Pedro Rios:

The borderlands and how I identify myself as a *fronterizo*, someone from the border, has always been part of my identity.

(start music)

PR:

When I was a teenager and into college, the anti-immigrant atmosphere in the state of California was just extremely heavy. I think that helped define for me, what I wanted to do with my life, which was to participate or be involved in something that addressed that heaviness, that attempted to support people's basic rights to survive, if we can say that.

(music continues)

Anne Marie Tipton:

This is the ancestral land of the First People, the Kumeyaay.

In 1917 during World War I, there was concern among Quakers- a largely religious group of people, to find ways to serve without joining the military or taking lives.

The American Friends Service Committee quickly established itself as an organization for humanitarian relief and social change. They were also in direct contact with the U.S. military discussing how to move forward with conscientious or religious objectors to war. This was in direct response to the military's inconsistency in dealing with religious objectors during previous periods of conflict.

Over time, the American Friends Service Committee's reputation grew. In 1947, they were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and since then have worked with groups from all backgrounds and cultures around the world to promote a world free of violence, inequality, and oppression. Here in the Southern California border region, this work largely focuses on immigration and humanitarian concerns.

In this episode we'll hear how the American Friends Service Committee has had an impact on the border region and the lives of those involved in the work they do. I'm Anne Marie Tipton, the Education Coordinator at the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, and I'll be your guide.

(end music)

Pedro Rios:

My name is Pedro Rios and I work for the American Friends Service Committee.

AMT:

Pedro's work represents a personal investment for him, as he and his family are intimately familiar with the US-Mexico border region.

PR:

My, I think, political trajectory in beginning of the nineties, into the mid-nineties, in many ways was framed through that lens of wanting to be supportive. My family, my parents also are migrants. My paternal, my maternal lineages have their own interesting history. For instance, my paternal grandparents were born in Los Angeles, but during the 1930s, even though they were U.S. citizens, they were deported to Mexico. My mother's lineage follows a much more traditional migration pattern where my grandfather migrated. He worked as a *bracero* with his older sons, and then eventually they all came across when one of his bosses petitioned them to come into the U.S.. Migration has always been part of my history, my background, and I think, and I really do believe that it defined why I wanted to do this type of work, with the idea that hopefully it would make some difference in someone's life.

AMT:

Pedro has been the Director of the U.S. Border program since 2003, a program which has been in operation since 1977. While he spends most of his time on the U.S. side of the border, his work does take him into Mexico, including Tijuana. From one day to the next, though, Pedro's daily tasks vary.

PR:

There is advocacy that I do, whether it's at the local, state, or federal level, or speaking with migrants who have experienced mistreatment by law enforcement agencies and assisting them in providing direction about how to file a complaint, or it could be documenting any number of incidents that might be taking place. It could also be providing humanitarian support to migrants in Tijuana, especially those that are newly arriving to the border, or analyzing legislative proposals, mainly at the federal level, regarding how border and immigration laws might change.

AMT:

Because of his personal investment in the region, Pedro finds gratification in the work he does. But when it comes to educating and empowering migrants and community members, that's where Pedro really finds his work to be most enriching.

PR:

The most rewarding aspects of my job are when I'm able to work directly with impacted community members, primarily migrants, or their family members who might see themselves as without having a recourse to address the concerns that they are confronting. When they realize that they have the ability, that they have the power, they have the know-how of arriving at solutions that address those problems, that for me, is the most rewarding. They then continue to share that knowledge and those learnings with other individuals as well, so that they no longer see themselves as victims of bad policy or victims of something that happened to them, but also capable of being social actors and therefore creating social theory through the work that they're doing, whether that be providing information to a neighbor, a housemate, or someone they work with, information that could be useful to that other individual as well. They then become these actors that are not only sharing information, but also developing leadership skills that really provide them tools to address the bigger problems that they face as people who might be undocumented, or who might be disenfranchised in one way or another.

AMT:

The leadership skills Pedro mentions are rooted in human rights training and typically begin with basic conceptual questions.

