

Interviewee: Hilda Ramirez
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Abstract: Hilda Ramirez was born in the Dominican Republic in 1964 and ten years later her family moved to New York City. She faced challenges as a non-English speaking child, but through strength, perseverance, and the guidance of a bilingual elementary school teacher, Hilda found academic success. After professional achievements in the male-dominated corporate sector, Hilda returned to school and earned a Master's in Administration and Social Policy at Harvard University. Today, Hilda serves as the Assistant Director of the Latino Education Institute at Worcester State University where her experience and advice guides young adults on their academic and professional path. She passionately advocates for education reform, drawing from her own experience as an English learner in elementary school.

SN: Okay and then this one... That one is running [tape recorders]. Okay, great! So, thank you so much for meeting with us.

HR: Sure.

SN: And I was wondering if you could start with your family or your childhood?

HR: Yeah. What about it?

SN: What it was like growing up in the Dominican Republic and...

HR: Sure. So, it was wonderful. I come from a large family and we grew up around all of our family. So we all lived close nearby. There were a lot of us. A lot of kids, so we always were kind of really more free than in the United States in terms of playing outside and our grandparents took care of us because my parents came here when I was really young. They came here when I was six months old and they couldn't bring us right away. So we stayed there for ten years before we came.

SN: Oh, wow.

HR: Yeah. So that was a little hard because we kind of got to see our parents once a year, twice a year. But then we lived with our grandparents until we came to the U.S. But other than that I mean we were spoiled as kids because we grew up with our grandparents. And so in a way we had a lot in terms of love around us and just a lot of fun times as kids. I remember liking school, liking the neighborhood, liking my neighbors. Till this day the same neighbors are still there. And we visit and they know all of our lives and we all are very tight as a small town so it sort of feels like they're family forever.

SN: Okay, that's great. What town in the Dominican Republic?

HR: It's called San Jose de las Matas. And it's north of Santiago, so it's in the country on the mountains. And so it's not near the beach but it's on the mountainous side were like two hours from the beach. But very pretty, it's a very pretty setting with lots of natural resources and rivers and—so we kind of grew up really loving that environment. And appreciating the outdoors, appreciating just relaxing and not—not a lot of stress. And so loved as a kid just having fun running all day and doing all kinds of kids' stuff.

SN: Oh that's awesome. What was school like?

HR: School in the Dominican Republic its interesting. I mean I don't remember a lot because I was small. I came when I was ten years old. But I do remember that you had to wear a uniform and you went to school for half a day only. So you either went in the morning or in the afternoon. And then you know there was this big gap in the middle for you to eat at home. So we have our big meal is from 12:00 to 2:00. And it's not in the evening. And so school is organized in a way so you can come home from twelve to two and be with the family. I remember those were special moments. We all ate together and we all kind of got together and then at two some kids would go to school in the afternoon but then you know parents went back to work. And it seems that the middle of the day was the most important part of the family day. And so I really remember that. I remember again in school I don't know for some reason all I remember is playing a lot. In the backyard and games and teachers were very strict, though. Discipline was like very very high priority, but I don't remember, I just remember seeing other kids being disciplined very...and so I wasn't one of them, my sister was [laughs].

SN: So your sister and brothers did they come to the United States at the same time as you?

HR: Yes we all came together. My parents at the time, I mean my parents came to this country like in the late '50s early '60s and so for them it was a matter of they had to establish themselves here and in New York City which is really expensive. And they had to work and they couldn't

figure out how to get an apartment big enough to have all of us. Because there were six of us and—well five over there and my mom had Robert, my younger brother, here. And so it was a big thing for them like do we both go back? Because the reason why they came was because there was revolution in the Dominican Republic in '65 and the that turmoil was unsettling. And they weren't sure. So they were like, “Well, we’re just going to try to figure it out so that if we have to relocate then we know what we’re dealing with.” But then after the way that they explain is that they felt like they could do more for us here. But that they had to get ready for that because they felt like they couldn't just bring us to the U.S. working the way that they were working and not knowing how we would be taken care of and schools and stuff like that. So it took them a while. And you know my mother talks about how expensive New York was and they fought about what are our expenses going to be bringing them here. And so they took a long time. And my mom was trying to convince my dad to go back.

