

NMSU Archives  
Oral History Collection

New Mexico State University  
Las Cruces, New Mexico

**Mesilla Valley Community of Hope**

2018

**Hope Stories**

Interview 8

**Project Link Liaison with Yolanda A. Silva**

Interviewed by David Lee del Norte

17 July 2018

La Paz Room at Jardin de Los Niños

Sponsored by Doña Ana County Historical Society

Copyright Yolanda A. Silva — Copyright David Lee del Norte

**Table of Contents**

Project Link Liaison with Yolanda A. Silva	i
Recommended Citation	iii
Recording Information	iii
Acknowledgement	iv
Project History	v
Narrator Summary	vii
Index of first hour	ix
Index of second hour	xi
Interview 8 of Hope Stories — July 17th, 2018	1
Interview 8 second hour — July 17th, 2018	43

### **Recommended Citation**

Silva, Yolanda, interviewed by David Lee del Norte. July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018.  
Hope Stories oral history project, New Mexico State University  
Library Archives and Special Collections.

### **Recording Information**

Hope Stories 008 — 1h 49m duration. Recording held at Jardin de Los Niños La Paz Room on the Hope Campus.

## **Acknowledgement**

With guidance from public historian Dr. Jon Hunner, and support from Dr. Elizabeth Horodowich and Dr. Peter Kopp, in early 2018 Doña Ana County Historical Society awarded the Hope Stories project generous transcription funding through the Mary and J. Paul Taylor NMSU Student Scholarship.

Archivist and oral historian at New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum, Donna Wojcik transcribed eight interviews of the project, provided invaluable knowledge about transcription craft, and kindly orchestrated narrator appreciation artwork from Ray Ortiz. Donna's interpretive insight and professional workflow support is unmatched.

Kara Andrea Lory's *The Cultural Geography of the Homeless in Las Cruces, New Mexico* remains must-read research. Available at NMSU Library Archives and Special Collections, Lory's 2003 thesis is an excellent historical source on the consolidated services model at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, an important first step to learning more about Doña Ana County poverty and Las Cruces homelessness.

I am especially thankful to each of the sixteen Hope Stories narrators whose invaluable time, insight, and personal engagement with the homeless community cannot be highlighted enough. Seen together collectively with project oral history transcription and audio recordings, it is my wish as researcher that New Mexico citizens recognize each narrator's contribution alongside the many unnamed individuals who work to end homelessness and hunger in Las Cruces.

## **Project History**

The Mesilla Valley Community of Hope (MVCH) is a homeless services corridor in Las Cruces, New Mexico. In the 1970s, Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church began Soup Kitchen service which later became El Caldito. As need for food and healthcare clinical service increased throughout the 1980s, the Las Cruces community supported Saint Andrew's congregation members with the opening of Saint Luke's Health Clinic. With a long history of compassionate services for visitors, the City of Las Cruces recognized the importance of limiting distance and travel-time between public health and human service organizations located throughout different parts of the city.

Incorporated as a non-profit in 1991, additional support continued to form what became known as a collaborative alliance with operations at 999 Amador Avenue nearby to downtown Las Cruces. In 2011, following a particularly harsh Las Cruces "Deep Freeze" winter that caused health concerns for the housed, and deaths for the homeless due to exposure, Mesilla Valley Community of Hope staff banded together with clients to appeal to the City of Las Cruces for sanctioned overnight camping status to found the Camp Hope transitional living program.

In 2018, the Hope Stories project collected fifteen oral history interviews to learn about the development of the consolidated services model at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope. The term "Corridor of Care" refers to a perspective in the healthcare industry known as the consolidated services model that helps people access health and human service related programs in centrally located "Hub" or "Node" areas.

This public history graduate project asked participating narrators questions about how the Las Cruces community first began to advance, reinforce, and collaborate through the actions necessary to become the Hope Campus at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope. Rather than conduct interviews with those who experienced homelessness, the project features staff and volunteer narrators who shared community engagement stories about the consolidated services corridor concept.

Two additional perspectives from outside the Hope Campus, the fourth interview with Glenn Trowbridge took place at CARE Complex in Las Vegas, Nevada, an out-of-state counter-balance to the history of homeless consolidated services in the United States; while the fifteenth interview with Kit Elliot and Meg Long occurred at Aggie Cupboard on NMSU campus, a satellite food pantry inspired by Casa de Peregrinos.

Today's work to help the homeless in Las Cruces is the result of a compassionate, multi-organizational approach by non-profit service providers. In 2018, these five core non-profit homeless services include Mesilla Valley Community of Hope; Casa de Peregrinos food pantry; El Caldito soup kitchen; Jardin de Los Niños educational program; and Amador Health Center (formally Saint Luke's Health Clinic).

With Hope Campus the geographic center of non-profit homeless service providers in Las Cruces, it is important to note resources offered by City of Las Cruces, State of New Mexico Health and Human Services, and many other local organizations not located at 999 Amador Avenue. For a comprehensive listing of community service organizations, including for those experiencing homelessness, use online search term "Las Cruces Community Resource Guide," or ask for an updated copy.

## **Narrator Summary**

Yoli Silva helped New Mexico’s children as a Las Cruces Public Schools (Title 1– Education for the Disadvantaged) Social Worker for over twenty-seven years, including twelve years as Project Link Homeless Education liaison to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Silva worked as an investigator, a counselor for foster care and adoption with Children, Youth & Families Department (CYFD), and advocated for community awareness of youth experiencing homelessness. An important perspective on the State of New Mexico’s foster care system, domestic violence, and its historic struggles with childhood welfare, the CYFD mission statement reads, simply, “Improving the Quality of Life for All Our Children.”

Locally, accommodated by Project Link liaisons to promote enrollment regardless personal circumstances, Las Cruces Public Schools issues “Student Residency Questionnaires” to identify homeless youth and families in need of assistance. In partnership with Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce, Leadership Las Cruces started a fundraiser event for Project Link called “Linking Hands: Helping Our Homeless Youth” which raised over \$36,000 in 2018, and more than \$40,000 in 2019.

Silva emphasizes regular commitment of student support to match the determination that youths need to create lasting educational schedules and routines. This includes community recognition that youth homelessness requires year-round attention, Silva tells us, and not just during holidays or over the winter months of the academic school year.

A long-time partner to Mesilla Valley Community of Hope and collaborator with Audrey Hardman-Hartley of Jardin de Los Niños to provide students consistent access to educational resources, in 2018 Silva retired from Las Cruces Public Schools persistent to continue to seek funding sources for New Mexico's unaccompanied youth.

## **Index of first hour**

00:07 - Interview introduction

01:08 - Las Cruces Public Schools' "Title 1" Social Worker for disadvantaged families

02:10 - Community awareness about Las Cruces homeless children

04:14 - Project Link and McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

05:08 - The law, and providing documentation to protect homeless youth

06:38 - Project Link community liaisons, identifying youth, and reasons for homeless status

10:22 - Childhood homelessness awareness, stigmatization, and acceptance

12:30 - Successful Project Link unaccompanied youth students

15:09 - Challenges to access community resources for homeless teenagers

16:30 - Community rallies to protect two homeless students over winter break

22:30 - Ups-and-downs of working with community kindness to increase awareness

24:19 - Momentum of McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act in New Mexico

26:25 - McKinney-Vento liaisons within local New Mexico school districts

27:51 - Albuquerque mentor Helen Fox and liaison connections across the state

**Index of first hour (cont.)**

30:14 - “Fine-line” of Children, Youth & Families Department (CYFD) liaison referrals

31:47 - School House Connections (SHC) and youth homeless law protections

34:17 - Project Link liaisons and Las Cruces Public Schools Districts

35:47 - Awareness of New Mexico Colonias and educating families about rights to resources

39:31 - Difficulties of “Doubling-up” and living in someone else’s home

41:01 - Kids becoming “Parent-ified” and sibling caregivers

43:53 - Establishing consistency, everyday routines, and adapting to school opportunities

48:53 - Las Cruces community trust through Project Link intake process

52:30 - Limiting barriers to unaccompanied youth success

55:42 - Project Link origins with Las Cruces Public Schools and Erlinda Martinez

## **Index of second hour**

- 01:00:32 - Homeless youth accountability politics of Las Cruces Public Schools
- 01:03:03 - “Linking Hands” leadership group fundraises \$36,000 to benefit Project Link homeless youth
- 01:07:24 - In-retirement private help contrasted to “Title 1” federal funding for homeless youth
- 01:10:34 - Families and Youth, Inc. (FYI) program collaboration
- 01:12:19 - Closing El Crucero transitional living center; downsizing Families and Youth Inc. (FYI), and Southwest Counseling
- 01:15:59 - Rebuilding Families and Youth, Inc. (FYI) services
- 01:20:30 - Project Link liaison support across New Mexico, and “Knowing the law”
- 01:23:14 - Collaboration throughout Las Cruces homeless services organizations
- 01:25:48 - Jardin de Los Niños and Project Link join forces to benefit homeless students
- 01:27:58 - New staff and volunteer collaboration with seasoned homeless service providers
- 01:30:09 - Health insurance benefits for Project Link liaisons, and organizational self-care
- 01:33:47 - Social Worker healthcare coverage needs at Community of Hope
- 01:36:44 - The future of youth shelter care with Families and Youth, Inc.
- 01:38:08 - Combination of Las Cruces affordable housing and supportive services

**Index of second hour (cont.)**

01:39:10 - Maintaining agency focus, follow-through, and contributions to homeless youth

01:43:00 - The future of Project Link programs

01:45:00 - Leadership champions for child welfare in New Mexico

01:46:36 - Hope Stories project description; influence of *The Cultural Geography of the Homeless in Las Cruces* by Kara Andrea Lory

01:48:34 - “The homeless face is now children”





## Interview 8 of Hope Stories — July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018

\*\*\*\*

**David Lee del Norte:** This is the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope Stories Project with the New Mexico State University Public History Department. Today's narrator is Yoli Silva. The interviewer is David Lee, and the file name is 18HOPE\_0208.wav. The recording is being held at Jardin de los Niños La Paz Room on the Hope Campus. Today's date is the 17th of July, 2018. It's a beautiful day in Las Cruces.

**Yoli Silva:** Yes, it is.

del Norte: I'm very happy you're here today, Yoli. Thank you. Can we start by telling us your full name?

Silva: So, my full name is Yolanda A. Silva.

del Norte: And the location that you consider your home town?

Silva: Las Cruces, New Mexico.

del Norte: We discussed a little bit that you just retired from Las Cruces Public Schools.

Silva: I did, um hmm.

del Norte: How does that feel?

Silva: It's still brand new. I have worked with the Las Cruces Public Schools for twenty-seven years, as a social worker, and I started off just working with "Title 1" which, of course, is the program that works with disadvantaged, low-income children. And about twelve years ago, I started working with Project Link Homeless Education. So, I really have been working with disadvantaged families for many, many years.

Along the way, I've worked in being an investigator, and a counselor, for foster care and adoption — Privately as well as contracted through CYFD [Children, Youth and Families Department]. We make sure that families who are applying to foster children, and adopt through CYFD, are appropriate, and they're ready, and they understand what it means to adopt a child who has been placed in foster care situation.

