JCSCORE
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NCORE 2016 Keynote Speaker

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Dolores Huerta did an interview on June 1, 2016 in San Francisco at The Hilton San Francisco Union Square. The interviewers were Robert Con Davis-Undiano, Cristobal Salinas, Jr., and Kathleen Wong (Lau)—all members of the executive committee of the Southwest Center for Human Relations Studies, the parent organization for the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education (NCORE).

Dolores Clara Fernández was born on April 10, 1930 in Dawson, New Mexico. She was born to Alicia Chavez and Juan Fernández; however, she spent a majority of her time with her mother in Stockton, California, following her parents' divorce. While the separation made Dolores not able to see her father frequently, the two remained close and his political and labor activism later inspired her. When Dolores came of working age, she worked multiple jobs that left her displeased, and followed a passion for teaching. While her teaching career only lasted a few months, Dolores decided she could do more than just inspire the youth and decided to help parents win more equitable working conditions by becoming part of the Community Service Organization (CSO).

During her time at the CSO, Dolores Huerta met Cesar Chavez, who shared a similar interest in having equitable working conditions for underprivileged communities of people. While the two were unable to achieve their ultimate goal for the CSO, the two then cofounded the National Farm Workers Association. In this organization, Huerta was able to shape the national climate that led to the passage of the 1975 Agricultural Labor Relations Act, which was the first law to recognize the rights of California farmworkers to engage in collective bargaining. Also, during her time with the National Farm Workers Association, Huerta coined the phrase "*Sí se puede*!", or yes, it is possible. This phrase was used as a guiding principle to help inspire the accomplishment of goals even in situations that, at times, seem insurmountable.

Dolores has accomplished much after her time with Cesar. She was able to cofound the United Farm Workers' (UFW) radio station, serve on the U.S. Commission on Agricultural Workers for five years, was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993, and was lastly awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012, by President Obama. Dolores continues to work diligently developing leaders and advocating for the working poor, women, and children. She is the founder and president of the Dolores Huerta Foundation, and she travels across the country engaging in campaigns and influencing legislation that supports equality and defends civil rights. Huerta has made a tremendous impact in this world, and will continue to do so until she finds justice.

On June 1, 2016, Dolores Huerta gave a welcomed keynote speech about the importance of education and social justice at NCORE 2016 in San Francisco. After her

keynote, in collaboration with *Current Conversations with Robert Con Davis-Undiano,* JCSCORE had the opportunity to interview Dolores Huerta.

**JCSCORE:** Thinking about the Latino world and really America pre-Dolores Huerta and pre-Cesar Chavez, and post what you did with United Farm Workers in the 1960's and 70's and really beyond that, it's a different world now. Do you ever find yourself reflecting back and think, my goodness, we walked on this stage of history and really helped to change the world?

**Dolores:** No, I think about it a lot because sometimes people will ask me, "Well, do you see a difference?" Of course you see a difference.

I remember when I went to college, there was a handful of us Latinos in college and some of my friends actually changed their names; like, Estrella became Cruz. They anglicized their names. Martinez became Martin, because they were not really identifying or being proud of who they were. And so, you fast-forward to today's world and now you have many of the institutions that are what they call Hispanic-serving institutions, or you have maybe half or even half of the population at the college, will be Latinos, and we see this throughout the country, not just in the Southwest but in New York City, or in New York state. I was just at a conference there, and then you see all of these organizations of Latino teachers, Latino engineers, Latino doctors. Latinas also, for example the Latina lawyer's organization, so there's been a tremendous amount of progress that has happened in the last few years.

**JCSCORE**: If we can take you backward just a second, we think you met Cesar Chavez in a community service organization, in the 60's. What were the aspirations that you and he had at that point? What did you think you were doing at the time?

**Dolores:** Well, our purpose was to organize people in their own communities so that they could go forward and help erase some of the discrimination that was going on, and not only in their own communities: fighting a school issues, racism issues in the community, but also to start dealing at the state and national level. I remember very active in passing laws to get ballots in the Spanish language in California, to get driver's licenses in people's ethnic language. We passed a very important law way back in 1961 to remove the citizenship requirements so that people could get public assistance. Later on, with United Farm Workers, we passed unemployment insurance for farm workers, the right to organize, so we worked at the local level to strengthen communities so that they could then influence their legislators and their Congress people. I mean we passed a law, and when you think about this to make it mandatory that employers throughout the United States have toilets in the fields for their workers, which they didn't have.

It was all done with the workers themselves organizing and putting pressure on their legislators to make these things happen.