SN: Oh, really?

HR: And so my father really felt there would be better opportunities here and so they kind of grappled with that. And then they brought us on a very cold February day [laughs] we were like, "Okay!"

SN: Oh my goodness.

HR: Oh, yeah. It's a very big change.

SN: Definitely. So how old were you when you moved to...?

HR: Ten.

SN: Ten years old okay.

HR: I just turned ten.

SN: So how was that transition for you starting school in the United States and just getting used to everything?

HR: I mean it was exciting like anything. I mean we lived in a very rural kind of outdoorsy kind of place where everybody knew us. We were like a little, I say spoiled because a lot of things around us that were great and then to fly into New York City. I mean the exciting part was we were going to be with our parents. The other piece of it was you're amazed as a child, “Oh my

god, this place is cold.” Like we had to wear these coats that we were like, “Oh my god,” [laughs] we couldn’t even figure it out. And then after that, then my mom took two weeks off to kind of like transition us into the schools and to the neighborhood and to like a structure. And it was really hard I think. One the weather, two everybody spoke English, we didn't speak any English, right?

SN: Oh, okay.

HR: And so everything around us was sort of like, “Oh my god, what is this?” And so my mom did a lot, especially like for me I was in third grade, to figure out how to support us like with the teachers she met with them it’s like, “Well what does it take for them to learn English well?” And at that time there wasn't any bilingual education. And so I'm talking about '74. So the teachers, I happened to be lucky and I got a Latina teacher from Puerto Rico. So it was just perfect. Because she could support me in learning right like she knew I couldn't pick up certain things so she would support them in Spanish until I got to where I needed to get. So it accelerated my learning a lot by being with her. That didn't happen for my brother—my siblings. Yeah, it was harder for them. They were in sort of immersed English classrooms and so my teacher too was really good about encouraging more reading, encouraging more—don't watch any Spanish TV until you quite have this down. And so, you know, she had good insights. So I followed it. I was younger so you're also very fearless when you're young like you don't get as embarrassed as my siblings who were a little older—in their teens. So now they were afraid to speak and so it took them longer. For me, I learned English in—I came in February in June I was speaking. And then the next year it was about writing. And by the third year I surpassed every kid in the classroom in speaking, in reading, in writing, in all of that.

SN: Okay.

HR: Yeah.

SN: That's great. So, did you take any, did you do any college in the United States?

HR: Yeah. So yeah, I have three degrees.

SN: Oh, wow! Okay. Did you get those in New York?

HR: No, I came to Massachusetts to go to college. So yes I did all my college in Boston.

SN: Oh wow, where did you go?

HR: So I went to a two-year college first, because I wanted to do tourism. So I went to Bay State College which had a tourism program. And so I did that for two years, but then I sort of felt like okay this is not what I really want, so I transferred to business. And so I did my business degree at Lesley University. And I completed that and then I went for a master's at Harvard for education so I kind of did a mid-career change to education.

SN: So did you do any teaching?

HR: No.

SN: No, okay.

HR: I did administration and social policy.

SN: Got it, okay. Alright awesome. So how long did you spend in Boston?

HR: A lot. I came in '85 to go to college.

SN: Right.

HR: And I stayed in Boston until 2002 when I came to work in Worcester, right? I was living and commuting for a while there. Because I had a significant other in Worcester. That's why I moved here, but working in Boston. And then I at some point when I transitioned for work I wanted to kind of not be—I had a very stressful job in Boston. And so I wanted to try something different and so I transitioned to work here [Worcester State University]. Now I was living and working here in 2002.

SN: Got it so you started working here in 2002? And you've been doing that ever since?

HR: Yes.

SN: Okay. What was your job before that?

HR: I worked for John Hancock financial services. It's a big large corporation.

SN: Yes, I've been in the building.

HR: Oh yeah [laughs] the big tower. So I used to organize all of their international conferences and symposiums and special events.

SN: Yeah.

HR: Including the Olympics.

SN: Oh, wow.