PR:

One of which is, how did I get here? Why am I here? How do I then connect with other people in my community? Then we review for instance, what the Bill of Rights is, what the Constitution is, how immigration policy developed in the United States. These are courses that we offer and one of them, which is my favorite, is when we review human rights and how they compare or contrast with civil rights. For instance, does the U.S. constitution address the right to not be hungry? How might that compare with human rights and that define those aspects of the human condition.

AMT:

All of these questions and all the information are discussed and taught in workshops and trainings that someone can then apply to their daily life.

PR:

For instance, someone who maybe has two jobs, there might be a conversation that takes place about why is it that that person has two jobs instead of one? What is their social condition that sets them up to have to work two jobs and maybe not address some of the other concerns that they might have? They might not spend time with their family. A lot of interesting dialogue develops out of those conversations, and that then leads to people developing the leadership skills to address those concerns that may be the most important aspects of their lives.

AMT:

Pedro's work still comes with some difficult challenges, both on a professional and personal level.

PR:

I think what's frustrating about my work, is having to constantly be butting heads with the different aspects of the state that attempt to dehumanize people, human beings. For instance, understanding that there are border walls that mark are our lands, understanding that there are policies that frame people as undeserving of being in the United States. It's frustrating when those people who are seen as undeserving and are here in the U.S. and are working hard to make ends meet, but yet they don't have access to resources that would make their lives a much more comfortable, where the policies that are being peddled by opportunistic politicians, tend often to find those that are without power to become the easy scapegoats. It becomes a political decision to try to marginalize people who are already marginalized and disenfranchised and more. It's frustrating for me to continuously be seeing that as part of the pattern and practice of how policy develops that impacts some people in one way to their detriment, and impacts other people in another way where those people benefit.

AMT:

The frustrations and personal experiences only highlight the need for the work Pedro and the American Friends Service Committee does on behalf of the underrepresented.

As I mentioned in the opening of this episode, the American Friends Service Committee has been doing this work for over a century. In that time, their purview has significantly broadened. In 1977, during a time of high migration between the U.S. and Central American countries, that

focus fell on the border region and increased violent white supremacist activity here in San Diego.

PR:

There was also a lot of tension between established migrant and Chicano/Chicana communities in the United States and law enforcement, and also the presence of white supremacists organizations, such as the KKK in Northern San Diego county that tended to do their activities even in the border. We have records that show that the KKK led a clan border watch in 1979, here around this area, in the Imperial Beach area.

During the late seventies, when people were already organizing in San Diego, the American Friends Service Committee decided to coordinate their work with local organizers. That's where the work started and established the program, which at the beginning, was primarily for the purpose of supporting research-based work for the organizers, as well as people that wanted to learn more about what was taking place in the Southwestern part of the United States around migration issues. That work expanded, and it developed into a border-wide effort known as the Immigration and Law Enforcement Monitoring Project, which included small based organizations, grassroots, from San Diego, all the way to Brownsville, Texas. These organizations formed a network and they began documenting human rights abuses. It was really important, groundbreaking human rights documentation of abusive practices, not only by law enforcement entities, such as Border Patrol and INS at that time, but also these vigilante-type of people that attempted to take the law into their own hands.

AMT:

Recently, organizations advocating for immigrants have been deliberating whether or not the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Border Patrol should be abolished. Over time and with a lot of thought and consideration, the American Friends Service Committee has been able to find their own stance on the matter.

PR:

It included a lot of debate, a lot of sharing of stories, analysis about why we believe that abolish ICE is a real genuine policy proposal that could be implemented. What we're suggesting is that if you abolish ICE, an institution from our experience and what we've seen, is for the most part targeting working families. We don't see reform as part of a real change that could arrive, where people then could be treated with dignity and with respect.

PR:

There are some perspectives within the organization that also have arrived at abolishing the Border Patrol, but that isn't yet a formal policy platform that the American Friends Service Committee has. With ICE, it is. With Border Patrol, it isn't.

AMT:

Pedro believes this is due to the difference in size and scope that each entity has.