**JCSCORE:** Was there ever a moment where you, or you and Cesar realized, this could be transformative? We could be changing the culture of the United States, this could have huge implications; or were you just so busy changing the world around you, you did not need to reflect? Which was it?

**Dolores:** I think we were just trying to get people organized, getting them involved, making them understand that they had the power to make changes and that's what our purpose was. I don't think we were thinking of ourselves in any kind of a historical context. I think other people that were working with us could see that, but we were just so busy organizing that, that wasn't one of our thoughts.

**JCSCORE**: What was Cesar Chavez like? What was it like to work with him? You were the co-leaders of the United Farm Workers.

**Dolores:** Well, Cesar was a very humble person; he didn't really like a lot of attention, he was embarrassed by it. When people would shout, Viva Chavez, he would just cringe. He just wasn't used to that and, because he felt that, a lot of the credit belonged to the workers that were doing the work; they were the ones that were making things happen. So he was very humble in that respect.

He was a follower of Gandhi, the precepts of Gandhi, the whole idea of voluntary poverty, the idea of non-violence and of course he committed his life to doing that with his, in a very physical way by the, the long fasts that he took. He did three fasts. He did the first one in 1960, let's see… '68 for 25 days, and then in Arizona for 72 days, another water-only fast, and then the last one was for 36 days.

It's hard to say [if the fasts destroyed his health] because Cesar actually was not ill when he passed away; he died in his sleep. And it was a very natural death and the interesting thing about the cause you know his parents lived to be almost 100 years old; his dad was 101 and his mother was just a couple of years short of 100. But his grandfather, who Cesar was built like, died at exactly the same age as Cesar, 66 years old.

**JCSCORE:** After all that you did, all that happened in those days, there are working poor people still there. As a country, we are not where we want to be, what do you have to say about that?

**Dolores:** I think the conditions for farm workers have improved. We know we have as we talked before a lot of Latino professionals, and even farm workers you know had their kids and the Ivy League colleges all over the country and that's wonderful. To know that, but we know that because of the stagnation of wages, the assault on labor unions in the United States of America.

You now have 26 states that now have right-to-work laws, which makes it very difficult for unions to organize because they can't collect the dues from workers, from their paychecks, which makes it easy for them to be able to fund the organizations. And so, it's been very difficult and I think that there's been an attack on labor unions specifically and that, of course, affects all workers and it also affects the formation of a middle class in the United States.

**JCSCORE:** You have been arrested, when you have been involved in peaceful protests and marches. Getting arrested. What was that like?

**Dolores**: Well, initially, we were arrested because we were trying to talk to workers, going to the fields and for trespassing and sometimes we would just go out there and they would arrest us before we would get a chance to go into the field and talk to workers. Some of my more recent arrests have been kind of in solidarity of other movements. I was arrested with the LGBT community in San Francisco, when they were trying to bring in more medicine so that the prescriptions that they needed, that were being blocked by the government. And then, I was arrested with casino workers who were trying to organize in the casinos and were being denied the right to organize. And then, also arrested with the retail clerk's union. Some of my arrests have been in support of other organizations.

**JCSCORE:** Getting arrested is one thing, but in September of 1988 in San Francisco, near the NCORE 2016 conference site, you were beaten by police when you were part of a peaceful protest against. And you almost died. They really went after you, they put you in the hospital.

**Dolores:** Right, right. That was the first [President] Bush, and it was interesting that while we were out there protesting because he had said that there was nothing wrong with pesticides, that the government takes care of us, and we don't have to worry about that. At the same time there were farm workers that were dying of cancer, children, farm worker children, a very, very high percentage of them dying of cancer. We actually had

called for an additional third-grade boycott to bring attention to the pesticides on our food. And that's what Cesar's last fast was about. Also, it was about calling attention to the poisons on our food.

**JCSCORE:** How did it affect your perspective when you were beat and that you put in the hospital? Did it change your view of things? Did it cause a period of reflection?

**Dolores:** Well, we had met with a lot of violence in the farmworker movement. We had five people that were killed in the farmworker movement. One of the first one was a young Jewish girl from Boston named Nan Freeman; the second one was uh Juan de la Cruz, a farm worker from Arvin, California, who was shot in the heart, on the picket line. The third one was Rufino Contreras, who was killed in the Calexico area there, a lettuce farm, where he was met with a hail of 80 bullets when he went into the field to talk to striking farm workers; and then, Rene Lopez was our last martyr. Rene was organized his farm to vote for the union, and after they finished organizing and they won the election, this is after we got the right to organize, the Agricultural Relations Act, he was called to an automobile and the owner's brother-in-law, pulled out a gun and then shot him in the temple. They told him, he went down to the car, and they shot him in the temple. And then we had another martyr, a young Arab named Nagi Daifallah, who was killed by a sheriff in Kern County, near Bakersville.

