
I was 11 years old, when World War II broke out, when they had the bombing at Pearl Harbor. And growing up in Stockton, I had a lot of Japanese friends

that were in my classmates, in my school. And to see that within a couple of weeks, that all of our friends were taken away, and it was hard to understand because we knew that the friends that we had and their parents that we knew, because we were always in and out of each other's houses as kids, that they were not enemies of the United States of America.

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And it was very hard to understand why they should be taken away in such a short period of time, when they didn't even have time to take care of their houses or their possessions or their businesses. And so it was a very cruel act that happened, when they put the Japanese into the internment camps.

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DAVID BENDER:
Your mother, who was such a role model for you and such an important part of your life, she had been involved in the cannery strike and the asparagus worker strike in Stockton. So your mother, really, was an early community organizer, an activist. Can you talk about your mother in that way?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Well, my mother was a businesswoman, and she divorced my dad when we were kids. That's why we came to California. My dad was very abusive to my mother, and she left him. But she worked two jobs. She worked as a waitress during the daytime, and then in the canneries in the evening, she would just

come home and change uniforms and then go to her other job because she was saving enough money to put up her own business. And what she did? She put up her own restaurant.

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It was a diner that had different kinds of food, and she had American food, she had Mexican food, but mostly American food in that- But my mother… she worked in a cannery, and so she was involved in the cannery strike that they had here in California at the Tillie Lewis Cannery. And it was ironic that when I met George Meany, who was the head of the AFL-CIO, that George Meanyhad actually been involved in that strike at the very beginning.

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And that strike was started by a group called Yukopowa which was a kind of a movement, kind of a left wing organization. But after the strike, what they did is, George Meany handed the whole bargaining unit to the Teamsters Union. And so the Teamsters Union then became the representative of those workers.

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DAVID BENDER:

After community service and Fred Ross in the early sixties, you actually focused on the agricultural workers, and that would be the AWA, improving labor conditions for agricultural workers. Can you talk about that transition? You're still very young. You're early thirties and you're starting something

major. Talk about that, what that was about at a time when it was not at all accepted.

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DOLORES HUERTA:
A lot of the members of the Community Service Organization were farm workers. And Ernesto Galarza, who was a great educator, and he had written a book about the bracero program, that these are the people that had been brought in from Mexico to work in the fields. And because of World War II, so many people were drafted, so many men were drafted to go to the World War II, so the US government brought in many- thousands of workers from Mexico to come and work in the fields.

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And this created a big issue, because many of the local farm workers then were not able to get jobs. They were being replaced, by the people that were brought in by the foreign workers, workers that were being brought into work in the fields. And so that created a big issue. And Ernesto Galarza, who had been an author and had written a book, I think it was called *Spiders in the Fields*, something like that, he had been hired by the Meat Cutters Union from Chicago to do something about organizing workers.

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And so he came to our chapter of CSO and we set up a farm labor committee. And I was the head of that committee, so then, I organized a group of farm workers and we turned them over to the butchers' Union, the Meat Cutters

Union, because these are the ones that are hired, Ernesto Galarza. But what happened after I turned those workers over to the Meat Cutters Union, then they asked me not to come to any more meetings. And so I stopped going to the meetings, and then the group dissolved.

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And so then, I started another group of workers, calling them the Agricultural Workers Association, and I organized that group of workers also and we were very successful. And I had an old queer organizer to organize the angle of workers. Of course, we had a Mexican organizer, one of the members of the Community Service Organization. I had a Black organizer, but I needed a Filipino organizer.

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So I knew a lot of Filipinos in my community, as some of my classmates that went to school, and some of their parents, so I went throughout the community and I was asking them who knew of a Filipino that could help us organize farm workers? And everybody gave me one name, Larry Itliong. Everybody I went to said, "You gotta find Larry Itliong." So I finally found Larry Itliong. I went to his home, and I had a meeting with him, and I asked him to come and join us.

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So Larry became a member of the Community Service Organization and became my organizer for this new group that we were organizing called the Agricultural Works Association. We had a couple of priests that worked with us very closely, Father McCullough and Father Duggan and Father McDonald,

who was from San Jose, who Cesar had met way back when he was organizing CSO in San Jose. So these three priests got into this blue Volkswagen van, and drove all the way to Washington, DC to meet with George Meany, the head of the AFL.