So, I've done that. One of the big things that I've currently— about a year ago, six months ago — is to really start working on the awareness of our community about our homeless children in our community of Las Cruces. It's amazing how many people still say [question], "We have homeless kids?" And we do. We have lots of homeless kids, and that can range from anything from them being in the car, to being at the Gospel Rescue Mission, to being in a motel, and to be couch surfing, which means that they move from place-to-place-to-place.

Silva: So, we do have homeless kids, and it became a big focus for me this last year, maybe two [years], to really get our community to understand that we have homeless kids, and this isn't a school district problem. It's not a family problem. It is a community problem, and it is something that our community needed to be aware of, and to start looking at: what would be some possible solutions, possible resources, for families and kids in these situations.

So, that's been my focus. I retired, but that doesn't mean I'm not gonna to continue. I have a lot of community people who are still very much involved, and aware, and want to continue to build that. So, I'm going to continue to work with them to see how we can keep that collaboration between the community, and the school, so that a lot of our homeless families, children, are at least receiving some of the things, some of the resources, or the basic needs, that they may need while in this situation.

del Norte: Thank you for that opening information. That's an amazing bunch of information to un-pack. Can you tell me how you first realized, or came to understand homelessness for children in Las Cruces, or in the United States?

Silva: Well, as I said, twelve years ago when there was a shift, and I was given the lead of Project Link Homeless Education with the Las Cruces Public Schools. I knew — I had worked with families who had disadvantaged, low-income, poor, for many, many years, but I didn't realize the correlation of homelessness until I started to get trained, as they say, in homelessness and the law, as far as the federal law that is for homeless students which is McKinney-Vento—

Silva: The McKinney-Vento Homeless [Assistance] Act, which is a federal law that protects our children, for making sure that they can continue to have an education, and being homeless is not a barrier. And so, and basically the law states that if a family comes in— One of the things about the districts, and any district in the country, one of the first things families have to prove is residency, and birth certificates, and immunizations, and those kinds of things. When you're homeless that sometimes is very difficult because you've packed things away to make sure they're safe, or you've lost things along the way, and when you have homeless youth, that's not something they carry with them.

So, the law is to protect these children. To make sure that if they come to school, to register, and they're in a homeless situation, which again could be motel, hotel, shelter— Which includes domestic violence shelters, [or] the Gospel Rescue Mission here in Las Cruces, or they're living with a friend, or they're couch surfing, going from place-to-place— Then these children can get enrolled, and start school right away, without any of those documentations.

And then, as a liaison, what McKinney-Vento also provides is— Then we work with that family to help them gather those documents. It's not that they don't need them, and it's not that they don't still have to provide them. It just gives them leeway so that, then [Parents and children] have time— Kids are safe, they're in school, they have breakfast, and lunch, and snacks, and they're learning while mom and the liaison work on getting the documentation that they need.

Silva: And then, as the liaison, you also work very closely with the community to make sure that you find resources for these families, and the kids. And so, when I started working twelve years ago it was a big learning curve for me because I knew about “Title 1” and disadvantaged, but I didn’t realize the protection that a lot of those kids had, and how to facilitate that for them, and how to identify them. How do we go about— Because we had a lot of kids in our district who are in homeless situations, but we weren’t identifying them. We weren’t making sure that we were providing them those services.

del Norte: Can you talk about identifying homeless youth, and maybe tie that in with some of the training that you spoke of?

Silva: So, one of the big things is that we do have a lot of kids that are over fourteen [years old], who, for whatever reasons, are not able to live with their parent. And there’s a lot of reasons. It’s not just “They get in a fight.” We have kids who are very responsible, very, very much into making sure that they’re okay, and they have a fam-, a parent who may not be able to care for them because of domestic violence, because of drugs, because of their own mental health issues. So, some of these kids, because they wanna break that cycle, will leave home, and then they kind of “Couch surf.”

Other times, yes, it could be because they’ve gotten in a fight, and they just can’t get along with a step-parent, or wherever the parent situation may be. Other times, it’s young ladies that have been kicked out because of the reason of extramarital sex, teenage sex, pregnancy.

Silva: So, there's many, many different kinds of reasons. And so, first, it was learning about all those, and then it was educating our staff about recognizing when a kid came and said, "I wanna go to school," and they said, "Well, where's your parent?" And they're like, "Uh— I don't know. My mom's here." It's to recognize maybe some of that hesitancy, and then sit there and say, "Okay. The best thing for you to do is be in school. So, let's just get your name, put you in school, and let's fill out this form, and let's get it to our department that will work with you, and figure out what we can do to support you."

And that's what it was, it's education. Education and awareness is the biggest thing. And so, it had to start with the School District. It had to start with our staff to make sure that they understood that when a kid came, "Please don't turn them away." Even if you are still "Iffy," you pick up the phone, you call, and one of us, one of the liaisons, one of the people who work with Project Link, would be right there to figure out how we work this. And so, it became awareness, and that's how we began to identify, because a lot of times when the kids come in that are unaccompanied, right away they go to the counselor. That's where they send them.

The registrar will say, "Oh. You need to go to the counselor because your name is A through L, and Mrs. M works with A through L." And so, they would go there and the counselor, because of awareness and education, making sure we knew we provided them with the resource, with the forms and phone numbers, and all those kinds of things, was able to assess and say, "You're going in school, but I'm gonna find you some help." And that's how we started working on that awareness. And so, we would talk to registrars. We would do— The counselors—

del Norte: Throughout the system?

Silva: Throughout the system. Throughout the—

del Norte: Not just one school.

Silva: Not just one school.

del Norte: All.

Silva: All schools—

del Norte: Yes.

Silva: —because every school in the Las Cruces Public School District has a homeless kid. All of them do. They may, some schools may only have one or two. Other schools may have an influx of twenty. But, every school has one. So, it was educating all of our staff, including administrators.

del Norte: Wow.

Silva: Including the janitors, and the food service, and the nurses. It meant educating, and making them aware, for everybody.

Silva: So, we started working with doing that, and it was a slow process because not everybody understood. And everybody— Just like other things that they think is a negative, “We don’t have that in our school.” We heard some of that, and it’s like, “Yes. You do.”

del Norte: That reminds me. Yeah. Can you talk about some of the stigmatization on youth homeless?

Silva: Well, absolutely, because, again, one of the first things that people think, when you think of homeless, is you think of the gentleman who’s at the end of the median with a sign that says, “I’m hungry,” and “Please, give me money.” They’re scraggly. They’re not clean. And that’s what people think of, and that’s not the face of homelessness anymore in the United States. The face of homelessness now is kids who are birth to five years old. That’s what the growing number of our homeless kids are. Our young, early childhood kids.

So, we had to change that view. We had to change that character, and make it, “These are kids.” And so, we had to talk about kids over-and-over. And there was a stigma, too, especially when you have homeless youth, that they’re gang members, they’re trouble makers, they use drugs, they’re just not the good kid, and that is so wrong. And one of the things, through the awareness’ [campaign] and all that— We’ve been able to prove that that’s not what is here in our district. Every district works with different things. Ours was to make sure that everybody understood that those weren’t our kids.

Silva: And so, one of the things we started working on was making sure that our seniors, kids who are in a homeless situation, unaccompanied youth, twelfth graders who were on the verge of graduating, got as much assistance from our program as possible. And I am proud to say that in the last year, out of twenty-one kids, eighteen graduated. And between all of them there was scholarships, and awards, and they're all— Eighteen of them were going on to something, whether it was higher education, the military— They were going on to something else. They're breaking that cycle. And then, this year we had forty-five, and out of those forty-five, thirty-eight graduated with scholarships, and with the plans of moving on to college.

So, these kids are smart. They are intelligent. They are resilient, and they're full of talent, and that's one of the things that we want to make sure, and that was one of the big awareness things we had this past year, 2017, 2018— It's like, “No, no.” “Look at this kid. He wants to go to school every day, but he doesn't have gas for his car.” Or “Look at this kid. He wants to go to school every day, but he doesn't have the outfit he needs, the jeans and the T-shirt, to make sure he fits in just like every other kid.” So, those were the awareness' that we brought out, that these kids sometimes needed to have a food card, so they could go to eat in the evening, because they had breakfast and lunch at school, but then, “What do they do about dinner?”

So, our community started to come together, and they started to see that these kids are just like everybody else's kids, and are on that road to make things better. Just like in any situation, you do have that bad apple, of course, but the majority are the kids— are those thirty-eight who are going on to college.

del Norte: Can you talk just a little bit about the community coming together?

Silva: Of course. Sure.

del Norte: –When that began to take place? I can't find the exact question that I have on my sheet here; however, I'm really looking for the difference before-and-after Project Link began, and some of the indicators of the need for Project Link in Las Cruces.

Silva: Absolutely. So, we've always— I mean we've talked to groups here and there, and we've had things trickle in: backpacks, school supplies, those kinds of things. But then, one of the things, as you get trained, and you work in this system, you get to see some of the things that teens need, families need, and mostly teens. Only because families, at least there's a parent who hopefully is looking to see how they can gather this or gather that. They can make that phone call. They can go and apply for Social Security. They can go and apply for food stamps and Medicaid.

A fifteen year old, the policies make that difficult. So, we had to look for different resources to see how to— because a fifteen year old, a sixteen year old, [isn't] necessarily able to go and apply for food stamps because they're not an adult. They can't go get a room, or an apartment. They're not an adult.

Silva: Community of Hope is one of our biggest partners, but everybody who they can house has to be eighteen years or older. We have fourteen, fifteen year olds. We have sixteen year olds. So, those are kinds of the things that we started to work on. Still providing us a lot of support, but we needed to make sure our community was aware.

And so, one of the things that was a big thing, that kind of got the big ball rolling, was we were getting ready for Christmas vacation in 2017, just six months ago, seven months ago. We were getting ready, and as a program we were working really, really hard to make sure that these unaccompanied youth had a plan. There was a family who they could stay for the two weeks that the school district is closed. A family.

And then, we were working, we were getting gift cards, and hygiene [Kits], and snack packs, things like that, that we could give our kiddos, so that they would have something to take them through the two weeks that we're also kind of off, and aren't answering the phone, per se, because we have a life of our own.

del Norte: (Chuckles) Right.

Silva: You know, and those kinds of things. So, we were looking at all that. And two— One of our young men who was a senior at the time, and his younger brother— We found out that they were, through the counselor— because again, that's where they build, also, very good relationships; that they were sleeping in the car in someone's driveway. And we were looking at the weather. It was supposed to get really, really cold.

Silva: So, making some phone calls, it's like, "Okay. What do we do with these kids, seventeen and fifteen?" "They can't be living in their car for two weeks. We need to figure out what to do." And there was community groups that, right way, a bunch of realtors that were getting together. We had Catholic Charities who was, like, "What? We can't— We need to figure something out."

So, our— We had all of a sudden, city councilors who were very, very— Wanted to be involved because it's like, "What do you mean we have two kids sleeping in the car?" And, "Where's their parent?" And so, all of a sudden there were these questions. We had answers, but what were we still going to do about these two kids because we couldn't put them up in a motel. Because, then again, that would still be monies that we'd have to figure out how to get, and most motels wouldn't put them up because they were not eighteen years of age. So, "What are we going to do?"

