[MUSIC] You are listening to Tell Me Your Story where we connect to HLS staff on a personal level.

Hello everyone. This is Edgar Kley Filho from the HR department at HLS. My pronouns are he, him, his. Today we are talking with Martha Pena from the human resources department who you tell us about her life, how long has she is in this HLS position and the work she does. Thank you for joining us, Martha.

Thank you Edgar. Hi everybody. My name is Martha. My pronouns are she, her hers. I have lived in Boston since 2004, September 3rd, of 2004 to be exact. Where I came from the Dominican Republic. I'm a Dominican immigrant, but I'm a US citizen. I came with my mom and my sister. Our dad followed us a year after. We came from the Dominican Republic because our business failed. The business that we had was a construction business. We sold cement, cement blocks, sand that thing. Our business field at the time where our president was called Hipolito Mejía. Hipolito was not a very good president to Dominican people. I think a lot of us can agree on that. [LAUGHTER] A lot of things became really expensive and so our business failed because people were not building houses and the materials were really expensive. Our trucks and the parts of our trucks that we used to work with it was not something that we could sustain any longer and so we ended up coming to the States like a lot of immigrants looking for economic freedom, economic liberties I guess, and some mobility. More than what we had in DR.

Martha, 2004 was the first time you came?

2004 was not the first time I came. I was actually born in the States.

Okay.

But I was just born in the States and then I went right back to the Dominican Republic.

That's when your family, your father, your mom decided to go back and open a business there?

Yeah. They were never really living in the States. We had family in the States, we'd come visit.

Okay.

Yeah.

Then you went back to the Dominican Republic, your family went back there.

I came back when I was young.

You lived there for nine years?

Exactly.

That was plenty for you to learn [LAUGHTER] the language and everything?

Absolutely. My mom was an educator. She was a teacher and she taught me how to read and write. I knew how to read and write in Spanish by the age of four.

Wow.

She was also the person that taught me how to add, subtract, divide. I remember we would use our Barbie, some things that we had around the house in order to learn. My mom was an educator. When I was nine, I was already in the sixth grade in DR. Because you don't have that each thing that you have in the States. Whatever you know is the grade that you're at in the DR. That's how it goes over there.

Okay.

Then when it came to the States, I had to repeat like three grades in order to be at the same level as everyone else.

I have to ask you a question because that matters in terms for us [LAUGHTER] who are immigrant, but mostly for those I don't have a family here but you had yours.

Yes.

There are different aspects of this and is interesting because when I was studying psychology, I know that Erik Erikson was very into human development and studying a lot of the influence of immigrants and family culture and how a family that came in from a different country would try to not impose, but to let their children to have that same information, the way that they learned from their country. The children who do have their own complications in a sense that they were being in a new place with a completely different culture, their friends in school and everything that they knew here is a completely different culture but they were in between the one that they were born here and learning from, but also having the impact from the ones from their parents or family in general would put on them. [OVERLAPPING] Your parents already spoke English because most immigrants when they come they do not.

My parents until this day they don't speak English.

They did not not?

No.

When you came here nine years old and going to school and learned language and doing everything in English but also in Spanish you would be the translator as well?

Yeah. It's funny because a lot of immigrants have this experience of being a nine-year-old, seven-year-old, eight year old translating government documents.

Yes.

Translating medical documents.

Yeah.

Doing all these things and it doesn't make sense, but it makes sense. We don't have a choice and so we do it. Until this day I only speak Spanish to my parents. I would speak full-time in English when I'm at work or in academia in those spaces. But with the rest of my family, I only speak Spanish.

Only speak Spanish. Another aspect of this, that's why I think is worth mentioning. When I took a course as a medical interpreter because at the time it was shoveling snow and doing all the landscape surf and the winter for me was the worst part and that's why I said, Oh, no, I need to change my job and do something different.

Winter is hard

I decided to go for the medical interpreter because there was something that was really needed in the entire area in Massachusetts, New England in general. One of the things that I learned that I felt like I never thought about it and how heavy it was. We can chat a little bit about this because culturally it doesn't sound as heavy as when you learn about and you start thinking from another culture's point-of-view.

Right.

One thing that they said they need and how strongly they motivated the use of interpreters is because so many children would go to the doctor's appointment to translate between their parents and doctors. [OVERLAPPING] Sometimes the doctor had to deliver bad news.

