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**Recorded Message:** The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. A free flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry, and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

**Dave Hennessy:** Welcome to The Hennessy Report by Keystone Partners. I'm Dave Hennessy and today's guest is Denise Vargas, the executive director of El Hogar Projects, which provides education to hundreds of Honduran children in vulnerable situations. Denise is a native Honduran and she got her undergraduate degree at Dartmouth College in language and psychology, and an MBA at UNITEC in Mexico. She started her career in human resources and really came to understand the power of team building.

She's a published poet in two languages, which is very rare, and we get a treat at the end of this podcast. She's a member of the Aspen Leadership Institute Network and worked at the UN Security Council in New York, presented to the General Assembly on women, poverty and war. Now back in her home country of Honduras, she's leading El Hogar and discusses the importance from a very early age to know that someone cares and is there to support their future. Next up on The Hennessy Report, the number one *New York Times* bestselling author of *White Fragility*, Robin DiAngelo. And now our conversation with Denise Vargas.

Denise, welcome to the podcast.

**Denise Vargas:** Thank you, Dave, it's great to be here.

**Dave:** Well, we always love to start The Hennessy Report with learning a little bit about our guest. Maybe you could share some early life experiences that have informed who you are as a person, as a professional.

**Denise:** Well, when I was a very young kid, I was very sensitive and a little bit of an introvert. I remember reading a children's book that I actually keep next to me a lot, it's called *A Wrinkle in Time*. And this book really opened my eyes to the power of language and the stories that we tell ourselves. I remember reading verses of poems in this book, particularly one called *The Wound is Where the Light Enters You*. This new way of seeing vulnerability and sensitivity allowed me to embrace that part of my personality and to open myself more to connecting to people, and to engaging in the world.

I tend to live in this world of possibilities and not as grounded in reality, and I think that frames a lot of my work because it's about looking at things in a new way and exploring, asking a lot of questions and looking at the future. This one verse really helped me understand that my perception of the world is under my control. I think that's helped me and led me to be very interested in psychology as well, so those two passions of my life started very early on with one book. Which is why I also am so in love with education and the power of teachers and reading, and how it can really mold our lives and our children's lives.

**Dave:** Oh, that's amazing. And of course, you've gone on to become a published poet yourself. Poetry in two languages, I understand.



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**Denise:** Yes, no I only speak two fluently, the others I understand. Certainly it's very hard to dominate a language enough in order to write poetry.

**Dave:** Denise, you had such an amazing career. You've done so many different things. I don't think I've had a guest on the podcast that's had a more varied experience. You're part of the Aspen Leadership Institute. We've already mentioned you're a published poet. You lived in New York, worked on the UN Security Council and presented to the General Assembly on so many issues: women, poverty, and war. I was wondering, having lived all over the world, what drew you back to Honduras? And then more specifically, what has drawn you to the work that you do today at El Hogar, which is a school?

**Denise:** What drew me back is the sense of having true purpose. When I worked in the United Nations, I learned a lot about theoretically what's behind the root to so many of these world problems, but I felt very far away from where the impact was actually happening. I felt drawn to come back to Honduras because I felt it would give my life a lot of meaning. To look for work that was impactful and connected to my own roots, my society, my family, of course. I was very fortunate because when I started, I entered into the corporate world unintentionally. There was a common pattern in my work. I loved the mastery of it, I loved my independence, the leadership part of it, but I was missing purpose. So I kept looking for it, and starting projects and looking for things where I could feel more connected to my own giving.

When I came back, I was actually called by my previous employer to go back to this organization and I stayed there for another 10 years, but realized that parallel to the work in the corporate world, I started carrying out projects related to women, mentorship, entrepreneurship, a lot of work with empowerment of girls. Eventually I decided that I wanted to leave that job and start my own business, fostering these skills, the support network especially for women entrepreneurs and youth development.

Eventually after a few years, I was called by someone from the Aspen Institute. We had a common connection and I was called to participate in a position to work in El Hogar as the executive director, and it just seemed to combine absolutely everything I was passionate about. This diversity that you see in my pattern or my career, it just connected in a very unique way in El Hogar because El Hogar represents education. It represents support for those who are in the most vulnerable conditions, but also who can truly transform our country by becoming leaders in the next generation. El Hogar was actually looking for developing a greater degree of entrepreneurship, not only in its curriculum, but in the self-sustainability of the organization. That's what brought me back to Honduras, and that's how I ended up in El Hogar.

**Dave:** That's good. And before we go and jump to El Hogar, you had an interesting story about how you ended up in the corporate world, and I think, this is an HR leader podcast, you also dabbled in HR as one of your first jobs.