So, there was a big uproar. I will be very honest. There was a very big uproar in the community about these kiddos, and that kind of thing. Catholic Charities did come through with private donations that they had, and other community members that they said, "If you wanna donate, and help us with these kids, donate through here, and we'll provide." They actually paid for the kids, and took the responsibility of putting them up at a motel for almost a month.

del Norte: Wow.

Silva: From right before—

del Norte: Through the holiday?

Silva: Through the holidays, and about two weeks after we came back. They were willing to put them up for— And that was a lot of money. And so, other community members, there were gift cards all of a sudden coming in for all kinds of different things. Clothes, and food, and gas cards, because now it's like: "There was a face," and now they were seeing that these kids weren't homeless by choice. These are circumstances.

And so, our community started to rally, and thank goodness that throughout, it didn't stop there. The boys are okay, and they turned— the older one, turned eighteen.

Community of Hope already had a plan. We already had worked with them. There was a program that they could qualify as soon as the oldest one hit eighteen. He was going to be eighteen in January. So, we just had to figure out how to keep him, keep both of them, safe until he turned eighteen. The Community of Hope already had a plan. We were already working on that plan, and how we were gonna— What they needed to do, and how they were gonna work with us, and all those kinds of things.

So, now they're housed, and the older one is at the Doña Ana [Community College] branch. He's gonna start in August [2018]. The younger one is gonna be a senior this coming year. So, they're doing well. Community of Hope now is their support system.

Silva: So, it's that collaboration, and it's that awareness. But, the community rallied. And one of the good things, because one of the things I heard a lot of people say, "What do I do? I have a room." Or, "I have a \_\_\_\_\_."

I said, "I understand," but we also know that that's a lot of liabilities. Because we know the kid's persona here, but that doesn't mean once they go into a home it's a different story. The liability of the family who wants to take them in, the person who wants to take— We don't know a whole lot of that [Background information]. So, our big thing was, "If you wanna provide a gift card," those are all things that will help maintain them, and support them, so that they can continue to be where they're at, wherever that may be.

But, if nothing else, you make sure you continue to be a voice, and that was our mantra for the next couple of months. "Be a voice" for these kids. When you talk to your city councilor. When you talk to your senator. When you talk to your representative, you ask them, "What are you gonna do about homeless kids?" Because that's what these kids need. They need a voice, and people need to keep them up on the forefront for everybody who can make some policies, and make some law. So, that's what we worked really hard on, is continue to "Be a voice" for these kids.

del Norte: I think that's amazing that you had to moderate the amount of kindness, right?

Silva: Yes.

del Norte: You had to say, “Well. Let’s step back for your own good.”

Silva: Absolutely.

del Norte: “We’re gonna help these kids.” At the same time, too much kindness can also get in the way sometimes.

Silva: It can, and it can muddy the waters. So, we wanted to stay away from that because, again, we’re an educational program. This wasn’t— but it brought so much awareness and power, per se. We needed to figure out how we were gonna work with that, because we had people from all over— El Paso, including El Paso, who it was like, “What do they do for these kids?” It was like, “You have homeless kids in El Paso. You need to figure— This is the contact person.” Because that’s one of the good things about McKinney-Vento: they send out who the liaison is in all of the different districts, “This is the people who are liaisons in these districts. Call them. See how you can help those kids there.”

So, it was also making sure that it wasn’t just about these two kids. It was about our nations’ kids, our community, our regional, and our nations’ kids, our state and our nation. So, we needed to make sure, I mean, we got calls from people in New York, and people from California. It’s like, “We heard about this going on. How did you do this? How did you rally your community to come together?”

Silva: And that was important because then it wasn't just— This is one of the things that I truly believe in, and I tell students, social work students, “You are that pebble in that pond. When you do something, that ripple will grow— will grow, and it'll grow. Maybe at the very outskirts it's a very light ripple, but it's still a ripple. You're still making a change.” And that's what we thought, that's what I think we did.

del Norte: I'll refrain from saying too much about your inspiration, but it's really good to hear this in terms of the pebbles making waves, or ripples.

Silva: Ripples, um hmm.

del Norte: I think it's really important as well. I'm wondering, you're perspective on McKinney-Vento since its inception, I believe the late 1980s.

Silva: Yes.

del Norte: Has it always been a force in New Mexico since you began?

Silva: No. No.

del Norte: Can you talk about the shift into making it useful?

Silva: So, right. So, McKinney-Vento, again, it started because of states out east, and so, and that was great. Absolutely! But, people think of homeless in the inner— in the inner cities because you get to see it so much more. You do see the kids, and you do see the families, on the street.

So, getting out to this rural area, to our states out here in the southwest, it wasn't a big momentum, because you get that: "We don't have homeless kids," because you do not see them sleeping on the subways. You do not see them sleeping on the street, under the bridges, that kind of a thing. So, it took a little while for the momentum. It was there, as far as McKinney-Vento was concerned, but us, as states, didn't take it on until, I would say maybe five, six years ago. And again—

del Norte: That late?

Silva: Again, it takes a lot of momentum from people who are very passionate. There was people who started in Santa Fe who were very passionate. People who were in Albuquerque that were very passionate. The lady in Albuquerque, basically, was the momentum that started here in New Mexico, and that was maybe twelve, fifteen years ago, but it was, again, Albuquerque, you know, and it—

del Norte: Sure.

Silva: –it took some time for us to kick in, and say, “No. It’s not just in Albuquerque. We have homeless kids in Lordsburg [New Mexico]. We have homeless kids in Las Cruces. We have homeless kids in Anthony [New Mexico]. We have them everywhere.” So, a lot of it has to do with who’s in charge, and who is—

del Norte: As in the administration in the state?

Silva: –as in administration in the— not only the state, but in your school district. I mean, because the McKinney-Vento liaison is not specifically— It doesn’t have a profession tied to it. It’s pretty much, as long as there is a McKinney-Vento liaison, I mean, I’ve gone to state meetings, and national conferences, and they can be the superintendent. They can be a teacher. They can be— So, it takes that person to get that momentum going, and a lot of times it has a lot to do with the politics, and a lot to do with the funding, and what they’re really thinking of wanting to do, and their understanding.

So, if you don’t have the passionate person, even if it’s the superintendent, but if they’re not passionate, and they’re not gonna knock down doors and walls, and say, “No. We’re gonna do this, and da-da-da-da—” Then it’s not a big thing in that district, per se. But, if you start having people who are passionate, a program who is passionate, support from the district, the superintendent, the board of directors, all that kind of stuff, then absolutely, you can do so much.

del Norte: Thinking about the collaborations, and you mentioned Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Can you outline some of the vital organizations, businesses, and people? And I jump to this question because you mentioned a woman in Albuquerque. Do you remember who she is?

Silva: Helen Fox. She's deceased. But, she had Albuquerque. She wrote grants, and she had businesses providing dinners, and, I mean, she had that program down pat. So, a lot of us liaisons who kind of came in late in the game, per se, even though there might have been others, but who were passionate, and came in, it was like, "How do you do this? Tell us how?" I mean, it was, "Helen. Show us." And Helen became the voice of New Mexico because she made sure, being in Albuquerque, Santa Fe heard about her homeless kids, "Da-da-da...da-da-da." So, it started to build. And so, Helen Fox was one of the biggest ones that I can say was the rolling force kind of a thing.

del Norte: Do you have trainings in Albuquerque that you've attended?

Silva: Yes.

del Norte: And so, you're in contact with those groups?

Silva: Absolutely, because, again, one of the biggest things that we have looked to do is to make sure that we have that collaboration from liaison to liaison, district to district, because I have families who have moved from here to Gadsden [High School in Anthony, New Mexico], which is down south— Who have moved to Deming [New Mexico], and so, it's awesome to be able to have that contact because "Okay, Olivia. You have my family going down there, and this is a little bit of the information. Could you please make sure— Let me know as soon as they enroll because I need to make sure that those kids are in school."

She has her radar on. [In] Gadsden: "Ray, have you heard of this family" or "Ray, I have a family who says they went up to Gadsden. Where are they, and what happened? What did you help them with?" So, having those connections is imperative, so that we can make that continuum of care for those kids as smooth as possible.

del Norte: Yoli, how does this relate to Children, Youth & Families Department [CYFD] in the State? We talked a little bit about it before we began, but I'm wondering since we are across the state with your work, and your collaborations, how does that play a role in Project Link, and homeless youth?

Silva: It's a very fine line. Because one of the things that CYFD says— And again, especially in the last year or two, because of the influx of abuse cases that have happened, and that kind of thing, it's like, "We need to know. We need to know. We—"

Silva: A couple years ago, even maybe three years ago, if you called CYFD, and made a SCI [State Central Intake] report about a family who was homeless that wasn't really a big— “Are they being abused,” “Is there sexual abuse,” “Is there physical abuse,” that kind of thing. Because that's their forte, and when you look at unaccompanied youth it's hard, even for kids who have been abused, to find— For CYFD to find foster homes for sixteen, seventeen year olds, that kind of thing.

So, but then the push came that: “You need to report them,” and you have that fine line. Here you have a kid who goes to school every day. He is not in an unsafe place. I mean, yeah, he's surfing from three houses, but they're good families. They're— He hasn't, they haven't had any kind of abuse. They are clean. They are— Their attendance is good. Their grades are good. So, is that really a CYFD referral? So, it is a very fine line. And so, it makes it difficult for liaisons.

The national center— The Schoolhouse Connection (SHC) is one of the biggest, non-profit organizations that are the advocates for homeless. They know the law backwards and forwards. They do a lot of lobbying. They keep liaisons up to date on things that might be happening. They have lawyers on board, and that kind of thing. So, it was a call to them, and let them know: “They're saying that we have to \_\_\_\_\_.”

And they're like, “Well, no.”

“Being homeless is not against the law, and it is not abuse.”

Silva: So, again, I mean, and they wrote a letter of support, and I know they've written it for other people as far as— We really train our liaisons really well to recognize when there is abuse. If there isn't abuse, we've also trained them to keep an eye on them, to be the “Eyes” to make sure that none of that happens in the future, per se.

So, they wrote a letter. But, it is a very fine line with protective services because, “He's sixteen. Doesn't have a parent. So, we need to report them.”

“Do we?”

So, again, it's a very fine line, and it's a very hard line to walk because depending on who you are, and depending how strong, and depending on how you want to stand up for yourself, and depending on the support that you have, and all that kind of thing, it leans in different directions. So, again, it's a fine line, and it's just hard to figure. Sometimes it's a case by case. Sometimes it's like, “No. We call no matter what.” You know, those kinds of things. So, it just depends.

del Norte: I appreciate you talking about this because I'm just now learning about how that affects the State and Las Cruces. It's such a big issue for New Mexico. Before I ask the next question, I have a small question. How many people are on the Project Link staff? You mentioned that the entire staff is in Las Cruces Public Schools—

Silva: Yes. It's a program.

del Norte: –but how about just the Project Link liaisons? Is it a big group?

Silva: To the day I retired there was three of us.

del Norte: Three people in Cruces.

Silva: In Las Cruces, for the public schools, and we covered all the schools. So, that went from Pre-K all the way up to seniors. So, it was all the schools in the district that are— Let's see, thirty-eight?

del Norte: Thirty-eight schools?