Yeah [inaudible 00:06:20]

 [OVERLAPPING] I'm sorry to tell you but you have cancer and you have just this time left. Having to tell that for a child and having the child to translate back, or sometimes something that could be so embarrassing that the child would not feel comfortable to tell her parents or his parents back what was happening. So that's the main reason to really bring the medical interpreting in that sense. This is something that a lot of people don't realize the importance in how much we through. I remember the teacher saying, Oh, that's so heavy on that child to have to deal with in case of medical interpreter or just. But I don't know. You are from Dominican Republic.

Yeah.

I'm from Brazil. I feel like our cultures were more rough in a sense of there are certain things that might sound completely wrong in a way that point of view but you just have to deal with.

Exactly.

Because I have no other option.

That's what I was saying it doesn't make sense, but it absolutely makes sense. We don't have a choice.

Yeah.

Because in a lot of these spaces where they say that they have translation available, sometimes they just don't.

Yeah.

The translator is overbooked, overworked, way too busy and not available for every one at the appointments that are necessary.

Yeah.

At least here in Boston, there's a really big Puerto Rican and Dominican population and so when you go to a small clinic like Denmark and Roxbury, for example.

Yeah.

A lot of the people there speak Spanish, but because there are so many patients and not enough staff members, sometimes you just simply can't have that translation service that they're wanting to give. [OVERLAPPING] So the child has to step in.

Exactly.

As they always have. [LAUGHTER]

Yeah.

But it's like voting is not something intuitive and so you teach your parents.

Yeah.

Paying bills online. When I came 2004, technology obviously was not what it is now and so you have to learn the language so you can help out your parents. You also have to learn the technology because your parents, my mom does not know how to turn on a laptop.

Yeah.

You're doing all of that. My sister and I joke around that we're like their life managers, their financial advisors, their translators, literally just everything. But we've been adults since we were children. We don't say that in a sad way whatsoever. It's just simply what we had to do. That's okay [LAUGHTER].

In another aspect of this job. Because some people with those sometimes silly question in terms of why the parents didn't go to school? Sometimes they have to have two or three jobs to make the end meet.

Absolutely.

Maintain their families and do everything with dignity and everything. While the kids are learning in school and it's going to be a help for them, that's how life it is.

Yeah.

Is that I know is still some folks have two different jobs and have to wake up so early in the morning and come home and go to bed so late and still keep going that every day or working weekends and everything. That is a whole different world out there in terms when you talk about immigrants that just those who really are close to will understand what it is makes a difference. Fast-forwarding.

How did you get to Harvard? How did you come to work at Harvard?

Before Harvard I worked in the non-profit sector, and obviously Harvard is also considered a non-profit but, the non-profit sector that was less funded. [LAUGHTER].

Yeah.

Right before this I was

an office manager for a non-profit for the homeless in Downtown Crossing.

Okay.

Then right before that I worked with prisoners as a paralegal, right before working as a paralegal I was at Northeastern where I got my degree in Criminal Justice in Political Science, and my two co-ops were my first one I was an investigator in the Bronx for the Bronx Defenders, and then I was a house manager at a domestic violence shelter. It's been nice because I've been able to use my degree to see all aspects of criminal justice, you have the survivors, you have the folks that are committing the crimes, but also have their own set of traumas, and have been victimized in their own way. I've been able to have that experience, but I ended up at Harvard because as an office manager I was doing a lot of HR work.

Okay.

I was doing a lot of admin work of course, and so when I wanted to move on from that organization specifically, that's where I was looking more in the admin, HR side, that stuff, and then Harvard end up working out.

Before you go to Harvard now I'm be curious about a series of things that you mentioned their first, your degree.

Yeah. Criminal justice and political science.

You're graduating college?

I graduated May 2018 [OVERLAPPING].

May 2018. Then you went straight to the field and [OVERLAPPING]. Tell us a little bit about your work with the homeless first.

Sure.

Was a volunteer work or you have a position that you are paid for?

Yeah. I know I was a position that I was paid for. I was an office manager, and that was the only position of all the positions that I've had but I didn't actually have direct clients. I was assisting an office of 70 people with three different departments. You had eviction, you had home stability, and then you have housing in there. I was at the center of it all so communicating with clients, communicating with leadership, communicating with departments, and doing everything that I could to keep people there because it was a hard job, and making sure that people got responded to in a compassionate way.