HR: Yeah, so I was on a plane every month. And so I loved it. You know, graduating from college with a business degree and getting—I mean I had three job offers. Phenomenal jobs. And I remember that I wanted to combine that tourism because to me it was sort of like I love to travel how do I do this, right? And initially I thought I was working for an airline and then I worked for Delta and I hated it. I hated it with a passion.

SN: Oh, really?

HR: And so yeah. So then this job allowed me to travel, but you know be in an office and you know do all these other things. So that's what I did for twelve years and then I switched to a management position for five years out of that. And then I just felt like I was in the same company for 17 years. And I wanted to try something different. I felt like I wanted to touch people in different ways. And so, I was volunteering in education a lot. Mentoring young ladies, and especially young ladies coming from other countries that needed that same kind of encouragement that I had when I came. And I saw myself and I'm like, "You know, the school system isn't working that well for these kids." And so how do I change that? And so that sparked me into going to Harvard and thinking about how do we change public education in a way that is better. Because we are getting a lot of messages that are not good messages, and my—including myself. "Oh, you know you're not going to make it into this university or that one, you should go to a community college," and that's what I did because that's what I was told. And I'm like, "Wait a second no, I have the potential to do a lot more." My parents believed in me. And they tell me that I should do whatever I do. Why should I listen to these people? But sometimes when you're in those schools you kind of get influenced by—and so part of my switch was to try to change that a little bit for Latino students because we are not getting the right messages. And so, I felt like in order to do that well that I wanted to have good credentials. And so I applied to Harvard. I got in and I was like, "Oh, wow this is great [laughs]." And it was amazing. I got a lot out of that experience. And then I've been kind of figuring out my way in education. And now here, I really love [it] and again I'm really at the heart of a mission I believe

in which is helping people to achieve their goals, which they can achieve, even with a barrier of language. It's to me I look at it as an asset.

SN: Yes.

HR: And just developing those two languages are important.

SN: Definitely. So what is your day to day like doing this job?

HR: Yeah, [laughs] today is all relaxing because I just came back from vacation.

SN: Oh, fun!

HR: Yeah, but it's busy. There's so much need in our community my days are crazy. It goes from coordinating a program—I just coordinated an intensive program in the summer. Two weeks for kids that just arrived that need a boost in literacy. So we did like a theater program and a photography with writing program which is fantastic. So I get to design that. I get to collaborate with the public schools in designing something that's going to help those kids accelerate. I wish those things were around when I was growing up. So that's one part of my job, but the other part is looking at what's not working in the system and looking at policies. So right now today I have a meeting at 2:00 with a commission that we're kind of looking to push policy a little bit harder around improvements for English learners and making sure the school system is doing the best that it can to attract teachers that get this. And retain them. And two, to employ strategies wherever possible that are going to accelerate these kids. And so it's difficult because we live in a society and Worcester is a city that even with all its diversity it just doesn't get what that means, right?

SN: Right.

HR: So yes, we see it all around us and we feel good about the festivals. We feel good about this. When you look at diversity in the institutions that should be diverse, they're not. And that's where the decisions are being made on a daily basis, right? So everyday we're making major decisions for major numbers of people without them at the table or without somebody with that experience at the table. And that is at the heart of my passion in terms of you can't speak for volumes of people just because they're not at the table, it's because you're not inviting them to the table. You're not really making them part of your decision making and so that's the work that we do here and it's difficult. Because we're always coming in saying you're forgetting the obvious. You're not really doing the best that you can, you're not making the big—the decisions

in the way that are going benefit that community. And so it's kind of always what I call a love hate relationship in terms of I want to support you, but you need to do it in the right way. So we're always advocating for families and the kids in our community.

SN: Right. What is the biggest change you'd like to see in the education system.