Silva: I think that's about thirty-eight.

del Norte: Oh my. I didn't realize it was that many. Wow.

Silva: Um hmm. [Yes] So, there's— It's a big district, and it didn't matter whether it was a high school, middle school, higher income, lower income, it didn't matter, as long as there was a homeless kid. We served all the schools, the whole district, and there's three of us. So, different districts have different things. In Gadsden [New Mexico] they have ambassadors, and they have two or three schools per person.

Silva: So, they're much more rural, and they do more traveling, but they have more people who work with kids. In Deming [New Mexico], there's one person. In Alamogordo [New Mexico] there's one person. So, it depends on the district, and how they want to spend money. We were able to say that we— We had three people.

del Norte: Wow. So, obviously, you've worked with children from the Colonias.

Silva: Um hmm. [Yes]

del Norte: Can you talk a little bit about the differences between the City of Las Cruces, and children coming in from the Colonias, and how that's been an issue that a lot of people don't know about, or they don't want to recognize?

Silva: Well. I guess part of it, again, is the awareness. And even awareness for the families, and the kids. You'll hear, "Well. I've lived like this all my life. No lights. No gas. No water. No food. It's the way of life." No. You have rights. And then, you have the other side where the community is like, "Well, they've always lived like that. Why do we have to help them? They're fine. They're doing well. They're—" You know? "Oh, no. They have rights. How do we provide them with some of their basic needs?"

Silva: So, again, a lot of it has been awareness, and there is that: “Because I’ve lived like this all my life” or “This is the way life has been for the last two, three years. This is the way it continues to be.” And it’s like, “No.” You know? So, sometimes it’s even educating the families, and the kids. “You have a right. You have a right to an education. You have a right to have any program that any other student has. You should be able to have that right, too.”

del Norte: Do liaisons actually go into homes on Colonias? I mean, you mentioned traveling to Deming [New Mexico], and that’s not a Colonia over there, but they must be around.

Silva: They, there are. Yes, I mean, depending on what your area is. For us, Las Cruces Public Schools, we really didn’t have Colonias per se. I mean, most of our families are not— But in Anthony [New Mexico], the Gadsden area, Deming, there are the Colonias, and that kind of thing. So, but part of our job is to meet the family, or the student, wherever they are at. So, it could be visiting them; we have visited families who are living in a tent along the Rio Grande.

We have visited families here at Community of Hope. They’re at the Gospel Rescue Mission. The park, [or] “My friend’s house.” “Can we meet at the parking lot of Walmart?” Wherever that family is comfortable, that’s where we’re going to be.

del Norte: So, they’re calling in from wherever they might be to arrange this.

Silva: (Simultaneously) At lot of them are. Yeah, a lot of them are. Or, we find out from the school that this is the situation: “The kid came and said that they were staying in so-and-so place.” So then, it’s kind of like working, finding out a little bit more, and then saying, “Okay. So, that means they’re there between this hour and hour, because that’s when the kid gets home. So, let’s walk home with the child, and let’s find out what’s going on. Let’s go see if we can find them,” kinds of things. So, sometimes it was going to the home.

Sometimes— And the home usually belonged to somebody else, because if they’re homeless they couldn’t have their own house, or their own apartment, but they were doubling-up— Big, big things. They were doubling-up with family. They were doubling up with friends. They were doubling up with somebody who let them stay there for the day, whatever the case is. Then, it was a matter to make sure that we didn’t cause any more issues. And so, sometimes, yes, we would meet in the parking lot. Meet in the driveway. And other times families were very open and said, “Oh, no. You can meet with them. Come on in. Come and talk to them. Whatever you need.” It all depended on the situation.

del Norte: You reminded me of a question. Could you explain some of the differences and connections between homeless single adults, homeless families, and homeless teens? How that,— I mean, because it’s such a stressor on youth.

Silva: Yes.

del Norte: And you've talked about this already, but I just want to make sure we don't pass up things like "Doubling-up," and how that is very, very difficult on young children, or even the seniors in high school that have to take care of their younger siblings, and so forth.

Silva: Right. So, when you're talking about double-up, that's very difficult because you're living in someone else's home. Someone else's rules. Which shelters are the same, but shelters have policies that they hand you when you register to stay there. They hand you a policy. The policy— The handbook or the rules, or whatever, and say, "This is what you have to do." When you're going to go live with somebody else you don't get handed that, so you don't know that they don't want noise after nine o'clock, or they don't like the fact that you have a dog, and they don't want a dog.

So, being doubled-up sometimes, I think, is even more stressful because you are living in somebody else's space, and that space comes with expectations, and rules, and boundaries that you don't know.

And so, for kids who may have had a home, or a room before, or were able to go and open the refrigerator whenever they wanted, and get whatever they wanted, whatever there was in the refrigerator, things have changed, and they can't do that anymore. They can't be kids anymore. They can't— They don't have their own space.

Silva: So, that is very stressful for kids, and it's stressful in the sense of also knowing that their mom is the one that's getting yelled at. Their mom is the one that's getting scolded because "Don't let your child do that." "Don't do this—" So, again, it sucks. Some of these kids become "Parent-ified." They want to be able to take on some of those roles as an adult.

When you have an unaccompanied youth who's taking care of siblings, that's a big deal. All of a sudden, not only are they worried about what the algebra problem is, but how they're gonna make dinner tonight. How they're gonna make sure the kids do their homework. How their brothers and sisters are gonna have food. How their brothers and sisters are gonna get home. "Is somebody gonna be there." All of a sudden, they have the stresses of an adult, and that's— For a teenager, you're growing up. That's the last thing you should be worried about. All of a sudden, senior prom, and being part of it, is not the biggest problem in their lives. It's whether they're gonna have some place to sleep tonight.

"Is mom gonna have to work late, or is mom going to be drunk, or is mom going to be on drugs?" "Is mom gonna have a man? Are we gonna go stay at mom's boyfriend's house for the weekend because we don't have anywhere else to go?"

So, all of a sudden these kids have so many other issues other than what's four plus four, and that's what our educational system also needs to recognize, is that sometimes these kids are not being disruptive, or misbehaving, or not understanding, not because of intelligence or bad upbringing— Just being a bad kid.

Silva: It's because of all these other issues, that are hanging over their head, that they do not have any control, and that's the hardest part. They have no control.

So, the only control they have is whether "I misbehave in class today, so that's where my control is." So, we need— That's one of the big things that our districts, and every, in the whole nation needs to understand, that a lot of these kids, it's not just because they wanna be a bad kid. There are other things going on. There's an umbrella of stuff above them.

del Norte: I'm wondering, in light of their own stressors, and their own issues, that they're not going to share with you right away, or their classmates, or their teachers: What is a typical intake for a student when they first are identified? And what I mean by that is, how do they get closer to normalcy in classes, in transportation to school, so on?

Silva: The biggest thing is consistency. These kids have not had consistency throughout their homeless situation. They need consistency. So, just making sure that the teacher is aware of their situation, not into detail, but some of the situation, so the teacher can make sure that when that child walks in, they acknowledge them, they [say] "I'm glad you're here." "No homework? Not a problem. We can work that out. I'll give you extra work, and if you do that—"

Or "I'll give you time at lunch," or whatever. That consistency is there for those kids. "Every day I walk in the school it's the same routine. Nothing's gonna change."

Silva: “And I can learn, and I can eat. I can have friends. I can do my work. I can sit there and be like all the other kids, and stare off into space.” Whatever the case is, but the consistency is there. And not have schools single them out in any way or form. That’s why it’s also important that they have opportunities to join whatever is being offered at the school, that every other child has an ability to be part of. So, if football—

We had a young man whose parent— whose mom was deported, but he was a citizen. And so, he stayed with his aunt here in— And he was a senior, and he had— Even though he was a citizen, they had lived in Mexico for the longest time, but his mom wanted him to get the education from the United States. He was a citizen. He was— He’s entitled. That’s his right.

But, getting him over here, she got deported. So, he ended up staying with the aunt, but, when he was in Mexico, he loved baseball. He played baseball all the time. So, when he came here, and he went to high school, he saw the kids practicing, and he went to go check out what they were doing. It wasn’t a positive experience because, again, not everybody’s aware, not everybody understands.

So, then it was our job to be able to make sure we always have that door open for— Whether it’s the parent, the aunt, the friend who’s taking them in can always call, and [say] “We have a problem.” They can call somebody, and talk to somebody about that. Aunt called and said, “He wants to play baseball, but the coach, da-da-da— la-la-la-la.”

Silva: “Give us a couple— Let me work on it.” So, it was a matter of educating, and advocating, and getting in trouble, and having them upset with you, and whatever it took. That young man got into baseball, and then it was a matter of finding a community person who would sponsor because they asked for them to take their own snacks, and to do this, and to do that. Finding a community person, [or] community group, that would be able to sponsor him, so he could be able to go to out-of-town games, and everything the other kids have.

Maybe [it’s] a different brand, but they had the Capri Sun [Fruit juice], or maybe a different thing, but they had the snack bar, the little— What do you call those? The little granola bars? Maybe it wasn’t Nature’s Own [Brand], but it was a granola bar. It didn’t matter. Just the fact that he was able to [understand], “I pretty much have everything what they have, and I’m doing well.” So, it was a matter of doing that. But, those are the kinds of things we need to make sure kids in these situations are aware. “You wanna go play baseball? We’ll figure it out.” One way or another. “You wanna be part of band? We’ll figure it out.”

Depending on programs and awareness, a lot of programs are willing, “We’ll waive the fee.” “Not to worry, because you’re telling us the situation, we’ll waive fees. We’ll waive that. We’ll waive that.” Or “Instead of the three hundred dollars, “We’ll bring it down to fifty dollars.” You know, those kinds of things. So, again, it’s making sure those kids know that they do have those opportunities. If they don’t want to take advantage, that’s okay, but they have that opportunity.

del Norte: I'm wondering how literacy, and actual access to the classroom, plays a role for their own health and wellness? Can you talk about how positive stories, like the youth that was looking to be on the baseball team— Is there other stories that aren't as positive of an outcome, and, because they were cut off from an access, or they weren't literate in English?

Silva: Oh, absolutely. I mean, we had a kiddo who wanted to be part of the debate team, but his English was not quite there. We had one student who wanted to be part of the debate team, but he was in Special Education classes, and that didn't— His level of understanding, or his level of being able to keep up was different. And so, again, then you need to figure out if there's a way that they can still play a role, if they can still participate somehow, or do we need to have a really good conversation about, "It's not that you can't, it's that, maybe we need to look for a different avenue," and working with them in that sense. So, again, when— You know, you asked a little earlier how long does an intake take.

del Norte: Yeah.

Silva: It can be a year because—

del Norte: Depending on the student.

Silva: –you get— Dependent on the student, and how much— You get a little bit this day, and you help a little bit here, and then you’re consistent. The next week, “I’m gonna go check on him again, and see how they’re doing.” “Oh. She came [to school] again. Okay.” [The student] didn’t share anything with you, but “Oh, they were here.” A week later, “I’m here again. Do you need snack packs? I brought snack packs, again. Do you need any?” “Oh, yeah. I’ll take two. Oh, by the way—” And they give you another little piece.

