MY TÍA DOLORES HUERTA TAUGHT ME—AND MILLIONS OF OTHERS—THE POWER OF POSITIVITY AND POSSIBILITY.
Dolores does not play.” Those were the words of President Barack Obama as he awarded civil rights and labor activist Dolores Huerta the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012. He was driving home the point that Huerta was gracious to him when he admitted he stole her slogan, “Sí se puede,” having used the English translation (“Yes we can”) for his 2008 presidential campaign.

Cofounder with César Chávez of the United Farm Workers union (UFW), founder of the nonprofit Dolores Huerta Foundation, and civil rights icon, Huerta is a pillar of activism. She is also my great-aunt (my grandfather’s sister). In the 2017 documentary Dolores, executive produced by Carlos Santana and directed by Peter Bratt, activist Angela Davis described Huerta as a “dancer on the stage of justice.” That was a nod to Huerta’s lifelong passion for dancing, which I can vouch for personally. I recall many family gatherings in which our matriarch was the last on the dance floor—yet also the first to get up the following morning to catch a plane to her next rally, speech, or dignitary meeting.

Her boundless energy is rare and held steady even as she turned 90 on April 10, 2020. While the global pandemic has slowed her travel itinerary, she has taken to virtual meetings, interviews, and grassroots organizing with the ease of a millennial. I attribute the source of her energy to what I call a “sí se puede consciousness.” It is a “yes we can” attitude that runs so deep, the body, mind, and soul yield in submission to the work of possibility.

THE CRY WAS BORN

I could deliver the sí se puede rally cry before I could recite the alphabet. This was true for my generation in my family and for many farmworker children in California and around the country. Huerta coined the phrase sí se puede in 1972 in response to Arizona farmworker leaders insisting that the grower lobby in Arizona could not be beat the way it had been in California and other states. An Arizona law had been passed with provisions so strict that a farmworker could be imprisoned for merely saying the words boycott or strike. In a meeting with Arizona labor leaders, they hopelessly told Huerta, “No, in Arizona, no se puede.”

“No,” Huerta replied with determination. “In Arizona, sí se puede!” (And they did.) The phrase immediately became the UFW rallying cry and can be heard even today in any civil rights protest, march, or rally for women, people of color, the LGBTQ community, and others whose rights have been repeatedly pushed aside. The efforts of civil rights have been well-served by the sí se puede consciousness. Yes we can: Yes we can engage the power within us to create a better society. Yes we can engage the power of community to organize and cultivate leaders who will serve the greater good of all. Sí se puede. Yes we can.
Growing up in an activist family was a little like being a fish who doesn't know how extraordinary water is because it is all around you. My tía Dolores was standing next to Robert Kennedy while he gave his last speech, moments before he was assassinated. She and Chávez led a 340-mile march from the UFW headquarters to the California state capitol building. They were greeted by more than 10,000 people who had gathered to show their support. She spent time in New York City working with activist Gloria Steinem. All of that before I was born, and all by the time she was the age I am now.

Sí se puede consciousness is instilled in my bones, if not my DNA. I leaned into this consciousness when my high school guidance counselor advised me to stop my effort to graduate early because “you are just going to get married and have kids. Isn’t that what your people do?” I did eventually get married and have children—after graduating early, receiving a full-ride scholarship to Stanford University (among other renowned schools), earning a bachelor's degree in social work, and starting my own business. Later, I went to ministerial school and became an ordained Unity minister, as well.

My two daughters easily demonstrate the grit, compassion, and power that is the legacy of tía Dolores. They have marched for justice shouting sí se puede and have led rallies. The first president they recognized at their young ages of 4 and 5 when he took office was Obama, and now as high schoolers, they have watched a woman of color, family friend Kamala Harris, become vice president. The world my children are experiencing is a direct result of so many activists instilling in them a new consciousness, one of possibility rooted in the divine power within to make manifest ideals of equality and justice, born from divine love.