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So they convinced him that they should send somebody down to help organize farm workers. So they sent a representative down, and we called a meeting of all the people that we had been organizing at the St. Mary's Hall, here in Stockton, California. So when the representatives came and they saw how many people we had to haul full of farm workers and they were very impressed. And then they decided that- AFL decided that they would spend money to hire an organizer.

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And they did. So they hired an organizer named Norm Smith, who had been an organizer for the United Auto Workers in the South, and then he became the head of this new group, which was now called Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee.

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DAVID BENDER:

Now, somewhere in this period, and I think you just made reference to the fact that he'd been in San Jose with CSO, you meet Cesar. When did you meet him? When did literally see him in the same room?

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DOLORES HUERTA:

When we organized our chapter of the Community Service Organization in Stockton, Fred Ross kept telling us about this great organizer that had organized a chapter in San Jose, California. So, we were all very excited to meet him. And the Oakland chapter of the Community Service Organization was going to be having a dinner. So, we got a couple of cars, and we drove up to Oakland for their dinner. Fred Ross was going to introduce us to us, Cesar Chavez.

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So he brought Cesar over to our group, and Cesar said a quick hello and then he disappeared. So we were going around all these short Brown men, "Are you Cesar Chavez? Are you Cesar Chavez?" So that was the first time that we got to meet Cesar Chavez. Cesar was very quiet. Later on though, when we started having our executive board meetings of the Community Service Organization, and then we would have our conventions, then I got to know Cesar better.

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DAVID BENDER:

And I think he got louder.

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DOLORES HUERTA:

Yes.

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DAVID BENDER:
There are moments of record where you and he got into it at points, and always, *la caso* was always shared—worldview—but tactics and strategy you disagreed on. I gotta ask you, because it runs through everything you've said so far, you're a woman, and women don't do anything other than file. I mean, this is the '50s and '60s, and you're out there organizing men.

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I'm sure a lot of people made this point aloud that this is not a place for a woman. How did that get expressed to you, and how did you react to it?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
When I first started having house meetings, when we were starting to organize the farmer worker's union, I really only had one meeting where they canceled my meeting because the person said to me, "Oh, no, I don't think that I wanna have a meeting with a woman, and this is probably something that you shouldn't be doing." But actually, that only happened one time. With all of the other meetings that I set up with men,-

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-no, they were welcoming the message and they did open their homes. They and their wives opened their homes, so that I could convince them about how

we had to organize farm workers and how they had to get together. If we didn't, then the problem would never change, that they would never have a better life.

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DAVID BENDER:
You've talked about how men seem to have more of a need of either taking credit or giving blame, and women, in your words, just want to get the job done. Was that always your sense of it? Is that still true?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
I think women, basically, believe more in cooperation instead of competition, like men do. And so that's why, often, when women work with men, you find that men will take over their project, or they will take the credit for the success of a particular project, or try in some ways to undermine what women are doing. And I'm not saying this is true of all men, but I think that in the civil rights movement,-

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-that we found that women were always on the frontlines, but oftentimes, they didn't get the credit for the accomplishments that were- that succeeded in that movement. And I think it's just the fact that we do have this male dominance in our society, and this is something that women always have to deal with. But I always like to quote Cesar, because when they would ask

Cesar, “Why do you have so many women in charge of different operations in the United Farm workers?” And his answer was, “Well, because I know that they will do the work.”

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DAVID BENDER:
You had a quote from Dr. King, from his speech, the three Evils of Society. I'm gonna read it to you. “We are now experiencing the coming to the surface of a triple prong sickness that has been lurking within our body politic from its very beginning. That is the sickness of racism, excessive materialism and militarism.” And you chose that as your favorite quote of Dr. King. Why?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Dr. King's quote about racism being a sickness in our society is so appropriate, because people do not even understand sometimes where that racism comes from because it's so ingrained in our culture. And if people could understand that, that racism comes from slavery, and slavery means that people or individuals should use their entire life's energy and work to make other people rich,-

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-or to make other people better off than they are, this is what racism is, basically. And that idea also expands to the issue of women, that women need to give up their lives to support other people, be it other families or other

men, and that somehow, they don't have the same rights as men do. And it extends to children also. So this is the root of racism, which is slavery. And I think if people can understand that, then they have to understand why it has to end.