**JCSCORE:** You really have spent an entire life fighting for social justice, and very few people can say that they have really supported one goal their entire life. Has that been difficult? There must have been times where you have doubted yourself to always be focused towards one goal. What has that been like?

**Dolores:** Well, I think all of the work that you do when you do social justice work, it's built on faith. I was a schoolteacher, I quit teaching school to come to Delano, with no money, and, in the middle of a divorce with seven children.

And so, everybody thought I was crazy when I made that decision, but I never regretted that. Everything that we've done and I've done organizing is built on faith. You have to have faith in yourself, you have to have faith in people, and even knowing when you have obstacles or the things don't go the way that you want them to go, that somehow things will work out, as long as you don't give up.

**JCSCORE:** Almost any look at the national scene, right now, would tell us that the country desperately needs to talk about race in so many ways, and yet the discussion that never seems to happen is the discussion of race. Why is race the most uncomfortable topic in America?

**Dolores:** I think this country was built on racism. When you think about what we did to the Native Americans, to African slaves, to Asian people, or to Oriental Exclusion Act, the internment of the Japanese during World War II. We just have layers and layers and layers of wrongdoing. It's like the Howard Zinn history of the United States of America. And so, the Bracero program where Mexicans were brought in and they were almost treated like slaves where they were worked with very little wages for the work that they did, so I think we've just got so many layers of slavery. I think there's a huge amount of guilt.

And I think we don't really want to admit that we've done this, and people want to try to ignore it. Racism justifies some people keeping their power, because they can always. I like to say, they kept the farm workers without toilets or drinking water, you know with people that feed us, that put the food on our table, and they're not respected. They're not acknowledged, and somehow this justifies putting people being able to make profits off of workers and not acknowledging the workers that really built the wealth of the country. I think there's a lot of guilt involved in that and I think somehow we have to figure out a way to do some kind of reconciliation, just like they did in South Africa. This is so that we can say to people, well you don't have to feel guilty.

We've all have to identify this issue; we've have to acknowledge that racism exists and that people are getting killed because they're black or brown, and people are being mistreated, people are being incarcerated. The whole immigration issue, it's not about people crossing the border, it's about building prisons and saying that you have committed a crime when crossing the border's not a crime. It's a civil offense. So, there's profits that are being made out of racism and we've got to identify this and acknowledge it and then say to everybody and to all of our institutions and our, our government agencies. Everybody here has got to take a position and to start acknowledging and start working to end the racism.

Racism is so much in the fabric of American culture.

People have to be nudged into it, and called out. If you're not doing something to end racism, then, as the Black Panthers used to say, "You're either part of the solution or you're part of the problem."

And, I think that we have, not only a commitment, but also accountability. I think anybody, any organization that gets any kind of federal funds or state funds in the United States of America, has to say, "As part of this money that you're getting from the taxpayers of the country, we've got to do something to erase the racism in your agency." You know, in your institution, in your organization, and in your community, otherwise I think it's going to continue. And now's the time because now we see that it's so public. You know, it's very public when you have people who are quote-unquote leaders can come out.

You know, with impunity, and just attack people of color the way that they're doing.

**JCSCORE:** If you could tell people the one thing that could maybe move things in the right direction that they can do, what occurs to you? What one thing would you say is an important step that people could take?

**Dolores:** Well, the one thing that's very simple and one great power that we all have is to vote.

We can vote people into school boards, and that [voting action] will say, "Okay, I'm going to commit to do something about erasing the racism in our school district." Because we know that racism is based on ignorance. And so, if people will commit to start teaching ethnic studies, say in kindergarten through high school, people will start learning how, and where does this racism come from. How does it manifest itself. And, how people suffer from racism. So, then I think that's one thing, people have to again identify it and acknowledge it. This is why I always suggest that people show the movie of Emmett Till, this young 14-year-old African-American youngster who went from Chicago to Mississippi and was killed because he whistled at a white woman.

Showing maybe movies like Viva La Causa, which is the Southern Poverty Law Center's movie about the farm worker, about the great boycott and, again, because otherwise they don't know. Because we live in so many siloes, we don't walk in each other's shoes, and people are taught to be afraid of each other, and, it's also kind of I think tied into the violence that we have in our society, because we have a very, very violent culture. We've got to start, and we could make it end, we really can. It's not going to happen unless we all work very hard. And I like to quote Reverend Jim Lawson when he says, "We've got to dismantle, these institutional systems of oppression and racism."