So, sometimes you don’t get the full story, even after a year. You may get seventy percent of it, but along the way you learn a little bit more. But, consistency. Knowing that you’re the person that is not going to— They’re not going to lose along the way. You’re not going to drop them. You’re gonna still be there for them. So, whether it was a liaison, sometimes they made the connection with the counselor, that was great! We had janitors, that they made connections with, because , you know, they’re very non-threatening.

del Norte: Yeah. I’ve felt that way before with janitors. They’re cleaning. They have motions. There’s consistency. Yeah.

Silva: And so. I may, um hmm— “They don’t care whether I’m getting an A or a B.” You know, and they make a connection. So, sometimes it was getting the information from the janitor, who would call and say, “Okay. You know, little Johnnie here just told me—”

“Okay. I’ll get you the stuff. I’ll get it to your office, and you can get it to him.”

Silva: So, again, it didn't matter where it was coming from, as long as the kid got it, or the kid knew it was there, or got that assistance. So, again, sometimes it was the cafeteria ladies, because a kid would say, "Can I have seconds? Because I'm gonna go home, and I'm not gonna have anything to eat." Oooh— Pick up that phone. They wouldn't tell me that, or they wouldn't tell the other liaison, or anybody else that, but they told the cafeteria lady. Alright. So, we're gonna make sure that cafeteria lady has our support, and we'll provide her with the resources, or whatever, that they can then pass on to this kiddo. So, again, it was not just a relationship with that kiddo. Sometimes it was with the relationship with the person that kiddo felt the most comfortable with.

del Norte: Yoli, we just went over fifty minutes.

Silva: I'm good.

del Norte: Are you good?

Silva: Um hmm. [Yes]

del Norte: You're an excellent speaker, so I will not stop you.

Silva: Okay.

del Norte: Before I move on to any other subject, I want to make sure that it's clear what Project Link services are provided. Is there anything else you can think of that would be a service to help homeless youth that we haven't spoken about?

Silva: Well, again, just overall, really quick, is— Project Link is to work with homeless students to make sure that they have no barriers to keep them from school, which includes transportation. So, providing bus passes, those kinds of things. And then, we provided hygiene [Kits]. We've provided clothes and shoes, and socks and underwear. And then, again, some of those things that we do not think about. The haircut—

We had a kiddo a couple years ago, three years ago per se, who had an interview for the Daniels Foundation [aka Daniels Fund]; full ride. Wherever he wanted to go. He had an interview. He had no tie, no dress shirt, no anything. And so, he's like: "What am I gonna do?" Because everybody's telling him he needs to dress professional for the interview. He needs to have a tie, because that's what we think. And so, he didn't know what he was gonna do, and he was stressing.

We found a program that was willing to take him shopping, and we found a grandma that was part of that program, who just took him on, "Come with me, Mijo." And he was so excited because she was like, "Oh, that color just doesn't look good on you. Let's try something else." And it's like, "Purple? Naw. Deep purple? Let's try a light purple." And he made a connection with that lady that he continues to have. He graduated, got the Daniels Foundation, is going to school, and is going to be a doctor. And he still has a connection with that lady.

Silva: So, sometimes it's those unconventional things. It's not necessarily the pencil, and the paper, and the notebook. It's the: "We need somebody who's gonna be able to take him shopping, and make him feel good, because he's gonna do something awesome." So again, sometimes it's the unconventional kinds of things. We have kids who, you know, um— hygiene is important, and "I'm sorry. The ninety-nine cent deodorant doesn't work for me. I need the 'Extra' whatever," and that kind of thing. It's making sure that we have what— We try to work with as much as we can, so it's unconventional stuff sometimes.

del Norte: Can you talk about Las Cruces Public Schools' responses. I mean, so, if there's three liaisons in all of the whole district, what were some of the responses when you wanted to get these services going? And I'm thinking— I just want to trail it back a little bit to the origins of Project Link, but I'm also thinking about how there might be barriers because you can't do everything with three folks.

Silva: No.

del Norte: And I also imagine the janitor, and the lunch lady, how those are responses even though they're not administrative.

Silva: Right. So, when the program was first created with the Las Cruces Public Schools, again, the thought was, "We'll have a few kids, and we'll be fine as long as we're meeting the law, and the law says we have to have a liaison."

del Norte: And the law being McKinney-Vento?

Silva: McKinney-Vento, yes.

del Norte: Oh, okay, and so it started—

Silva: And so, McKinney-Vento, yes, there needs to be a homeless liaison who's gonna work with these kids, who'll understand the needs. And so, every district, one way or another, should have a McKinney-Vento person. But, like I said, when it first started it was kind of like, "We just need to meet the law," and—

del Norte: Gotcha.

Silva: "We're okay." So, yeah. And there were kids that were identified, and that kind of a thing. But again, one of the things, like I said earlier, is that passion, and what you're willing to do.

del Norte: As in a teacher, or a tutor?

Silva: Because a lot of times, a lot of things sometimes were taken care of directly by the school itself, by the teacher, whoever they made a connection with. But, our program needed to take some of that responsibility.

Silva: There's still peo— It's like the teacher's like, "I'm letting you know this kids homeless, but I got him. I'll get him whatever they need." I mean, there's still all of that, but they needed to know that there was a support system for them [the teachers], too, kind of thing. So, there again, the awareness, and "You call us," and "We'll be there," and all those kinds of things. Administrator wise, we had a director who understood McKinney-Vento, and understood the different situations kids could be in, so—

del Norte: Can you share who that is?

Silva: Erlinda. Well, she just retired herself, too, but her name is Erlinda Martinez, and she understood tremendously what these kids— So, she gave me a lot of leeway because she knew, I mean, this is personal to a certain extent, but she knew that I was gonna do the right thing by kids, so there was no micro-managing, or anything like that. It was pretty much: "Erlinda, I just talked to the principal from East Picacho because they wouldn't let the kid in [to school], and I told her she was breaking the law, and when the family sued the District, I was gonna make sure that her name was on that lawsuit."

"Ah, Yoli. Oh, my God. Okay, not to worry. I'll take care of it."

But, she never said, or tied my hands. She never told, I mean, I would call and say, "Okay, I've got an agency, or I've got a community partner who's willing to do this for them: I said 'Yes.'"

Silva: “Yoli, where are you gonna put all that stuff?”

“I don’t know, but I said ‘Yes.’ ”

“Alright. Well, let me know what you need.”

So, she never ta— That was the thing. I knew I had that. I had, when Audrey was here—

del Norte: Audrey [Hardman] Hartley?

Silva: The director, uh huh [Yes]. When she was here, she connected me with a private donor that helped Jardin de los Niños, who wanted to help homeless kids, and that had heard from some of my— When I would talk to a reporter, or talk to somebody that would put it out there to some extent, and he wanted to help. And so, he handed me a ten-thousand dollar check. I was like, “Erlinda! Oh my God! Guess what I—” Excitement everywhere, you know, kind of thing. She, right away, was like, “Everybody needs to know.”

So, she understood, and she supported— “I have an agency who \_\_\_\_\_.” Or “I have a community group who really wants to hear it from me, but they wanna have you—”

“I’ll be there.” “Tell me what time, and where. Whatever.”

Silva: And she would be there, and she would promote, and she would make people aware, and she would— So, she was a great boss because she supported the things that— A lot of people say, “Yoli, what are your shenanigans this time?” You know, because I’m always thinking, “Well. That might not be something that we need, but “Okay. Let’s do it. I’ll figure something out.”

Because one of the things, too, is like, if I can’t use it, but they’re willing to give it to me, maybe Jardin de Los Niños can use it; Community of Hope can use it; La Casa can use it; Gospel Rescue; and we’ll share. We have charter schools that we can share with. So, it didn’t ma-, I mean, we may have used two or three of those items, but homeless kids, or families in need, were gonna get the rest of them. We knew it. I knew that. So, I never said “No” to a donation. I don’t care how big it was. I never said, “No.” I always said, “We’ll do it. We’ll do it.”

\*\*\*\*

[End first hour of interview]





**Interview 8 second hour — July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

\*\*\*\*

**David Lee del Norte:** So, that must be difficult if a donation might be strings attached, and you don't— Is that what you're getting at—

**Yoli Silva:** Yes.

del Norte: —is that there might be repercussions from a donor or something?

Silva: Well, and the district itself.

del Norte: Oh!

Silva: Because again—

del Norte: The law.

Silva: The law, and “That’s not your job,” and “What are you doing?” And “Now people know we have homeless kids, and now we have to be more accountable.” And even the district itself.

Silva: There was a big hoopla, again, when these two boys were— And, I mean, the superintendent got involved, and all of a sudden they took the ball, and they “Knew more,” and they “Knew better,” and, it was like, “What are you doing?” kind of thing, but— Don’t— All of a sudden the support wasn’t there a hundred percent. And so, they hired a new— A new director came on board that was gonna take Erlinda’s position. And one of the first things I was told, right after she took the position in January, “Don’t talk to the media. Don’t talk to anybody unless I’m sitting next to you.”

del Norte: And this is after, over— Well, I mean, over twelve years in the program already.

Silva: Twenty-seven years with the district that I had never done anything wrong. And, I brought awareness, and we did that. All of a sudden, I was being told: “Can’t do that.”

del Norte: Oh. So, they wanted to change the message.

Silva: The message, um hmm. [Yes] “Because we don’t want people to know that we have homeless kids,” or that, “Now, we have to be more accountable.” Or “You have more power than I do—” You know, kinds of things. And it becomes political.

del Norte: Yeah.

Silva: And it's kind of like, "This is not what we need to be doing."

del Norte: So, just for devil's advocate here, how would that benefit anybody that's in administration to not acknowledge homeless children? I mean, if they have that perspective, it seems like they would want it to be up front, as it has been. And I know there's lots of complications with folks coming in from different parts of the state—

Silva: Mm. Hmm. [Yes]

del Norte: —and they don't know what's happening on-the-ground. But, how could that possible benefit anyone?

Silva: It doesn't. The only way that that would benefit them is if then they're the power saying, "Yes" or "No." And again, it's a power struggle.

del Norte: Oh— The collaborations are changed.

Silva: Things have changed, um hmm. [Yes]

del Norte: Okay.

Silva: Um hmm. It's "I'm 'The one' you're talking to. I'm 'The one' on the news. I'm 'The one' that's saying this." It— That's where a lot of that needed to change. They wanted that change. And so, a lot of my— For example: There was a program of a leadership group for the community, and they had to take on a community project. So, they decided to adopt Project Link. So, they started working, and they started doing, and they were gonna have a big, big, big fundraising event.

And they were looking to be able to raise a lot of money. They were— in March [2018], they were already to twelve thousand dollars. They wanted— You know, it was growing, and they were gonna have an event in May. And so, they approached the [Las Cruces Public School] superintendent about being there to represent, and he said, "Yes. It would be awesome. I'll be there. Great!"

Come April, they were already up to twenty-two thousand dollars, and lots of awareness, and lots of— And we had other little groups who had heard because of them, and wanting to donate, and that kind of thing, "Great thing." He calls them, and tells them, "I'm not gonna be there." And I'm like, "So they— They—" And I'm like, "What? But, this is a big thing. What do you mean?" You know, kind of thing.

Nobody talks to you, nobody has any conversations. Erlinda, who was our boss, suddenly didn't have a lot to say, but she was— She says, "Yoli, I'll be there. I don't know how much—" You know: "I'll support you." She goes: "You know I will, and I'll do whatever they— But, I'll be there."