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And of course, this is what happened with farm workers, because farm workers have mostly been people of color. Then, that somehow justifies the fact that the farm workers were not given toilets in the fields, that they weren't given drinking water. They weren't given rest periods, that they had to work from sun up to sun sundown. This is the legacy of slavery. And of course, it's something that we have to end and we have to end this sickness. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Said, we have to end the racism in our society.

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DAVID BENDER:
You never met Dr. King. But Cesar did. But you did work a lot with Coretta. Can you talk about this? Because specifically one of the things you helped make happen, and you and Coretta Scott King, worked on the Martin Luther King holiday. I'm very interested in why you thought that was important to do. Can you talk about Coretta Scott King and your friendship?

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DOLORES HUERTA:

Our movements were happening simultaneously at the same time, what was happening in the South with the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King, what was happening there, and the farmer worker movement was going on at the same time. And obviously the both of us, myself and Dr. King were very busy in what we were doing, but we did have telephone calls with Dr. King, and then what would happen when he would call us,-

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-then we would get in the office, and all of the board members would get into the office, and Cesar would put the call on speaker, we could all hear the conversations going back between Cesar and Dr. Martin Luther King. So, I never had the good fortune to meet him. The one time we were going to do a presentation in New York, in New York City together, and as I was getting on the plane to fly to New York, one of the staff members from the union came and actually got me off the plane.

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And I said, "What happened?" They said, "Well, you can't go to New York." And I said, "Why?" "Because we have an emergency, here in the strike." And, to this day, I don't know what that emergency was, but somehow, somebody did not want me to be on that platform with Dr. Martin Luther King. With Coretta, I was able to work with Coretta a lot because she was traveling around the country to campaign for the holiday for Dr. King, okay?

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And at the same time, I was campaigning for the Great Boycott. So we were together on many, many occasions. We were often at the same events, so we

got to be very good friends. And I would visit Coretta often, when I was in the area in Atlanta, I would just call her, and she always had her door open so that we could get together.

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DAVID BENDER:
I think you saw her at Ebenezer Baptist Church, didn't you?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Yes, yes. At the Baptist Church and many other places. Mm-hmm.

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DAVID BENDER:
The holiday itself, which now- There was a lot of resistance to it. A lot of people said, “No, we can't do this.” Do you remember, as you were going around and campaigning for it, what that was about and how you had to persuade people? Can you talk about what you saw when you and she were organizing for it?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Well, the one thing that we knew is that if Dr. King's birthday could become a holiday, that this would go a long way to make people understand, number

one, not only to remember his works and what he did, the Civil Rights movement, getting people the right to vote, giving them the opportunities that were being denied to them, and this would always be a reflection, and so that people could remember that. So this would be a big, big step to end racism in our society.

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DAVID BENDER:
One of the things that we talk about is legacy. Do you think about legacy for yourself? What does that mean to you?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Well, when we start doing this work, we never think of it in terms of history, we never think of it in terms of legacy. But I hope the legacy that will come out of the work that I have done, and Cesar did, and many other organizers, would be that people will understand the importance of why they have to participate. That every one of us has the power to make a difference in our society, and that we have a responsibility.

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It's not just a right that we have in our democracy—our human rights that we have—but it's also that we have a responsibility not only to ourselves, but to others. That we have to fight for justice, that we have to fight for reform. And

if we don't do it as Fred Ross taught us, it's not gonna happen. We cannot say, "I'm going to leave this up to somebody else." No, we have to use our energy,-

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-we have to use our time and do whatever we can do, to uplift people, to make them understand that they have power, and that we can really create a better world, that we don't have to put up with the racism and homophobia, misogyny, ll of these things that we are suffering now. We're worried about the planet, about climate change, but these are things that are not going to be solved unless we take the actions-

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-and we become the activists to make sure that we can save our planet, and that we can save our society, that we can save our democracy.