HR: It doesn't work for kids of color, it doesn't. And I think that as the numbers continue to increase it's—I just wish that we would pause for a second and restructure it so that it works. So like really revamping it and I think that that takes revamping the teaching system. The people, right? Because buildings are buildings. It's the people within those buildings that need to be trained in a way that they understand what globalism means and what does it mean to educate people that are different, that don't look like you. What does that look like? And I think we need—we all need that. Higher ed needs to revamp it because they're the ones that are generating teachers, educators, right? These systems that impact people that have been there forever need to change and that is why we haven't gotten to where we need to get because nobody wants to change. We use a lot of words like, not enough money, this and that and the other. But there's so much change you can create without money. And that's where I hold my hope in the leadership has to be stronger. We need the mavericks out there to kind of really take the systems and try different things. How bad can it get? They're not—some of these kids are not getting an education at all. And so why not try something different that's bold? We haven't seen that anywhere. That's the hard part. That I know what I want for change, but it's too comfortable for people to stay within the system. You know? Because why should they. They're getting their salaries, they're whatever they need. It's the families and the kids that are not getting their needs met. But they don't quite know how to advocate for themselves.

SN: Right.

HR: Right, so it's left up to a few people that can do that and it gets lonely to continuously be the bad cop, right? Saying this is not good. So change has to come from the training of not only teachers but the individuals in that building to really look at who you're teaching and teach to that child. Not to a mass. It doesn't work for the masses. We're all individuals, we all take information differently, we all learn differently. Just because I have an accent doesn't mean that I have a deficit. And so I think that that's what I want to see. More change and I think America needs to embrace globalism to its heart. Like, learn more languages, understand what that means so that you can be empathetic to who you have in front of you.

SN: Totally.

HR: I would make that a requirement for teachers. To have two or three different languages and not only for teachers, but anyone working in education. Especially if you've committed your life to teaching which is such a noble profession and admirable. Then I think you need to do more to really be part of that method that's going to get your kids to be successful. And that doesn't come with the job. You also need to do it for yourself. I don't know if I explained myself.

SN: Yeah! No, that's super interesting to me because I'm trying to be a teacher. And I did this program called City Year, I won't talk too much about myself because that's not the point but...I was just curious what advice you would give to teachers and aspiring teachers for them to serve the students as best as possible?

HR: So there's a couple of things that I think about because I also need to be fair. I've traveled around the world, as I travel one of the things that I do is I try to put myself into that culture, immerse myself instead of having the culture immerse to me. So that's one. I want teachers to immerse themselves into the communities from which those kids come from and that's a disconnect for us here. So we have people living in the suburbs coming into the suburban and sort of saying, "Oh those kids." No these are kids that live in these communities. Learn that community. Understand who they are. Connect with their families. They are a source of amazing strength when you are connected and working together instead of separately. And not using so many barriers and excuses. "Oh well, we can't meet with the parents they never want to come or whatever." No, they don't have the luxury of being able to drop a job or a job that lets them [take a day off.] So figure out other ways. So that's two. I think that teachers need different training. You're not getting the training I think [that] is putting you in the position of others. In terms of feeling what it's like to learn something, right? I think the teaching profession right now you get a lot of pedagogy, which is phenomenal. So how does someone learn, but there's no strategies for how someone learns when they have different barriers or different things in their way whether it's a disability, whether it's a language, whether it's just someone who's super bright, how do you challenge them? I was challenged as a kid and as a result of that I've done really well. For some reason those strategies were there in teachers before, they're not there now. So you know, how do you make that concerted effort to know this kid is really bright let me push them ahead? This one needs a little bit more support let me [do] more. Also more work with kids as groups and more innovative instead of the structured teaching methods that are really like outdated. And how to get those kids that need the support, there's a million of us that want to support kids on a daily basis. And so how can you be a jack of all trades and understanding that you have 30 individuals every year and those individuals have different needs. And how do you support that, not on your own but with a village, right? That supports you and that lets those kids grow to the fullest possible. It's hard and I'm not saying that teachers aren't doing that amazingly. But the system needs to support those teachers.

SN: Right.

HR: And very very specific ways about supporting that village or this kid needs this. Can you help me while I concentrate on moving the others forward? Or things like that. That's what I feel. I feel like it's about the teachers taking on some development of their own, right. Not just what you're provided because there's hardly any [laughs].

SN: Yeah, do it yourself.

HR: Do it yourself. And then too, the system supporting the teachers in the classroom a little bit more to be more innovative. Not so stagnant.

SN: Okay, awesome. Let's see, switch gears a little. How has Worcester changed since you moved here?