PR:

Even with the immigrant rights movement overall, there is a lack of understanding of the role that Border Patrol has. That's why sometimes you might have some beltway non-profit organizations that are immigrant rights organizations who will say, "Well, it's okay if you double the number of Border Patrol, so long as people are able to get their papers." We're waving our arms over here saying, "Wait. Hold on. You don't know what that actually means. What our lived experience has been with the number of Border Patrol that we have now, and what other types of real policy changes might make better sense for our community, versus the militarization that seen over the course of now 30 to 40 years, that has impacted people's lives in a way that we wouldn't want impacted anywhere else."

AMT:

Pedro’s experiences and time spent with the American Friends Service Committee has allowed him to provide his own valuable insight into the discussion.

PR:

I think the benefit of me working with the American Friends Service Committee since 2003, is that allows me an extensive amount of years to be able to say, "Well, this is what we experienced then. This is what we experienced 10 years ago, five years ago, and two years ago." This compilation of experience allows me to say, "This is a real viable political platform." Unfortunately, I'm not under any illusion that, while last year it might've been a talking point for some policymakers to adopt, this year it might not be. I understand that, but at least it creates the political space to have a conversation about what ICE in particular, has done to many working families with whom we've shared experiences.

AMT:

Another part of Pedro's work, is counteracting behaviors of ICE in the border region that can create questions in transparency or impunity.

PR:

We've been working in coalition with various organizations, not only locally in San Diego County, but also across the border from San Diego to Brownsville, Texas, in trying to promote better regulations and better legislation. Oftentimes, how we do that might change. Oftentimes, it depends what the political atmosphere might be in D.C. There's a lot of tug and pull on either of those sides, whether it's administrative policy change, or whether it's a legislative policy change. That's where a lot of our advocacy falls in.

There's also other levels where that might take place. The state of California- so again, jumping into a time machine and going back to the mid-nineties when the state of California passed Proposition 187, which essentially would have made any civil service position open to calling someone if they suspected them of being undocumented. That's what the proposal actually uses that word of suspicion/suspected. Whereas today, the state of California is passing immigrant friendly legislation to try to be much more inclusive, which is a 180 shift from 25 years ago. A lot of that advocacy takes place, whether it's at the local level, state level, and federal level. What I mentioned earlier, working directly with community members is also really important because it's not only about the advocacy that we can offer, but it's also ensuring that someone who has experienced an ICE raid for instance, who's lived through family separation, can speak for themselves, and can go to their Congress members office and tell their story and tell their testimony.

AMT:

Let's take a moment here to recognize why this is so important. For Pedro, that personal experience is what he believes can change minds and make progress.

PR:

That's something that I think is much more important than me saying it, but it's much more important for someone who's lived it to speak for themselves and share what their lived experience was. I think that that is fundamentally where there might be real change from policymakers, who might not have a clue of what it means when immigration agents come early in the morning, at five in the morning, and take the breadwinner away. Suddenly that family is trying to figure out, "Well, how are we going to pay rent, pay the bills?" That's, I think for me, the key of ensuring that people are able to find venues, the avenues, and for me to assist in creating those venues and avenues for people to share their stories.

AMT:

Pedro Rios grew up a stone's throw away from the border and the Tijuana River reserve, in a family directly impacted by our nation's immigration policy. That upbringing and the experiences in his youth, gave him great motivation to do the work that he is so well suited to do.

It is obvious that he finds much gratification in helping to train and empower some of the most disenfranchised people in our community. His longevity in his position gives him the valuable perspective to help to effect change. The American Friends Service Committee has been active in researching human-rights abuses in the U.S. Border program for forty-four years and most likely has influenced policy changes to protect immigrants in California through their advocacy. These policies are worlds apart from the Proposition 187 era in the 1990s. It is a part of a long tradition of religious organizations standing up for people that don't have a voice and giving them one.

Thanks to Pedro Rios for his time and sharing about his work. Thank you for listening to Divided Together, brought to you by California State Parks Foundation, Parks California, and the generosity of an anonymous donor.