**Denise:** I did. I knew from a very early age what I was passionate about. I loved poetry, literature in general, and I loved psychology. I started getting involved in human mind and development from the age I was 15 and I started tutoring, and I really knew that I wanted to work in that area, but I didn't know what I was going to do. Halfway through my college education, I spent the summer in Honduras



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and I had a conversation with a very interesting, and one of the smartest men I've ever met in my life, he was the father of one of my close friends. It was just like this conversation I had in passing in his house. They were having a Christmas party. He just seems so interesting and I decided at that moment, I want to work in that organization. I came back and I didn't apply anywhere else at all. My family was worried, said, "You have a lot of opportunities," I'm like, "No, I want to work here and for this man." So I went to this first and only interview.

**Dave:** Was that in the US or was this in...

**Denise:** It's in Honduras and he placed me in the human resources department in the selection, so I spent most of my day interviewing, but also learning. In order to be able to interview, I spent hours just performing roles and jobs everywhere in a very diverse set of...

**Dave:** What industry was it? Can you tell us about what kind of business it was?

**Denise:** I worked for the holding company, so it had a technology company and electronics. There was an automotive company, motorcycles, which is where I spent the last 10 years of my career there. There was real estate, supermarkets, so it's mostly retail...

**Dave:** Oh so it was really diverse.

**Denise:**... but very diverse, yes. I learned so much about business and about people and he couldn't have placed me in a better place. That's how I started in human resources. And I guess this was so long ago, so the terminology has changed, but it started in selection, moved to the training piece, which was my absolute favorite. Then I did spend a few years as the manager of the human resources department, and then moved to more of a corporate marketing role.

**Dave:** That's really cool. A lot of our guests are HR leaders so they usually tell us some stories about being outside of HR and then coming back to it. So you're the kind of the reverse.

**Denise:** I'm the reverse, yes.

**Dave:** Yes. Well, before we talk about El Hogar, the school, I was wondering if you could share a little bit about who the students are, and the environment that many of your students find themselves growing up in before they even come to El Hogar. And I know your upbringing was maybe quite a bit different than the average student in Honduras, especially where El Hogar is.

**Denise:** Their environment can be summarized as a series of conditions that expose them to the risk of not having food, not having water, lacking electricity, but also exposure to violence, lack of access to education. We have two educational centers, one in the main area of the city, so most of the families that attend the elementary campus live along a river that is at risk for flooding. Many of those families were affected with the recent hurricanes, so they lack access to the most basic needs.



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We have also a group of students who are in residence at El Hogar because of the conditions that they're facing. We're hoping it's a temporary situation in general with each of our students. But they face violent experiences at home, or just challenging situations where they don't have the ability or the supervision of parents, or parents who're just simply not available or facing illness. So there's a wide variety of circumstances that lead a student to the El Hogar campus. And the institute, it's a boarding program and the conditions are more related to poverty and lack of access to technology, communications, and basic services.

**Dave:** Yeah. And of course, El Hogar means the home, right, in Spanish?

**Denise:** Yes.

**Dave:** Maybe you can describe the overall school now. All the different locations and campus and how it's structured. I think it was all boys and now many girls go to the school as well. And you're hoping to increase that.

**Denise:** This organization was founded 41 years ago and it started as an all-boys school, just six students and now we serve hundreds of students every year. Now the program consists of an elementary program, as well as the high school boarding program. The elementary program is fully coed, there's boys and girls. And it's also a combination of day students, students that come just to receive their schooling services and one meal or two meals. Then we have the residential program where we have children who live on site year round with breaks to go home. The high school program is an institute that has also vocational programs. It's a boarding system where the students spend Monday through Friday in the school, and then they visit home on the weekends if their residences are close by. Some of them do live farther away and only travel home once a month.

Then we also have a farm, which is meant to be part of the entrepreneurial future of the organization. It not only supplies some of the food and vegetables to these programs, but also allows for many learning opportunities. We hope to expand it to become an entrepreneurial lab as a first stage of this transition to a more entrepreneurial curriculum in El Hogar Projects. The residential component of El Hogar is embedded into the school system. It's in the institute where we have less percentage of girls attending and we are hoping to increase that year by year so that it will eventually arrive to 50/50.

**Dave:** That's great. Maybe you could talk a little bit about your goals for the entrepreneurial program inside the farm. Can you talk a little bit more specifically? And also, how do you use your bias towards entrepreneurship, just in how you're leading the school?

**Denise:** One of the reasons I believe in entrepreneurship is that it allows for a lot more autonomy in establishing our roles. When we work in a company, there are many things that we're bound to, in terms of developing our jobs. When you're starting an entrepreneurial project, one can be a lot more intentional about not just the industry or the products that we're going to design, but also the role we're going to play in this organization, the amount of leadership or the focus either on production or on mechanics. One can really tailor our own activity to an individual's strengths, as opposed to being a more reactive activity. So entrepreneurial, for me, provides many learning opportunities for students



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and for staff members to embrace these strengths, what I call their magic, and to spend as much time as possible in their magic.