Silva: So, we went. They did it. It was a silent auction, and all these kinds of things. They were raising money. I mean, the [Master of Ceremony] MC lady's like, "Alright!" because it was all business people from the community, I mean, and big business people. "Who has a hundred dollar bill they can just give me?" You started seeing hundred dollar bills coming just out of people's— I'm like, we're all, you know, a little program; us [Project Link] who works with disadvantaged, and poor, and everything, we were all with wide-eyes, like, "Oh, my God. Oh, my God," kind of thing. (Laughs)

And it's like, one of the bids was on a vacation that's like twenty-five thousand dollars, and people were bidding, and I'm like, we're all sitting there, "Oh, my God. Oh, my God," because this was beautiful, and this was awesome. And just to think that all these people were doing this for our kids was important, and just tremendous.

So, I decided it was time for me to move on, and I— For all kinds of other reasons, and all those kinds of things, but I decided it was time for me to move on. So, I decided I was going to retire. So, I went and talked to the people from Linking Hands, who was a group who rose— who just generated all these funds.

del Norte: That's the event that you're talking about? Linking Hands.

Silva: Um hmm. [Yes] The group, Linking Hands, um hmm— And I told them that I was retiring.

Silva: Well, their mission was to raise the money for Project Link, which I was no longer going to be part of, and they were going to present the check in June twenty-eighth, or something like that, and I was no longer part of the [Las Cruces Public Schools] district after the sixth of June. So, devastating, but it was my choice, and, you know, I had already voiced very, very adamantly what we needed to use that money for, and those kinds of things. So, they did raise thirty-six thousand dollars—

del Norte: Impressive.

Silva: —for Project Link. And so, I'm happy to say that at least the superintendent did show up at that, but again, you know, it's like, "Is it just for the photo-op that you're looking to be part of? Is it really because you don't even have any idea what homeless kids are all about?" Our mayor [Ken Miyagishima] doesn't know what homeless kids are all about. So, it's frustrating— And so, but the awareness needs to continue, and so I'm hoping that, in the private sector, I can continue to make awareness, and continue to be a ripple in that pond. And we'll see how that goes.

del Norte: So, you have plans to begin something privately to help homeless children?

Silva: On a very small scale, at the moment. Like I said, I still have a lot of connections with Community, and they call me in, and that kind of thing.

Silva: So, I'm hoping to be that middle-man between our community because a lot of community members are like, "I don't want people to know who I am. I don't even know where I wanna take it, but here, you get it, and take it, and you know." So, I wanna be that middle person, so that when a counselor has a kiddo that needs something, they know they can contact me, and I can reach out to community members that might be willing to help with that situation. So, I'm hoping that that is the way it's going to continue.

del Norte: So, I'm wondering and thinking about how you've worked over the years now. How does funded programs play a role, a positive role, in your work? And what I mean by that, all of these donations coming in, has there been federal funds that you can use?

Silva: Yes. McKinney-Vento, you can apply for grants through McKinney-Vento, and the State [of New Mexico] applies as a state, and then districts apply to the state. You write your RFP [Request for Proposal], your grant to see. So, the most we've ever gotten is forty-eight thousand dollars, and that's for direct services for kids, or it can be used for staff, or it can be used— So, one of the things that Erlinda, early on, when she came on board and took over the federal programs, and "Title 1," and that kind of thing, she said, "I'm going to make your salaries part of "Title 1," so that the forty-eight thousand dollars you get can be directly for kids, and we're not taking any salaries out of that."

So, that was awesome. So, we do get that amount, and then, of course, "Title 1"— Part of the law says that "Title 1" has to match the funds of McKinney-Vento.

Silva: So, there was always “Title 1” set aside, which they call “Set-aside,” that there was monies there for, and helped with different things as long as they met the criteria tied to education, and all those kinds of things. So, having community collaboration is important because a haircut is not tied to education. So, we couldn’t get that out of— So, having that come in, and then, like, these monies that just came in that are donations, there is an activity account that’s set up for Project Link that pretty much gives it the ability to spend almost money on anything per se.

But, if it’s a federal grant, it needs to be tied to direct services, to kids. So, there was just some things like the haircut, or the kiddo who needed black shoes because they’re starting to work at McDonalds, and they need the black tennis shoe with the different sole, you know, “The sole—” and all this kind of thing that we—you can’t use federal monies for.

del Norte: Sure. You bring up an interesting— Well, the application of job services for those that were homeless.

Silva: Um hmm. [Yes]

del Norte: So, they’re moving into jobs in high school, where they were homeless. You’re also providing jobs-

Silva: Support there. Absolutely, absolutely. We, if they're— FYI, Families and Youth Inc. One of the things— A program that they had was summer programs for youth. Summer job programs for youth. So, it was making sure that our kids were on the top of that list, so that they could get a summer job. Having a connection with Workforce Solutions which is like the labor office.

del Norte: And that's the state, Workforce— yeah.

Silva: Having a connection with them that we can call one of the people there and say, "I have a sixteen year old that really needs to work, and da-da-da—" and how they could help, and what kinds of services, I mean, sometimes it was sending them there, so that they could have someone work with them on their résumé, and those kinds—

del Norte: Yeah.

Silva: So, just having those connections for those kids is important because it may not be a service that we would provide, per se, directly, but we knew who could— who can, and who can't, in the community. So, you send them that way. Making connections with some of these businesses, "Do you have a job that you could possibly—" "Well Okay, Yoli. Are you gonna vouch for them?"

"Yes, and we'll make sure they get there, and what they need."

Silva: It's like, "Okay, send them over. We'll talk with them." But, at least it'd give them an opportunity. Sometimes it was just, "Can you just give them a mock interview because they need to learn how to interview." "Okay, I have time. Send them over. We'll talk to them." So, just having those connections worked are important because it's not a service, per se, that we provide through LCPS, Project Link, kind of thing, but it's something these kids need to know.

del Norte: It's what's on the ground.

Silva: It's on the ground, absolutely.

del Norte: Is there an example of a grant that got away, that you had been working on, not just you, maybe the community? Is there something that you were really shooting for that didn't work out?

Silva: Well, one of them is housing for youth. One of the things this community had had for many, many years, twenty plus years, through FYI [Families and Youth, Inc.] was El Crucero, the transitional living center.

del Norte: I have not heard of this.

Silva: It was El Crucero.

del Norte: El Crucero. Thank you.

Silva: And it's the transitional living center, and it was— All those apartments that you see on the other [West] side of Community of Hope?

del Norte: Yes.

Silva: Those were built, and designated, for homeless youth.

del Norte: That's empty?

Silva: No, they have— No, so that things changed. Let me tell you the story.

del Norte: Please. Please, tell me.

Silva: So, when our wonderful governor [Susana Martinez] took office, one of the things that she ended up doing was causing a big ripple about Medicaid, and [Claiming] that there were agencies that were being fraudulent with Medicaid funds, and FYI was one of those agencies along with Southwest Counseling. They were part of that agency. So, they [Susana Martinez Administration] cut off Medicaid funding. No funding. So, that meant a lot of programs that they had, which included El Crucero, they no longer had monies for.

Silva: So, they had to— FYI had to downsize so much because of the funding that they lost through all of that. And so, El Crucero was one of them. So, it did sit empty for almost two years because there was no funding, and they couldn't continue to provide services because part of it, too, was that they got funding through CYFD [Children, Youth & Families Department], Medicaid, you know, different things. And so, they were able to house kids there. Kids that were— Part of the rules were that they had to be going to school, had to get a job, had to apply for their own kinds of benefits, but they had people there working with them to help support them through doing that. We had teenage moms living there with their little ones, but it was specific for youth. Sixteen through twenty-one, as long as they were doing those things. But, they had to let it go.

del Norte: Is this at the same time as, well, family development? So, Youth Development, Inc. [Sic] was closed, and El Crucero, they had all—

Silva: Families and Youth, Inc. downsized completely. So, they were still doing things, but they were very “All of a sudden” because they've always had lots of programs, different programs, because they apply for grants here, and grants there, and then they had Medicaid that they could— that they were billing for diff— If the client, if they could for the client, and that kind of thing. But, when all of that, when Medicaid was taken from them, and, of course, that there was this fraudulent [Claims], and all kinds of things, it stopped a lot of their funding avenues. So, they downsized. They didn't close, but they downsized completely to where they were just providing certain things that didn't necessarily have to do anything with Medicaid.

Silva: So, they had a few grants that were still kind of working, but it wasn't— They were still providing services for youth, but it wasn't at the scale that they were before. But, one of the programs that they lost were the Boys and Girls group homes, and El Crucero. They lost those, and those were the services that were part of resources for the south part of New Mexico.

We had kids from Roswell. Kids from Anthony. Kids from Deming, and Alamogordo, that would get sent here because it was the closest one. And if they had an opening, and they could take them, all of a sudden we no longer had those services. So, it wasn't just an impact in Las Cruces, but it was an impact in this part of the state. So, it was really, really hard. So, one of things that we've been lobbying for a lot is, "Who's gonna take over? We need housing for these kids. We need this."

So, FYI [Family and Youth, Inc], only because it was sitting there, and they were trying to build, and that kind of thing— When they did get part of their Medic-, when they did get exonerated, and there was nothing wrong, but it had already made so much damage.

del Norte: That was, like, three years before that happened.

Silva: Yes, and now they—

del Norte: It took three years to—

Silva: Well, no. They— Yeah, about two years—

del Norte: Okay.

Silva: Yes. — to start working on building their programs again, and that kind of thing. So, by that time they had gotten a grant for keeping families together, which is part of CYFD [Children, Youth & Families Department], and they've made those apartments permanent housing for those families.

del Norte: Not on the Hope campus, but over at their location.

Silva: No. Right there. [West of Camp Hope]

del Norte: So, this is happening again?

Silva: That's part of— They have that program, but it's for families. So, again, we have no resources for youth.

del Norte: A little bit different.

Silva: A little bit different, and it's permanent housing. So, as long as they meet their needs, the rules, and pay, or whatever they need to do, they can live there forever. I mean, I'm like, "No!" So, again, differ— You know, we're like, "But what happened to all these other kids, and all these other families?" And that kind of thing. So, there are no resources for housing for them.

So, for our youth, we don't have a transitional living center. So, that's been a big impact, and that's one of the things that, through the awareness, FYI [Family and Youth, Inc] has said, "We will apply for grants, and we will look in that, and the licensing and everything, and we'll look—" So, one of the group homes that they had, that had closed, they were looking into building— to making it into a transitional living center for youth—a ninety day placement, not long term or anything, but at least a ninety day placement, so that they would have some case management, and figure out some services for these kids. The community has rallied behind them because, again, bringing that awareness, it's like, "But, we need this. We need this."

And then, Brian Kavanaugh, the CEO, is like, "Yoli, we're gonna piggy-back. You know how many people are calling me because of what you're doing, Yoli?" And da-da-da— "I don't care. You just answer the phone, and you tell them, 'Yes,' you need it." So, a lot of the community members were looking to see how they could help them open that. The opening was supposed to be in July. It didn't happen, so I'm not too sure where they are with that. But, it's still something that we're hoping will open, so that there will be at least "A resource" for youth. Depending on the criteria and stuff.

del Norte: So, I'm wondering how the, well, the FYI came back with such force after being closed almost overnight? Was it the community? You're saying that it is the community that provided that support, and now their hopefully gonna come back. Well, was there pushback from when they had, I believe one of their houses caught on fire?