HR: Yeah, it's interesting because I have these conversations with a lot of people to say physically it has changed a lot. So you visually it's much more pleasing to the eye. These old factory cities have been revamped and I love that transformation. I think it's really, really important. Where I still am disappointed in the city is that while we are doing those beautiful transformations we're really not taking care of our people. And so we still have this opioid epidemic. I was happy to see an article that the city manager is suing pharmaceuticals because of that. Because we really need to make bold statements in terms of what can we do to ensure that we all feel safe right? And so we need to take care of that. We need to take care of all this prostitution that is all over the city, the trafficking of humans, of young ladies that's going on in this city. We also need to—there was a huge issue and I think there still is, on homelessness and we still see these—I don't know if they're veterans or not but they have signs. And I want to believe that they are I don't know. All these issues that are so visual that you can really change the city to the best looking city but if you don't care about that it's going to crumble on you because we're not really doing that. And so, what I mean by taking care of that is we need to have more sectors coming together to discuss ways and strategies and what has worked for this city for that city and for the other. Let's try it, let's try—just like I'm talking about in education. Let's try different things and see what—at least you're trying and so I don't see that that is happening. And I feel that is because again there's a level of contentment with city officials.

SN: Right, they're comfortable.

HR: It's the same ones. We're comfortable, it works for us. Sure, I live here, I live there. It works for me. I'm part of the old Worcester and so it works for me, but it doesn't work for somebody else, for other people. And so when you're investing here, you really have to think about that those implications a little hard. And so I have a house here, I have two houses and everyday I'm still kind of like, "Oh, I don't know, do I stay? I don't know, do I pick up and go somewhere else?" I'm single I don't have any attachments. That comes through my mind all the time. And it's not because of the physical, it's more of I don't see enough efforts to take care of the people that need to be taken care of.

SN: Right. Okay. So you have a lot going on professionally and doing all this super important work. I was wondering what you do for self-care, to relax and take a break?

HR: My god, I just got back from Costa Rica [laughs]. I was hiking for two hours and we were parasailing, we were kayaking, we were a group of eleven women. And I do a lot of like small getaways like just before going to Costa Rica I did a hike in New Hampshire. I enjoy the outdoors. In the summer, so I try to maximize that and go to the beach, walk. Do as much as I can to get out of the city, too. I feel like I need that.

SN: That's important.

HR: Even just a drive to Newport. And crossing that bridge and just getting to you see water and ocean. And walk, I love that. Self care for me is family. I have really tight-knit family and so my sisters live here and so we spend a lot of quality time together. You know, dinners and just helping each other, going out for a walk and that's important. I have a lot of good friends, too. And so we end up just doing a lot, just sitting at home having a glass of wine and catching up and in the Latino community we're—it's interesting, we just show up to our houses and, "Okay, I'm here I have a bottle of wine [laughs], what do you have in the refrigerator?" And I love that. Because it definitely makes you feel loved and wanted and appreciated and company and there's—I never have a down moment I feel. Which is good, I like it because I'm a people person.

SN: That's great, okay let's see. There's some good questions here. Let's see, so how do you define success in your life and has that definition changed over time?

HR: Definitely it has changed, big time. And especially I think lately it hit me. I don't know if it's the age thing that...so success for me before was absolutely about professionalism, right? Achieving what I wanted to in the corporate sector. I mean started working in a department with a bachelor's degree and I was getting paid whatever a college student gets paid, but then I saw

myself going up the corporate ladder very quickly. And I reached a midpoint management position which is a big thing in a corporate sector with all males. And as a Latina. So definitely I feel like my plateau was in the corporate sector in terms of really achieving what I wanted to professionally. Got tons of training and professional development that I've taken with me everywhere I go and that's phenomenal. So I appreciate that. And then I think in higher ed and education it's definitely I was looking to slow down a little more because I felt like I was just on that track that I was working long hours, a lot of hours and not doing much for myself. And so my switch was about trying to achieve a quality of life. And so today success is defined very differently. Now I define success with a balance between the personal, the professional, and the health. And those three I think I need to have in sync. Working towards them, I don't have them down. But definitely I think today the personal and health is more important than the professional. And I think that just happened in the last two years. I was like all gung-ho I want to get my PhD because I want to do this and I want to—and I got admitted into two programs and I was gung-ho going into a PhD. And then I kind of had to stop and say, “What is it that I want that for? What is that going to do for me at this stage?” And instead I said, “Well wait a second, I mean I have a master's. I can still get around to do the things that I want to do with a PhD and some of the policy work that I'm doing.” And it would have been nice I have to admit, to publish work. And to really get to that scholar level that I think that I wanted, but at the same time we're kind of doing that with scholars, you know, right?