**JCSCORE:** In your lifetime, do you think you will see additional major change in social justice issues toward the good in the United States? Do you expect to see that in your lifetime?

**Dolores**: I see it happening right now. I think it's very visible. I mean, we have the Occupy movement. For instance, that brought to the attention of the disparities; we have the Black Lives Matter movement that is happening right now, in terms of calling attention to the slayings of African-Americans by police. This whole culture of police

violence that is happening everywhere. Even in my own city, Bakersville, California, has just been acknowledged as one of the cities that has the highest number of people that have been killed by police in the United States per capita, my own city.

The large expulsion of African-American and Latino students that are going all over the country into to the school-to-prison pipeline, that we have to also dismantle. I see it happening now and I think the young people are going to be in the vanguard of this. We've seen people like the Dreamers for instance that were able to get the most powerful person in the world, President Obama, to do an executive action that they could stay in the country and go to school and get work permits and driver's licenses. It's going to be led by a lot of the young people and I think by the educators, because the educators are the one group that can really understand what's going on. I think other people are too busy with their lives and they see it on the news and they don't they feel like helpless or hopeless that they can't do anything about it, but I think our educators can be in the forefront of changing our whole system of racism that we have.

**JCSCORE:** Organizations like the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity, which you are a part of right now in San Francisco; what role can organizations like this, where educators come from all over the United States and talk for several days and try to make plans, can that be part of, is that an important part of what you are describing?

**Dolores:** Absolutely, but I think that they've got to make a commitment, to not just be teachers but to be organizers. They are the leaders in our community, but I don't think that they acknowledge themselves as leaders. I think other people see educators as leaders, but they don't see themselves as leaders, and they've got to take on that mantle, which of course means extra work for them because we know that educators have so much work to do to begin with in terms of trying to teach and be in the educational system, with its own problems that it has. We're asking them to take an extra step to go out to the community, and get out of their comfort zone of the school system and go out to the community and start teaching people in the community what they need to learn about race and racism.

**JCSCORE:** What message would you like Americans, for those who are reading this interview, to know and reflect about the struggles that we face for social justice in America?

**Dolores:** That we need to be reoriented, our whole society in the United States, to think of one of sharing, and one of caring for each other. When we think of social justice, we think of not only equality, and I know people who say, “Well, not everybody can be equal, right?” But the thing is that we don’t have to oppress certain groups in our society, the disabled or the mentally ill; people should be cared for, and we have a responsibility as citizens to do that.

I think that we also need to be more demanding because these are our tax dollars that we are paying and we need to ask, “where are our tax dollars going?”

We have asked those questions, and we can’t feel ever that that’s not our right.

I’m a citizen participation, we’re doing this with the Dolores Huerta Foundation, with my organization. We’re organizing parents, so that they can come to the school districts and they can say, “Okay, we want to look at that budget and see how you’re spending that money.”

And we have been very successful, we have found in one little school district over there, we had somebody who was earning a six-figure salary that didn’t have a certification. When parents started asking questions of that administrator, and he couldn’t answer the question, then they started looking a little bit deeper. They found out that this person was not even certified but he had received that position because he had friends on the school board.

Things of that nature it was because when people participate they should never feel that, they don’t have a right to do that. That’s where the power comes from.

Being involved and taking responsibility for what I am doing as a social justice leader is for the people.

**JCSCORE:** Can you make a prediction of something that will impact the Latino community, good or bad, but you think is, is really looming on the horizon out there in the next 10 or 20 years that people could look for.

**Dolores:** I see the Latino community playing a much more powerful role in the United States of America, in our own country. Also, when you talk to many of the students and I always ask them, "what are you majoring in?" And so many of them are majoring in international studies. I see that a lot of our young people coming out of the colleges are going to be more involved in international politics, and because they understand the ramifications and the implications of a global world.

And that's what I see in the future, that so many of our young people are much more visionary than the rest of us are, and so I think the Latino community is going to have a very powerful role in the history in the future of the United States of America, and we've always had a role.

A bigger role and I think more links with Latin America and I think we're going to be learning from Latin America; we're going to be learning from Cuba, now that we have a relationship with Cuba. People say wow, how are the Cubans able to do all these incredible things like having free healthcare for every citizen, free education for every citizen, and yet be able to maintain their country, when they're a very, have a very poor economy that's had an economic boycott in the country but our young people are very open, curious, and they all want a better world, because so many of their families have suffered so that they could have an education and create a better world.