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DAVID BENDER:
You started as a teacher, and isn't this work, ultimately, even in organizing, isn't it telling stories? Isn't that teaching? And you're a storyteller. You tell these stories of the history of the movement. Why is storytelling so important in our culture? Why does it need to be revered?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
When people hear stories of things that were accomplished, and when the accomplishments and the victories that were won by ordinary people, then it

gives them an idea that if they see somebody that looks like me and they were able to accomplish that, then maybe I can do the same. It gives people a faith, I think, in themselves, and faith in other people. So stories are very, very important to set the example so that people can understand and people can learn.

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And then it gives them also- you might see the path that they can follow and that it removes the anxiety and the fear that people might have when they think, "Oh, I can't do that. I don't have enough experience. I don't have enough education, and that's for someone else to do." But when they hear the stories and they see the stories of what ordinary people were able to accomplish, then I think it gives them somehow the faith in themselves that they could do the same and that they need to do the same.

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DAVID BENDER:
Do you think about mortality? Does that affect you in any way? Does the notion of the finite time we have enter into your thinking?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
I do think about mortality, because my mother died- she was 51 years old when she passed away. My dad was 72. I never thought that I would live as long as I am living now. I left the Farmworkers Union, because I was in my

sixties and I never ever thought that I was going to live to be 93. But I am really blessed, I believe, to have given this much time on Earth.

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And I do want to use all the time that I have left to continue talking to people, organizing people, and continuing to convince people that they have the power, that they have the power to create a better world. And not only in the community, in our country, but because we know that our country, the United States of America, is such a rich and powerful country, that what we do here affects the rest of the world.

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And if people could just understand that they have the power to create a better world for everyone, then I know that that is the answer. As Fred Ross Sr. used to say, there is nothing more important than for people to get involved just to create a better society. And so I'm really blessed. I think that I have been given this time, and whatever years I have left, I'm gonna hopefully continue to do the same as long as I have the health and the energy to be able to continue talking to people, organizing people, getting them to become activists.

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DAVID BENDER:
You have observed that we are a culture, unlike others around the world that does not venerate our elders. You're now 93. Do you see that there is something missing in our culture for not listening to the stories and

venerating our elders? Can you talk about that? 'Cause I think it's so important.

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Well, in the indigenous community, our Native American community, the person who is usually the head of the tribe is the elder person. And that is the person that people venerate and they take their advice from because they have more experience. And a lot of times people talk about wisdom, but I think it's really not so much- Well, wisdom is acquired because of the experiences that you live and the things that you have gone through.

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Sometimes, those experiences are good experiences, sometimes they're negative experiences. But from every experience that we have in life, we learn something, whether something that we need to do more of or something that we need to take out of our lives. So, I think it is very important. But the other thing too is in the Native American culture, when the chief somehow is not doing what the people think they should be doing, they just leave him.

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They just move, and they leave that chief and get another chief, okay? So, yes, definitely we do have to venerate our elders and we do have to take advice from our elders, but sometimes we know that some traditions—and I'm talking particularly now about machismo, the male dominance—that some of

these cultures that we have lived with, we know that we have to do away with. And so we have to also know how to tell the difference, right?

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So yes, we have people that we need to venerate and people that we need to take their advice, honor them and follow them. But of course, if somehow that particular chief or leader is leading us down the wrong path, then we do know that we have to not follow that person anymore.

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DAVID BENDER:

The movements that we were a part of, the anti-war movements of the '60s and civil rights movement- Now we're seeing a women's movement that grew up—you were part of building the Feminist Majority—and now there's an LGBTQ movement. Some of the farm workers that you worked with early on, probably in the '60s and '70s, were openly gay, and you never thought anything about that. Is that true?

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DOLORES HUERTA:

I, and the Farmworkers Movement, have always been supporters of the LGBTQ community from the very, very beginning. We had members of the Farmworkers Union that were gays and lesbians. One of Cesar's *comadres*, the woman who baptized his oldest son, Fernando Chavez, was a lesbian. And, so

in the Farmworkers Movement, there was never any thought of discriminating against people because they were gay, lesbian or transgender.

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And in fact, we joined the early marches, and not only in New York City when they had some of the first marches, that we were in New York on the boycott, and many of our farm workers joined some of those demonstrations that they were having in New York City, and of course in Los Angeles and West Hollywood and San Francisco, the farm workers were always part of the marches there for gay rights.