What was the most common cause of these folks to be in a homeless situation?

It's just a big systematic thing. There's a lot of people that are battling mental health. There's a lot of people that are battling substance abuse, and just poverty in general. It's really hard to get housing in a city like Boston.

Would you say that substance abuse and poverty would be leveled in a way? Which one more or through the years is [BACKGROUND]?

I think just poverty in general.

Poverty in general?

Like just having access let's say like clean clothes in order for you to go to an interview, or understanding others like interviewing is a skill. Not everyone has the privilege to learn that skill because, either lack of education or so many other different things that happen on earth for people or on people. [LAUGHTER]

Of course I believe that for someone in that environment, finding a way to be able to get ready for a job interview, do you think that a lot of that was successful or was frustrated in a sense of what their background is, would not match with the idea of what the work was expecting from them?

It was really frustrating because I had to say no a lot.

Yeah.

I was the first point of contact into the office and I had to say no a lot because, we can only use this people that were coming to us straight from the public city shelters in the city of Boston, and if you were not referred by a case manager you cannot work with us. Then the only other way that you could work with us was eviction prevention, but you had to have already gotten and notice to quit from your landlord in order for us to be able to assist you. It was almost like you have to come to us at the worst possible case scenario, because otherwise we cannot help you. We're not assisting [NOISE] the single mom that fell behind rents on 2-3 months. She has to wait till she's almost evicted in order to get assistance from us.

Wow.

You see what I'm saying, so when people call you and they're literally like, I'm at the hospital, I will get discharged and I have nowhere to go from here. I'm technically homeless, and we're like we can't help you because you don't fall under these categories. That's a lot of what happens in the non-profit sector, and while a lot of people burn out anywhere there's such high turnover rate.

I was going to ask and now I think I know already answer. What would it be more frustrating while you were doing this job everytime trying to figure out the best way to help these folks? But clearly, when you say that someone, because they have to come via referral from an agent or something that nature, is clearly the fact that you have just tell someone, we need to wait until you get evicted, then you come here and ask for help. [NOISE] We cannot be proactive and help you before.

Right?

Which is fascinating to think in terms of the desperation of someone with family at home trying to figure out what you're doing.

Totally.

After this job with the homeless you have another experience?

Before that I worked with the homeless right before Harvard.

Yeah.

Right before that I was a paralegal. I was actually called the brutality paralegal because I was investigating police brutality in prisons in Massachusetts. The majority of the prisoners that I would go to were the high-level security prisons, and essentially when people will reach out to us and say, "I was physically beat by a guard or sexually assaulted by a guard." By the way trigger warning to anyone this is going to be a heavy section, to anyone that's listening. But whenever someone would reach out to us I worked at the prisoners legal services. When someone reach out to us I would have to get prepared to go into the prison to photograph their injuries and get their testimony, and essentially I would just spend time trying to gather documents for that person in order to build up a case if possible. The vast majority of people we were not helping to litigate for them or represent them because we just didn't have the manpower.

Yeah.

It was an office of 20 people. Me alone when I left I had over 140 cases that I was hoping on.

140 cases?

Yeah. Per year we would get about 250 reports of brutality, and still the majority of my work was fighting with the Department of Corrections to get the documents that people deserve to have because it is their information. But when a prisoner requests their own information they get a lot of turnaround.

Yeah.

Because I have the name of prisoners legal services behind me. I was able to request some information. Presenting legal services is doing incredible work, everyone should definitely check them out. They're just trying to protect the humanity of prisoners because yes prisoners deserve to have their humanity protection.

Yes. It's all sounds extremely heavy.

Yeah. [OVERLAPPING]

Emotionally.

You have to be grounded with yourself if you're going into the non-profit sector. Because you're being overworked and underpaid and digest it's the truth. You've got to have a lot of peace outside of your workspace. You also have to understand that your entire life cannot be the job that you do. You have to set a lot of boundaries in place. I was 22 talking about boundaries, 20 talking about boundaries. You see what I mean?

Yes.

Because you do. You have to learn that very early on.

Because I think the conflicting thing is you are there to try to do your best, to try to help human beings, you'll see the complications and everything in-between in terms of how to get around.