SN: Yeah.

HR: Collaboration with scholars and that I'm enjoying more because that's a very focused area and I'm a generalist. And so I've come to believe that I need to spend more time traveling. And really doing I wish I could combine that with my job. And that's something that I'm still trying to figure out. But success for me right now is more about enjoying my time at work. Doing the best that I can to accomplish successes for others, not for myself anymore. And so to me, success means helping other younger professionals achieve their goals and I do that a lot here with college students who I see. And I make sure to connect them to a professional job and sort of that cycle of having them give back to their community and be part of that. So that's what success means for me today.

SN: And then, based on your life experience what advice would you give to women of today and future generations?

HR: Well, I've been one of these women that I don't think there's anything that I haven't tried. Like I've just jumped into things and I don't know that I have loved them, but I will never be one

that says, “Oh my god I didn't do....” Even the PhD I probably will get it just for my own self at some point. Whether it's when I retire, something I have never regretted because I've done the things that I've wanted to do. And so it hasn't been easy and so the advice that I would give to anybody is that like anything in life, you have to work at what you want. And stick to it because you can only achieve success by taking things one step at a time. But for me it's always been about doing my passion work and my heart. I can't do work just to get paid. I have to do work that really fills me and that motivated to—you know I get up very happy every morning to do whatever I want to do and that's something that I've always had since I've been 21 years old when I started working, till today. And my advice is to always do work that makes you whole. And not, “Okay, I want to do this because I'm 40 years old and I want to buy the house, buy the car.” To me that's irrelevant. It's more about the meaning that that you can give to yourself, you know?

SN: Right.

HR: And how do you develop yourself in that? Even in like a man's world, learning how to stand up and negotiate there's a lot of people that can coach you. And I've had wonderful coaches in my life that—they're subtle coaches, they're not formal. But every time I'm like, “Well, what was that all about?” Having somebody just decode it for you, that has worked for me in my life a lot. And I think that the highest achievements have been for me with people behind me sort of helping along the way, never alone. And some people think that I'm always alone, because, you know, but I'm not. I have a whole group of women including my mom my sisters, these other women that every time I'm doing something I'm like, “What do you think? What do you think will happen here and there,” and to me that village of support, it's what's made me achieve all the goals that I've had in life. And so I highly recommend that. People need to do that at all stages of life and I think that one thing that I've learned throughout my life was asking for help.

SN: Right.

HR: That was a hard thing for me but I've learned how to do that well. And I think that that's—it's going to serve its purpose in one area of my life health wise that I want to improve. And so sharing tips and kind of figuring out how people do this and how do they balance, because that's the hard part. And I'm a very workaholic. And I need to kind of transfer.

SN: Right. Okay, awesome. Let's see, is there anything else you'd like to mention?

HR: No, I feel like the only thing that I want to mention is that going back to the whole question of the city of Worcester, that while I want to say that there's some beautiful things happening

physically and then there's some challenging things happening with people, I am hopeful for better things to come. Because I also see a transformation of the space from new people living here that are, I think, a lot more willing to give up themselves. I see much more people now because of the context of what's happening nationally that are willing to take the time to help out. So I see that more happening. And I see people really supporting other people in ways that I think I haven't seen in the past. And I like that. Hopefully that will create some change.

SN: Yeah. Always thinking about that. Pressing forward. Okay, great. Well thank you so much!

HR: Yeah!

SN: I really appreciate this interview and I think it's going to be really awesome.

HR: Good. And now you'll transcribe it?

SN: Yes.

HR: And then the professor, you translate it into Spanish or no? It's just in English?

SN: It's just in English, yeah.

HR: Oh, Okay.