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That's always been part of bringing all of our movements together, but especially supporting people who are being attacked for whom they are. This is something that we know that is so totally, totally wrong. And I, myself, have been on the Board of Equality California for many, many years.

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DAVID BENDER:
You left the farm workers. One of the ways you established the foundation, out of pain comes purpose. You were protesting George Herbert Walker Bush and the security beat you with batons. Tell me what happened.

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DOLORES HUERTA:

Cesar had just completed a 36 day water-only fast to bring to the attention of the American public about the issue of pesticides, and how pesticides were harming the farm workers and their children. Farm workers dying from pesticides, from cancer, children that were being born with horrible deformities, no arms, no legs, horrible deformities, and that this was being caused by pesticides and the poisons that they put on our food.

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And when Cesar finished that fast, he went off to rest. George Walker Bush, the first Bush came to Fresno, California, had a press conference and said that there was nothing wrong with pesticides, that our government protected people so that they would not be harmed by pesticides. So I drove to San Francisco and met some of our organizers up there to do a press conference, to challenge George Bush on what he had said, that the pesticides are really harming our community.

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And during that demonstration in San Francisco, which by the way, there was a big demonstration, it was not just farm workers demonstrating, it was people from the machinists union, from different labor groups, and this was during the war in El Salvador, so a lot of peace activists were at that demonstration. And they had signs that said, “Bush, Noriega, that's the ticket.” He had been the dictator in Panama. And, “Bush, get out of El Salvador.”

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And a lot of the gay community had big signs that said, “Bush is a drag,” and people in drag were carrying these signs. So, it was kind of a very festive type

of a demonstration. People were singing song, very peaceful demonstration. Then the police moved in and they started beating people up. And I had just done a press conference with a woman from KRON-TV from San Francisco,-

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-and I had finished that conference with her, and then the police turned on us and they started beating people up, and I was one of the victims of that meeting.

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DAVID BENDER:
You wound up suing successfully for that and received a major settlement. Tell me how that worked. You were able to use that money, that settlement to help continue the movement, is that right?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Yes. And luckily, the television reporter who I had been interviewing, she actually turned her camera when the policeman was beating me up. So they were able to identify the police officer, and that particular police officer was not even supposed to be on the streets. He had beaten up two African American men in different places, and he had beaten up his wife and his mistress, so he was not even supposed to be on the street.

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But had it not been for that reporter, that she asked him to turn the camera when he was beating me up, then we never would've known who that person was, which police officer is the one that had struck the blows. So, during that beating that I received, there were many other people that were beaten up and including an African American woman who was waiting for the bus. She was not even part of the demonstration and they beat her up.

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There were some other activists that were beaten up, but I was the only one, I think, that filed a lawsuit because people were so afraid of the police that they were afraid to file a lawsuit. So we were successful in our lawsuit, and luckily, we had friends that were on the Board of Supervisors in San Francisco. One of the people on the Board of Supervisors was Heima Gonzalez. And so that they were able to agree on a settlement for my beating, and then they settled a lawsuit for $300,000,-

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-but it was put into an account that I would not get the money immediately. The money was going to be- I would get $2,000 a month until I die. And so that is my retirement fund from the San Francisco Police Department. And because otherwise, I would not have any kind of retirement because in the United Farm Workers, we never got wages, and we worked for stipend, $10 a week.

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The union took care of our housing, any emergency bills that we might have, any medical bills that we might have. And we got our food from food stamps,

our clothes from donations, but we really didn't have any money. So because of the fact that we didn't get wages, in the United Farm Workers, I didn't have any kind of a pension. So my social security is also very minimal, only $600 a month. But because of my beating from the San Francisco police,-

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-I now have a retirement fund of $2,600 a month which I live on, because all of my work that I do with the Dolores Huerta Foundation, I do not receive a salary. I am a full-time volunteer for our foundation. And the reason that I chose not to have a salary is because I am very political, I'm always campaigning with different candidates, and the Dolores Huerta Foundation is a nonprofit organization.