Right.

Then you have to live that every day with that charge of conflict and feelings and emotions in general, and go back home and recharge to come back again next day and do all over again.

 Right, totally.

What would you do? How would it be when you got home for example? Just curious.

Yeah.

What would you do? I'm going home and I just click.

It's a little bit escapism, there's a lot of reading in my life.

Yeah.

There's a lot writing in my life. I love therapy. I love to sit down and talk with my friends. I have cats that are really big part of my life. Things like that. [OVERLAPPING] I tried to live a feeling life outside of work.

The families are good base?

For sure. [OVERLAPPING] My sister and I are super close. That's my little best friend, and I'm so happy that my parents were like, we planned you guys, we're having you guys two years apart from each other. You're practically in the same grade having the same experiences, really don't love, that they did that. [LAUGHTER]

How did culture help?

I love being Dominican. Honestly [LAUGHTER] takes me through every day, like the music that I listen to, the food that I eat, I love being Dominican. But am very much someone that's like, I also have critiques about being Dominican and that's important. It's important to have balance. You can have your nationalism but also be like, oh, my country is failing on this aspect.

Yeah.

For sure.

Do you see similarities because another aspect of immigrants and when you're talking about Hispanic or latish folks.

Yeah.

The difference? People pay attention to difference from each of them? Or they just say, below Mexico [LAUGHTER] or over Latin.

Yeah.

To be honest with you, I don't even call myself Latina like that, to be honest. I just caught myself Dominican. A lot of people in the States, when they look at me, they either think on Cambodian or that I'm biracial like black and white.

For me, it's like interchangeable. Sometimes there's like, oh yeah, I'm just black. Then another space is not like, Oh, I'm Dominican. But it's like on both, they just really depends on the space of where I'm at.

Once you were on this, did you have any situation that you were not black enough to be black and not white enough to be white?

Oh, for sure. I relax my hair from ages 13-19, so my hair here was Street. But again, Cape Verdeans will be like, oh, you're definitely Cape Verdean. Cape Verdeans are black people. So for them, I was like very black. But then I would go into other spaces where it was more of an African-American place. They would like you too light skin, you something, but you're definitely not just black. You know what I mean?

It is fascinating.

But that is something that happens in the States. In the Dominican Republic, I'm just Dominican. It's a conversation that you don't have enough about race in general, because when you go to the island, you're just going to have Asians and Dominicans. We all just look a lot alike. Like we just all are very different ranges of colors. People don't really talk about race, which is is actually one of my critiques of my country for sure.

Because they don't talk much about race or because they perceive race in a different aspect of what it is?

What things I think identity is super-important to discuss all the time and colorism plays a really big part of the Dominican society and just life in general. That needs to be talked about like, yeah, we can be some really colorist people and that's a fact.

Yes, very much. This is something that I want you to talk with someone in another opportunity when you have more time to talk or maybe present this in group discussion that you might have. Colorism is something that really needs to be paid attention [OVERLAPPING] in terms of what really is when you talk about race for a country like Brazil, for example that mostly people say, oh, you don't have racism in Brazil. Because then you have the South, that's mainly, mostly white. Then you have the rest of the country, which a majority of Afro Brazilians. I think it's considered the most African country outside Africa because of the population and slaverism and everything else. But also because of the colorism, race in Brazil is in a different way to be perceived than it is in US. That's a fascinating aspect in terms of a cultural and the colorism part that we are talking right now. How much of that you know plays an important part and role in terms of how we perceive each other. What do you consider race or racism and everything else. But that's for another time. We're going to talking about that. Then with this work experience, you had an opportunity to come to Harvard?

Yeah.

How did you apply? How was your way to get here?

Yeah. I was definitely not obviously nothing against Harvard. I'm very happy to be here. But I was definitely not like, oh, I need to get into Harvard. I'm applying to a bunch of positions at Harvard. That wasn't my experience. My experience was, I'm feeling burned out and my role is unsupported and so I would like to move on from this role. Then I started applying to different spaces, startups and tech spaces and also Harvard. Then I ended up getting the HR assistant role, and I'm so happy to be here.

What do you do there? How is your work at HR department?