Silva: And, No. No, there was no pushback. That was squatters.  
(Laughs)

del Norte: Okay. I was wondering about that.

Silva: No, no. They've actually been embraced about them coming back—

del Norte: Oh, good.

Silva: —because those were services that had been here for years and years. And so, we all knew what we had: “We have a boy’s group home. We have a girl’s group home. We have a transitional living center.” So, yeah, “We don’t have homelessness because we have those programs.” So, it’s been embraced. And so, as far as pushback, I really don’t see any pushback from the community in any way or form.

del Norte: What would you say to anyone outside of Las Cruces that asked how they could provide Project Link in their community, and maybe even outside of New Mexico? And I know this is— You’ve got lots of national perspectives, but I’m just wondering, if someone were to call and ask how to start a Project Link in their community.

Silva: So, I’ve had liaisons who have called me, and said, “The national center, or the state coordinator, said that we should call you.” Or “We heard you talk at the \_\_\_\_\_.”

Not that I give a workshop or anything, but because you share stories, and things like that. “We heard you were the person to talk to” about how to do this, and how to do that. So, you have people who call you, and it’s a matter of “This is how we did here.” And then you need to tweak, however you want to do it there, but you need to know the law. And you have every right to say that that kid—

So, I’ve had people call me from different places and say, “How do I get this person to understand that this kid needs to be in school?” And da-da-da... da-da-da— So, it’s a matter of also being a resource, and providing them with, “Well, this is what we did. Maybe it will work for you.” Or tweak it to make it work for you. So, that’s basically how, I would say, is that you need to sit down with people who have done it. That’s how we kind of worked ours when Helen [Fox] was in Albuquerque. It’s like, “Helen, how do you do all this stuff? How do you have all these people working?”

Silva: So, we're a smaller, little place, and that kind of thing, so we didn't do things at her level, but just learning some of the things that she did— Being able to have that resource. I mean, I remember calling Helen and saying, "Helen, they're telling me I can't do this, but I can, right? I can do this?" And she's like, "Damn right, Yoli. You did the—" Because she was this ornery older lady, and she would just be like, "Damn right you can," and Na-na-na—

She would just give you all these resources, or all this support, that you felt strong going back in and dealing with whatever issue it was that you called about. So, just being that support system for each other is key because not— What works in New Mexico may not work in Portland, but it doesn't mean that you still don't take ideas, and figure out, "Maybe we could do that on a smaller level, or maybe that: But, I have an idea how that might work." So, it's just a matter of sharing, and saying: "Try this. Try that."

del Norte: I think it's so important. The reason I always ask that question is because the spotlight has been on Las Cruces, and the Community of Hope. It's been going on five years now, but it's been here for twenty years, or it started, and people want to replicate that—

Silva: Other places, um hmm.

del Norte: —where they are, and I think it's just really vital that it doesn't skip a generation.

Silva: Absolutely.

del Norte: That we don't— That people don't retire, and then we lose ten or fifteen years of all the progress.

Silva: Absolutely. You're right. I mean, and again, it's also important for whoever's being highlighted, whatever program's being highlighted, to be humble and say, you know, "It's not 'My thing.' "

"It's 'How can I share with you?' " that's important. It's not to be territorial, you know, that kind of thing.

del Norte: Absolutely.

Silva: It's like, because one of the things— This worked out really well when Audrey [Hardman-Hartley] became the executive director of Jardin [de Los Niños] years ago. I remember her coming to my office and saying, "We need to see how we're gonna work together, Yoli, because my homeless kids are your homeless kids." Yeah, "You're right." And we always shared the fact that "I have a dime, you have a dime, let's make it twenty cents. Let's not say: I have a dime, you have a dime— And oh, my god, I've already used it up."

Silva: So, it was important, too, if you're already providing that service, then, "What can I provide that you're not providing," or "Why duplicate," kinds of things. And so, I think that's the important part, too. It's not for us to be territorial. It's like, "Okay. You've got those services going. I've got these services going. Let's share them, and not duplicate them."

Because then you use up resources that you don't have to. That you can make stretch in other directions, instead of saying, well, "Community of Hope does it, so, and we're doing it too, but— And we're gonna go after the same money, and now we can only serve twenty people—" Instead of saying, "You do that. We do this. I support you." You're gonna be able to serve fifty people. It's a big difference.

del Norte: It reminds me of a book title, in my bibliography, called the *The Tyranny of Kindness* [by Theresa Funicello].

Silva: Um hmm.

del Norte: And everybody— Have you read the title?

Silva: Yes.

del Norte: So, I haven't visited it yet. I'm looking forward to understanding more about how separations occur, even though we're all trying to be kind, and collaborate together— That's not always the case.

Silva: No.

del Norte: And I just, incidentally, I want to mention that Audrey [Hardman-Hartley] was the first person to mention your name to me.

Silva: Oh.

del Norte: She was the third interview. Obviously, she gave us this space [La Paz Room]—

Silva: Right.

del Norte: —and it's paying off because this is the eighth interview—

Silva: Awesome! Awesome.

del Norte: —and it'll continue. But, I was wondering, can you talk just a little bit about the collaborations between Project Link and Jardin de los Niños? You mentioned it with Audrey [Hardman-Hartley]. Can you just—

Silva: Well, Jardin de los Niños is the daycare for homeless families. So, we have homeless families. I mean, it's being able to say, “Audrey, I have a kiddo. Can they help?” And if it wasn't Audrey, it was Aralis [Chacon].

Silva: It was somebody from her staff. I'd say, "I have this happening." "Yoli, you do backpacks. We have school-age kids." "Tell me how many." So, it was that collaboration, and to work with each other, I mean— And one of the things is they have an after school program. They do have kids who come here.

So, it's like, "What can we provide you for your after school programs?" We help them with computers, that we were able to set up here, that kids could use internet. "Audrey, I have a kiddo staying at the Gospel Rescue Mission who has to do a project. They have no laptop, no nothing." "Send them over, Yoli. We're open until six. If they can come, send them over." So, it's that collaboration that is "The key."

And absolutely, I mean, I worked with Audrey, as Project Link, Jardin de los Niños, we worked on projects together, on awareness together, on solutions, and networking, and problem solving— And then, to be a support system for each other, because she had an understanding, and I could call and say, "Guess what, and I don't know—"

And she's like, "Oh, Yoli. We can— Just think about this, or do that." And vice-versa. So, that's important, and it had nothing to do with "You're a bigger voice than I am." "You're a stronger person than I am."

It had to do with "You have your strengths, I have mine," and "How do we work together?"

del Norte: I think it's wonderful. I'm just so concerned that Audrey's moved on, you're moving on, it seems like there's a shift—

Silva: Yes.

del Norte: —in the Community of Hope. A lot of people have been here a long time, and younger people like myself are coming in and trying to do good things, and learn more. I just really hope that that can continue.

Silva: I hope so, and again, that's gonna be the key, too.

del Norte: Keep bridging the generations—

Silva: Keep bridging because, yes, you're a new person coming on board. You have your own ideas, and your own programs, and that kind of thing, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't still sit down and say, "You're the old person who ran that program forever. Tell me how it worked," and "Tell me because then I can tweak it to fit." I'm not gonna say, "Oh, no. I'm gonna do it my way."

No. It should be, "What did you do that worked? And these are my ideas, and how are they gonna work with that?" You know, that's the key. It shouldn't be, "I'm a new person, so I have to prove myself, and I do everything on my own." No.

del Norte: Absolutely.

Silva: Why reinvent the wheel? Take what's already been there, and I mean, a lot of people, when I— Liaisons call me and say, "I don't know how—" Why reinvent the wheel? "Let me fax you, or let me email you, the form. Just tweak it. Make it work for you." And it's a starting point. By their tenure, they may have changed the form completely, but it was a starting point. They didn't have to start from scratch. That's important, but that has a lot to do with— And that's a two-way street.

It's not just the person who's been there, but it's also the new people who are coming on board. They have to understand that there's already things that have been in place. There's nothing wrong with embracing them. You can always tweak them, to then say, "Oh. They're David's now." You can always do that. But, you should always embrace them, and not sit there, and say, "Nope. Yoli did it that way. I'm not gonna do it that way. I'm not—" and close it off.

No, it should be: "Audrey ran Jardin de los Niños this way." It doesn't mean that a new executive director that comes on board can't continue to do some of those programs. They might just tweak them to fit "Their view of their direction, their focus." Nothing wrong with that.

del Norte: I'm wondering about self-care, and this is a series of questions that I usually ask. We've got all sorts of directions we've already went today, but for your liaisons, are they able to have health care insurance?

Silva: Yes. Through the Las Cruces Public Schools you do get health insurance. You get sick days. You get some annual days. And then, of course, you get the holidays that the school district gets. So, if they're off on Columbus Day, you're off on Columbus Day. So, you are part of the district, and their benefit package, and retirement, and all those. That's the reason I was able to retire after twenty-seven years, but, you know, they do have all of that, which is awesome. But, you also have to learn to do some of the safe care, self care, on a daily basis.

del Norte: And I always bring this question up because it changes depending on the organization.

Silva: Right.

del Norte: Randy Harris' version of self-care probably isn't the same as folks in Project Link, or, you know, it depends on the person, and it depends on their organization. I don't believe Randy has health care as a volunteer.

Silva: Right.

del Norte: You know what I mean? So, can you talk about how self-care might be a vital resource to help liaisons, or people that are new to the Community of Hope?

Silva: I think one of the important things is you shouldn't have to have pneumonia to take a day off. I believe in mental health days. I don't say you have to do that once a week, or anything, but if you've had a rough week, if you've had a rough case, it's important not only as the leader, or director, or whatever your role is as far as the boss, to be able to recognize that in your staff, and "I think you need a mental health day. Take a mental health day. It's okay. We'll be okay. Take a mental health day."

I mean, I was a lead [Staff member]. I wasn't a big boss, but I was a lead for our program. So, there was times that it's like, "Take a mental health day. Don't come in tomorrow. You're— It's okay. We'll handle things. Take tomorrow. You really need to de-stress. You really need to take five minutes for you." It's important to know that mental health days count as much as when you have pneumonia.

del Norte: Are there programs that might help liaisons learn this importance?

Silva: Well, different districts have different things. I think it's more of a district thing than anything else. I mean, when we go to national conferences, or even at the state level, they always have those different things. "Let's go for a walk. We're gonna have an ice cream social. We're gonna go do this \_\_\_\_\_." They always have those different things that people can do to help de-stress, and do those kinds of things. With the district, about two years ago they started the health kinds of things. So, there was every different Zumba classes offered, and walking classes, and mindfulness classes.

Silva: So, it depends on the district. And then it depends on you as a person. Are you gonna take advantage of those or not?

del Norte: Absolutely.

Silva: And if you're not going to take advantage of those, just make sure you do have a plan. You know, that I may not do all that Zumba stuff, but I really do enjoy taking a nice long walk, sitting outside under a tree, and reading a book.

del Norte: Absolutely.