HOPE WINS

All this has not been without sacrifice. During a peaceful protest in 1988, a San Francisco police officer beat my aunt with a baton, rupturing her spleen and breaking two ribs. While I have painted a mighty picture of this powerful woman, let me be clear that physically she stands all of 5 feet 2 inches and weighs just over 100 pounds. That experience slowed her down only a little and for merely a brief time.

Thirty years later, numerous schools have been named after her, history and social studies textbooks include her story, Santana and other celebrities regularly attend her birthday parties, and the Smithsonian presented an exhibition called One Life: Dolores Huerta from 2015-16. As our sí se puede family legacy receives well-deserved global accolades, it provides perspective on how one person can ignite a movement and shift consciousness for generations to come. It’s a cry of hope.

The release of the 2017 documentary was both exciting and eye-opening. I was invited to speak on several panels at film screenings, and each time someone approached me with tears in their eyes, thanking me—decades later and two time zones away—for the work of my tía. They shared firsthand accounts of how her ideas and actions shaped individuals, families, and communities by illuminating worthiness, personal power, and oneness.

Then came my own “Dolores does not play” moment. In 2018, she was set to meet with the Latinx students at Kansas State University (KSU) and to give an evening keynote address. Before she arrived, Congressman Emanuel Cleaver II contacted me to request a breakfast with her. As they talked politics and “Washington,” catching up on mutual acquaintances and commenting on legislation and special interest groups, I gained even more perspective. These two have been in public service for a very long time, shaping our society. Sacrifice. Commitment. Selfless service. Sí se puede.

We were scheduled to arrive two hours away at KSU to check in at the hotel and meet the Latinx student leadership group by 4 p.m. So we shuffled off with my two daughters in tow. Dolores does not play. Having arrived in Kansas City on a red-eye flight from Washington, D.C., she was as perky and energetic as ever throughout the
entire day. During our drive to KSU, she had phone conversations with lawyers about her lawsuit against a school district whose disciplinary actions were biased against children of color. She then reviewed a curriculum sent to her by PBS that would be provided to schools across the nation with the viewing of her documentary. She closed her eyes only for about 20 minutes. After a quick check-in at the hotel, we attended a reception with the Latinx student leaders, at which Dolores gave an impromptu 30-minute speech. Much to my surprise, she announced that I would be speaking with her during the evening keynote address. Dolores does not play.

We finished the reception and were off for a quick trip back to the hotel to change and eat dinner. On the 10-minute drive to the main event, we discussed what we might talk about during the 60-minute keynote address. We decided that we would work me in by talking about the power of faith and courage used to embody *sí se puede* consciousness and to activate change in the world. *Good, I thought. I can do that.*

We stepped out of the car, my head spinning a bit, and rushed backstage with barely enough time to don microphone packs. Just as the emcee began to read her bio to the audience, she turned to me and said, “Okay, you go first. Say something about being a mother in Kansas, a woman of color, and an activist.” She turned back to walk onstage as the applause rang out with the emcee announcing, “Dolores Huerta and Jacquie Fernández.” Dolores does not play.

In that moment, I had a new understanding of who she is in the world. In that moment, I wasn’t walking onstage with my aunt Dolores, I was walking onstage with an icon, an inspiration, a fierce woman of faith and courage. One who does not play until the work is done.

The presentation was effortless, joyful, and honest. Once the work was done, the dance party began. I thought perhaps *tía* would be too tired to stay long. *Ha! I thought wrong.* We danced the night away with those college students. As we left, she asked the driver what fun thing we could do in the morning before she had to catch her plane at 11 a.m.

“*The campus museums will be open,*” he suggested.

“That sounds great,” she responded. “Let’s do it!”

Dolores does not play—until she does. The *sí se puede* consciousness is life-giving, energy-boosting, generous, faith-filled, courageous, and fun-loving. My *tía* Dolores Huerta is living proof.