My days look very different, but definitely what takes up the majority of my day is I do scheduling for Roxanne Ambacher, which folks are familiar with. [LAUGHTER] Scheduling is like playing Jenga all day. But like a very serious like life altering Jenga. One meeting could take a week to organize because I'm talking to a lot of assistance from other folks that are Roxanne's higher ups or folks that really need to meet with Roxanne because Roxanne makes very important decisions for the university and the law school.

I think it's interesting that you are mentioning that. In my last position, I had the opportunity to be the calendar person, scheduling in-person for the dean at the Dean of Students Office. Just then I went to realize how much involves to be someone in that position to reschedule for folks in a different level of administration because when you're talking to in here, there is no diminishing or judging position, but the regular staff that are used to is much easier because you can look at their schedule and everything is there. With the new folks, you are going to depend on the assistance that take care of them, but also their own personal and private schedule that they might have. When you have one or two that their calendar is not up to date, it becomes a nightmare because sometimes you send a doodle poll or you talk with all the assistant and that is one person that would say, oh, I'm not sure. I need to verify. Say, oh, I was closing these right now for love of God.

But it's also like folks go on vacation, not everyone was 9-5. That's my schedule, 9-5. A lot of folks were 7-3 and 8-4. Like if I send an email at 03:00 P.M. because that's when I was able to send it, I won't get a response from a lot of folks until the next day or maybe the day after.

Then some opportunities of the others.

Exactly. That time someone can book time with Roxanne that I was thinking that I could hold for this meeting.

Yeah. The whole game of can you hold that for me for atleast until tomorrow? Then someone is asking for that time or when something come out before the meeting that was a scheduled already and say, oh, something really unprecedented or emergency happened. I can no longer be part of that and is one of those figures that has to be in that meeting. Say, oh okay, so you need to cancel or reschedule and start the game all over again to figure out when and it can take really weeks until we can have the whole group together depending on what it is.

I also like to say life be lifing. We live in a really unprecedented times. You just simply don't know if someone's going to be able to make it. There's a whole bunch of flights getting delayed and canceled these days. There is a lot of traffic that we're just like very unsure about. The MBTA is living its worse life right now. [LAUGHTER] Like trains are just like blowing up and stuff. You have to take into consideration those kinds of things giving people travel time, giving people grace, that kind of thing.

To put everything together. What else in HR?

I do a lot of student hires work?

Oh, yeah?

Yes.

We send a lot of appointment letters and I9 appointments and different things like that, that we do in the office. I also help out the HRVPs drafting letters that they need to send out to the folks that they assist in the departments that they exist. I do a lot of just team support and celebration, and planning events and booking rooms, and making sure that it's a good experience whenever we get together. A lot of that. I feel like I'm forgetting things, but yeah. My days don't look the same.

I'm pretty sure that you have a lot more.

A lot more. [LAUGHTER]

You know when you do something every day and you're just like, I don't even know how to talk about it.

Exactly.

Because every day 9:00 to 5:00, once I get to five o'clock I'm like. Let me close this laptop.

Should we always be writing down what we do? Having a list that you keep a file that say, I do this.

I feel like that's my Teams calendar. I'm very much a person that's like, I finish this. Let me write that down. I finished it, block those 30 minutes for this next thing, that kind of thing. A lot of the financial stuff in the office, like our transactions, our budgeting, our P cards, our P card sweeps, all those things.

Because it is just the combination of all these little things that you do day to day or in different process there that when the person leaves is when we say, did she do all that? Is that where I didn't realize really in terms of the scope of the job that she did? How do you feel about the HR environment? How is the relationship? How is the whole group?

Our group?

Yeah.

We're really cool group of people. It's really nice. I also think that this is the first time where I see a lot of age diversity in an office. I feel like in the past that just wasn't it. I was the youngest one and then it would be folks that were 10 years older than me and those will be the youngest next set of people, so that's been really nice. Folks are just really supportive and really open to me saying, hey, I like to work and assist these folks and I would like to do more of this and people are very open-minded about that.

Open to the idea that the things that you see as a possibility that could come true then. I agree with you. I think that is a great vibe there, and the age difference as well because, in all aspects, the diversity there is working in many different aspects and the openness for all levels of positions that you have, side of department, how supportive they are from each other. I think the chat in Teams is a very cool thing.