Silva: So, for everybody, it's a little bit different.

del Norte: The reason I ask this question, specifically, is because many people that work in social services don't have any type of health-care, and so, they do have to learn it individually.

Silva: (Simultaneously) That's true. Yes.

del Norte: And do you think that there's a need on the Hope campus to make, not necessarily volunteers, I know that's a rough one, but staff— a need to make it more available?

Silva: Absolutely! Absolutely! I've worked as a liaison supervisor for their social work students when they have social work students. And so, I've known Community of Hope for many, many years, and I know some of the staff pretty well, and I've heard some of the stories that they've gone through, and some of the stressful situations, and I'm like, "Oh, my God!"

And not having healthcare is a big thing because they should be able to have the day to take off, to say, "Yesterday, we were attacked. Didn't get hurt, but there was this big old thing outside. I just want to take five minutes." Or even for the staff to say, "You know, we had a really rough day yesterday, so today, it doesn't matter, we're gonna close from eleven to one, and I'm gonna buy you all an ice cream, and we're gonna just sit, and we're gonna relax."

"What about our clients?"

"They're gonna survive." Because it's true, "Your client's gonna survive." They'll be okay. Because you're not saying, "We're never gonna see you again." You're saying, "For two hours, we're gonna take care of us." Or "We're not gonna open until 10:30 because we're gonna have breakfast, and we're gonna just sit and talk."

del Norte: A vital part of the day.

Silva: –of the day, exactly. “We’re just gonna sit and talk.” That sets the tone, and that sets a very healthy environment because if your boss is willing, your organization is willing to take five minutes for you, you start thinking, “I can take five minutes for me.” And that’s important.

del Norte: I think it’s a great perspective that it also depends on the individual accessing those resources.

Silva: Um hmm. Accessing.

del Norte: Last week Pamela Angell interviewed, and she told me so much about Cafe Salud that I didn’t know, and also that the Amador Health Center will allow anyone from the community to use the clinic. It’s no longer if you’re indigent, or homeless, or any of those identifiers.

Silva: Right.

del Norte: So, there’s a shift happening with not only staff and volunteers, of course clients, that I think is positive, and I just really want to get the message out with these type of questions about self-care, healthcare, and so on.

Silva: Absolutely. Um hmm.

del Norte: Yoli, I only have a couple more questions, and there will be plenty of time for you to, you know, anything that you'd like to talk about. We can just continue as long as you'd like. Are there any future programs, or new proposed projects, that show promise for homeless youth in Las Cruces that we haven't talked about already?

Silva: Well, I think one of the things that's going to piggyback is, if FYI [Families & Youth, Inc.] can get the shelter open, which I'm sure they will, then they'll be able to build, and maybe more go to a transitional living center. Maybe build another shelter. So, I really do think that the doors gonna be opened— They've opened it a crack, and I think once they get started it'll be wide open. Even if it's not FYI, there might be some other entities in town that might be willing to.

One of the things, and again, that I talked about is “Be a voice.” So, a lot of the people who— business people that I've talked to, realtors, and that kind of thing, hopefully they'll continue to be a voice, so that the community, the City of Las Cruces, will look into doing some programs for youth.

del Norte: How about the three part question? Did you get a chance to look at the end of the questions?

Silva: I probably did, but I don't know.

del Norte: So, that's what I have for you next, and I only make it three parts because it might be complicated to think about it, but, can you name three of the most valuable insights, contributions, levels of support, not present today, that would help homeless youth in Las Cruces immediately?

Silva: Housing, transitionally— A transitional living center. Absolutely. Housing.

del Norte: And I get that a lot, right. It's "We need housing in Las Cruces."

Silva: We need affordable housing. Housing that is not the [Uninhabitable] shack. I mean, we need affordable hou-, we need a community to recognize that we need housing with supportive services.

del Norte: A combination. Yeah.

Silva: A combination. Yes. Um hmm, absolutely. I would say that's one of the biggest things we need right now.

del Norte: Is that something that's always been in play, but is just slow going? Actually getting units built, and community support, because I know that there's the veteran's housing that happened, and the Tents-to-Rents that Nicole Martinez's up to. I mean where, if this need is here, where are we gonna go?

Silva: Again, we need that champion who's going to be able to sit there and say, "As an agency, this is what we're gonna tackle." And, unfortunately, one of the things throughout the years of my service, and working with kids, and that kind of thing, it's the [Popular yet ineffective] "Flavor-of-the-day," which is unfortunate.

Nothing against our veterans; they deserve everything, and anything, we can give them. Absolutely! But, then we focus on "Just" our veterans, and we kind of let other things— Right now, we're all focused on the immigration, and these families who have been separated, and that kind of thing, but we still have homeless youth. What are we doing about the— Sometimes, we take and we focus on that one thing, that we lose sight of all the other things that are happening.

And I think that's one of my concerns more than anything, is that if we don't continue to voice "We have homeless kids. We have homeless youth—" that the support, and the awareness, is gonna go. I'm not taking anything away from those immigrant families, and the separation, absolutely not, and that kind of thing, but we have kids that are going through that on a daily basis in the United States. Where's our focus for them?

We need to still have a level playing field, per se, that even though we're thinking about these immigrants, and we're gonna voice, and that kind of thing, we can't forget to continue to voice for our kids who are going through those same kinds of things within the United States.

del Norte: I don't like to, you know, suggest money when I say contributions, but is there anything else that would help immediately?

Silva: Well, I mean the money is great. And like I said, Linking Hands raised thirty-six thousand dollars. That's awesome! Great things. But, we need follow through.

del Norte: Wow.

Silva: It's almost like when you go to church. They pass the basket around, and on that day, "Here's my five dollars. God bless me." And then, the rest of the week we forget to say, "God bless me." It's the same thing with this. You gave a contribution, but there has to be follow through. There still has to remain a commitment— That you may not give us thirty-six thousand dollars next year. That's okay. But, you remain committed by continuing to be a voice, by maybe making sure once in a while, and see how things are going. Maybe come in once in a while and say, "Are you doing okay?" That still needs to be there. "Is there a specific kid who needs a specific thing?" "I can do that."

We still need that continuous commitment. It doesn't go away because you wrote a check.

del Norte: I think that's a great perspective, that the money might come in, although people might want to drop out after they've contributed.

Silva: Um hmm, absolutely. So, I mean, the awareness needs to continue. The commitment needs to continue. That kid isn't going to go away because you gave that thirty-six thousand dollars, or you gave ten dollars, or you gave a deodorant [Donation]. That kid is not going to go away. We still need to make sure that we're there— with whatever. It does not have to be—

del Norte: Even if there's no contribution.

Silva: Even if there's no contribution. But, at least "I've got somebody who might be willing to tutor you. Somebody who might be willing to listen to you. Somebody who knows somebody, who knows somebody, who knows somebody." That's— We need to continue that.

del Norte: I know I keep asking the same questions, but it's only to get more.

Silva: Sure.

del Norte: But, the final question that I have for you is: How do you envision the future of Project Link, and youth driven programs in the United States?

Silva: I'm afraid for them because, again, we've focused on not the problem. We focus on all these other things, but we don't do anything about the problem. Families being separated. The veterans.

Silva: This is, it's not— We need to continue to remember that we also have kids, and kids who don't always have a parent, and are not part of a foster care system, or a treatment foster care system. They're on their own for whatever reasons. And so, we need to continue to see that. And I'm afraid that sometimes the kids are the ones that get lost in that shuffle kind of a thing. And so, Project Link, per se, it's all gonna depend on the leadership from the school district as to how— Leadership from the program, and leadership from the district, as to how they're going to view the importance of the program, and the difference that it makes. I don't know. At the moment, I would say it looks bleak.

del Norte: Is that because of the experiences in the last year, or just because it's not— There aren't many voices right now? And I'm also thinking of this in terms of the Kids Count project that happened. They just released the new one.

Silva: Um hmm. Still at the bottom. Um hmm.

del Norte: Exactly. When you say that you're mentioning the fiftieth lowest in the United States for child welfare.

Silva: Right, um hmm, absolutely. Well, and I think it's a combination of things that have happened in the last year as far as leadership within our district and our program. None of them have any idea about homeless, and what homeless means, and services. And so, at that level, there's concern because it's, "Are they going to be able to continue?" "Who's going to understand?" And "Who's going to champion them?"

Silva: As a state there's still that, because we look at other things, and we focus, "It's child abuse. We need to get those parents. We need to—" Oh, but, we need to understand what leads to child abuse. What programs do we have that are helping with that, and if it's housing, "Why don't we have housing?" If it's food, "Why aren't we doing that?"

Casa de Peregrinos is our biggest, one of the biggest also, resources. So, again, and then nationwide, again, we're focused on immigration. We still have all these kids who are here, who are in similar situations, that we're not doing anything for. So, it's again— It's that ripple effect. Unfortunately, it's moving out. But, we're not focusing because we're starting to just focus on a ripple, and not necessarily focus on that pebble that fell in, that "We need to figure out how we're going to work with them," and "Those are our kids."

del Norte: Yoli, do you have any questions for me, or concluding thoughts that you'd like to share, before we wrap up the recording today?

Silva: So, maybe a question for you is like— All these people you're interviewing, and you're recording, what exactly are you hoping to do?

del Norte: Absolutely. I'm documenting the staff and volunteers, mostly the staff, here at the Community of Hope in order to get a picture of the history of homelessness in Doña Ana County.

del Norte: And specifically the development of the Community of Hope, with a focus on the five community, or the five organizations that make up the Community of Hope.

Silva: Hmm.

del Norte: And the reason I saw that it needed to be documented, at the archive, is because I couldn't find anything except for Nicole Martinez's work with Doña Ana County, and one thesis, which is called *The Cultural Geography of [the Homeless] in Las Cruces*—

Silva: Mm. Hmm.

del Norte: —and I believe it's by— K.A. Lory is the last name on the thesis, and this was a few years ago. She had done a project that looked into how resources were separated, and transportation, [how] getting from one resource to another is very difficult in an urban setting, and how the Community of Hope was solving that. So, the “Corridors of Care,” the “Havens of Hope” that are happening across the country. I found out people were coming here to find out how to replicate that in their own community. So, it's happening in different pockets in the United States, but it's far from being the “Hub” that the Community of Hope is.

Silva: Right.

del Norte: So, my project is, specifically, so that other people can listen to all of these recordings, [and] can replicate [the Community of Hope Consolidated Services Model] in their own communities. Does that answer your question?

Silva: Absolutely. So, I guess my closing thoughts on this would be that it's important to recognize that— Homelessness, the view of who's homeless, needs to change. People need to be educated, and that “The homeless face is now children.” And if we don't do something as a local community, as a state, and as the United States, this cycle is not gonna change. It's gonna to get worse. And so, I really think that it's important for people to hear, and people to understand, that we need to start doing things now, and not later. And we need to stay committed to making that change.

del Norte: Thank you very much for your contribution, and your work. And congratulations on your service and your retirement years.

Silva: Thank you. Thank you. Well, hopefully, it's not over yet.  
(Laughs)

del Norte: That's right. It's not over. We're still in the now.

Silva: We're still in the now. Absolutely.

\*\*\*\*

[End of recorded interview]