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It's a 501c3. And so, I have the freedom then, that I could go out and campaign for candidates and not put our organization in jeopardy in terms of their nonprofit status.

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DAVID BENDER:
And the mission of the foundation is…

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DOLORES HUERTA:
The mission of the Dolores Huerta Foundation is to organize people at the grassroots level and to make them understand that they have the power to

improve their conditions. And that is what we do, to grow the leadership from the grassroots up so that people can understand they may be poor, they may not have a formal education, they may not even be citizens, but they have the power in their person,-

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-once they and their friends or relatives get together and we form an organization that we can take direct action, direct, non-violent action, to put the pressure on the politicians or government bodies to make them accountable. And also to change policies, to change legislation, to create the kind of governance that we need to make a better world. That's what we do. Organize people, empower them, so that they can know that they have power.

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DAVID BENDER:
What does the foundation do today?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
We are working very hard on education, on stopping the school-to-prison pipeline. We had to sue our high school district in Bakersfield, California, because they had suspended 2,500 students- expelled 2,500 students in one year, and most of those students were Black and Brown. And as a result of our lawsuit, we brought those expulsions down from 2,500 expulsions in one year to 21 in one year.

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And now the Kern High School District, they have to have a Black history month, they have to have an Hispanic Heritage month, and they have had to change their procedures on the suspensions and expulsions. And we are working on that at the statewide level. We have also done a lot of work on health during the COVID epidemic. We have vaccinated tens of thousands of people throughout the Central Valley of California, to protect them from COVID.

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We have a huge youth program. We have had hundreds of youth that come to our program, again, teaching them the positions of activism, of civil rights and women's rights and LGBTQ rights. So, this is the work that we do, civic engagement. During the census of 2020, we actually were able to get 84,000 people to sign up for the census. And that was so important because we know that the people that are registered for the census, that means how much money is gonna come into the communities.

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We did a great job on redistricting here in the Central Valley of California. And all of our maps that we drew with our demographer, a Latino demographer named Jesus Garcia, they were accepted in total by the Independent Commission of California. And we have registered thousands of voters and continue to do that civic engagement work, and getting the people that we organize, so they are the ones that are getting elected to school boards, water boards, city councils, okay?

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Getting them- They are the ones, and again, they may not have a formal education, but they know the issues. And when they get on those boards, they know what to do. And so this is about democracy, about encouraging people to get engaged, but also to take the power and to pass policies and issues. And we have been very successful in many legislative endeavors, including in California. One of the big issues that we worked on is to have our undocumented people in California, that they are now covered by healthcare under our California healthcare systems.

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We are working right now on setting up an organizing academy, so that the lessons that we learned from Fred Roth Sr and for Cesar Chavez, that we can have our organizers go not only throughout California, but throughout the country. Right now, we have about 14 chapters of the Dolores Huerta Foundation throughout the Central Valley and part of Los Angeles County. But we want to continue to promote and teach people this organizing method that was taught to us by Fred Ross Sr., so that we can really make democracy work.

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And we know that if we do not do this work, that our democracy is going to continue to be challenged. And that people have to know that they are the ones that have the power to save our democracy, but they have to do it. It's not gonna happen unless people participate. So people have to understand

that they have that responsibility. It's to make sure that we can also conserve and save our human rights.

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DAVID BENDER:
Dolores, I'm gonna finish with this. You love music. Who's your favorite artist? What music do you listen to that gives you joy?

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DOLORES HUERTA:
Well, I was very fortunate to grow up in the '40s and the '50s, and so I was able to hear all of the great musicians like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, et cetera, et cetera. And I was actually- got very fortunate to meet Dizzy Gillespie. We were in New York City, when we were on the boycott, and Dizzy went to put a boycott button on his- the cheeky that he had, and encouraged the audience there at the Vanguard for all of them to support the Farmworkers Union, to boycott the grapes and to boycott the lettuce.

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And I was also very fortunate to meet Charlie Parker. But I have to say this, when I met Charlie Parker, I was so smitten that I could not say anything. I lost my words, that I could just stare at him and look at him and admire him. But I was speechless, but I did get to meet him. So, those are my favorites. I know they're the old guard, but I think they set the standard for bebop, for jazz music, that we still hear today and admire today.

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