We're so sweet to each other. When people have birthdays, people write paragraphs for people. It's people baking for each other, folks just saying, hey, I'm going out here to lunch. Do you want me to grab you something? We're that kind of team and I love that. I'm so grateful.

I love when, for example, Roxanne bake and bring to our office. I can tell the others who are not in the office during today to say, I'm so sorry, you're not here to try this. I'm really sorry. Not really, but we are sorry. Martha, still one curiosity in terms, not that the transition was. This really comes from curiosity and I want you to be honest about this. I was concerned about how much you did and work with the homeless in other aspects of volunteer part because those are really heavy parts of this. Did you just take a break in terms of just letting your mind calm down a little bit with an HR job right now? Is that still part of who you are and you are going to probably go back someday to work with that? How you see yourself?

I'm definitely a community minded person and it's important to me that I support communities, especially just marginalized folks in general. You know when Issa Rae was like, I'm rooting for everybody black?

Yes.

That's me. I'm rooting for everybody black and brown very hard. I root for people in general all the time, but I think my work is definitely centered around black and brown people and their success because of the way that white supremacy works so well and so they need extra support. Eventually it would be great to do another job like what I've done in the past, but I definitely feel very at peace and this is a much more peaceful position where if I am close to not meeting a deadline, then I know that it's someone's life at stake. Like if I do not get a testimony from someone in the South Bronx, then that means that my attorney won't have something to present in court tomorrow. If I don't get this video, then that does not prove someone's innocence or that they weren't there or something like that. You know what I mean? It's been nice to not have that pressure, but I do miss the hustle and bustle of it all.

The human connection?

Yeah. The human connection.

Because you see, I believe that even in those circumstances when you see so much of the hustle like you said, there's still a connection there?

Yeah.

You can still see the human being and I think the connection and not anxiety, but that feeling that we are all part of the same situation is just someone in this moment and is in a different state of their lives.

Definitely.

Maybe with a little support, they would just move to a better place and that of the idea that you should have with everyone else instead of trying to judge this or that or because of this reason, because of that reason.

I agree with that. We were more supportive of each other. We definitely have a different world dynamic for sure.

The reason I'm saying this, a place like in Brazil, for example, we have a common thing that translating is difficult, but would come up in something like you say we laugh of our own disgrace because when you are in that level of poverty or we are dealing, but it's not just Brazil. I think the Spanish population in general, they have the same feeling. Even in the lowest level that people can think about, we are still happy. There is still that hope, there's still that connection that drives you, that make you feel like you are going to laugh about things even if they are the worst. I have a bad day. Tell me about my bad day or yours. Of course there is a lot of work to be done, but I think in terms of a human connection, understanding each other, supporting each other, we still hold that in a different level that make us I think in a sense, special too.

I agree. Totally. I think when I came to the States, there were a lot of culture shocks until this day I'm still culture shocked about certain things, but one of the things was not knowing my neighbors. That is so common here in the states when you live in the city at least and you live in really big buildings and you don't really interact with your neighbors. In the DR, we knew all of our neighbors. We knew the neighbors of where we live in our next three streets and then the neighborhood after.

Yes.

Sometimes just by your last name, they know who you're connected to and they know who your family is. In the States, it was so different. It may be because we have winter here. I'm unsure, but it was really interesting. It's like just not know people. That felt so weird to me.

There's a little distance that feels like each one in your own space and not to get into everyone's business, that kind of a situation. It's interesting because when you go to Brazil, my husband and I, Brian, Brian gets emersed in Brazilian culture much more than I do. The mess that you see around the party, the barbecues, the loud music, you see Brian, look like he's in Disney heaven like a kid in Disney.

I love that theme.

It's just interesting how a person can change so much. Look like he was holding back here very proper, but then when he gets does, okay, time to party, that kind of situation. Thank you very much for accepting to participate.

My pleasure. This was great.

I love to hear,

everything that you said. I think it's very important that our community also hear more of these stories to understand different aspects of life, and family, and cultures because this is rich and you need to touch that.

We have some beautiful people. Seemed lovely. Thank you starting this.

Thank you very much. I hope that I can talk with many more to know about their story as well so we can have more of these conversations, the engagement, and I don't know, let's see how far we go with this. I hope far. [MUSIC]

I'm rooting for you.

Thank you very much. Everybody who is listening, until your next time, thank you all. Bye bye.