So this entrepreneurial perspective combines both creativity, initiative, taking risks, but also identifying one's core strengths and matching it to where to contribute. It gives a lot of purpose and a sense of achievement. A farm has a very clear production cycle, and there's so much to learn from every element of the process in how farming product becomes part of a supply chain. This whole process allows for this kind of exploration as to identifying what piece of the organization I would like to be involved in, what skills are required in each of these activities, and where do I feel I could most contribute? So it's both as a learning process about one own self, as well as how to become productive and independent, and make decisions, and take risks, and even experience often a lot of failures. I think that this connection to nature cannot be undermined in terms of the impact it has on us. The reason to also consider the farm is because it also provides this break from busy-ness and this quiet environment for reflection.

**Dave:** I know that the teachers are so passionate about what they do and the impact they have on the kids' lives, who go to El Hogar. Maybe you could talk about your staff and what you're proud of about them. What's their culture?

**Denise:** There's a very strong culture of commitment, dedication, respect, heart. Most of the staff members of El Hogar have been working for 15, 20, 30, 40 years, so there is that lifelong dedication to the mission. When I ask teachers and directors, and anyone who's related to the logistical aspect of managing the organization, what they most like about what they do, it's the sense of purpose. It's actually very easy to lead because it's mostly just channeling initiatives and energy so that we can arrive to the same goal together.

It's not so much of having to push or having to set goals, or set KPIs, as much as it is to get everyone to work together and aligned, seeing the individual as a whole and the student from beginning to end. Culturally, I think one of the biggest changes though, is actually measuring more and becoming more accountable. With sustainability comes the sense of matching activities to investments, and to cost and to expense. It's a challenge because we tend to focus on what's really important, but it also has to be measured. I think that's one of the biggest changes right now.

**Dave:** Denise, what percentage of your funding for your school comes from donations versus people that pay to go to school?

**Denise:** Well, our schools are all tuition free and it is part of our mission. This is an internationally funded organization, mostly. It started with a 100% donations coming from North American donors. Our donor base consists of both people in the United States and Canada, primarily. One of our goals is to increase the amount of funds coming from either entrepreneurship activity for profit, within a nonprofit organization, which is social entrepreneurship, or local donations as well. If we expand our educational programs to other groups, then we might consider requesting some tuition, but not for the main beneficiaries of the programs.



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**Dave:** Right. And this has been a tough year for everybody in the world, but I know it's probably even tougher in the environment you're working in ...the pandemic, and two hurricanes follow right in the middle of this pandemic that really hit Honduras. Could you talk a little bit about how your organization has adapted?

**Denise:** I think one of the biggest challenges is one, that we are responsible for children's lives, and I think that a sense of responsibility for their health and for their wellbeing weighs down even more than any other type of organization in my experience, or at least what I've lived through. The second piece is that we do have children in residence who have been quarantining, and haven't had the chance to be in enough contact with their families, as they wish. But learning has come from this. Well certainly we've expanded our use of technology so our teachers have had to truly make leaps in use of technology that will be useful in the future. So this is not something that we're going to stop doing.

We've identified our understanding of the importance of developing resilience throughout the organization. This was important before the pandemic, but it's just highlighted how necessary this kind of training and related programs are for everyone involved in the organization. The resilience piece for not just the students, but also the adults working closely with them and anywhere in the organization.

Another thing is connecting with the community. One of the ways that we've identified to help, we have many of our students who can no longer come to campus. So reaching out and visiting them leads to a different type of proximity. A proximity that's more human, more one-to-one and adaptive. And also prioritizing learning to truly focus on what's essential now, while still staying focused in the future. We really need to stay focused on that North of where we're heading and how all of this will eventually lead to growth and to improving everyone's lives.

**Dave:** That's good. Well, we produce this podcast in cooperation with the Northeast Human Resources Association. You might have known of SHRM, the local chapter here in the Northeast. And Meghan, who is part of the Emerging HR Professionals group within NEHRA, and we always have the NEHRA question of the podcast. Meghan's going to ask you that now, Denise,

**Meghan Mandino:** Hi Denise.

**Denise:** Hi, Meghan.

**Meghan:** I saw one of your performances of *Shadow* from 2017, and two of the lines really stuck out to me, "don't be the shadow, be the oar that stirs the water, not the ripple," and "be the voice that breaks the silence, not the echo." You talked about the importance of having a purpose and the mission of the organization. I was wondering what advice you would give to emerging leaders in HR to embrace that idea and bring that to the cultures that they're entering?

**Denise:** One is that there are so many ways of stirring change, of creating change in an organization. That sometimes we are so focused on doing our jobs well, and it's so important to step back as often as possible and see what's around. And take a risk and getting involved in something not directly related to our roles, but to explore other things, and even offer help in other areas. By doing that, we start to



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figure out where we could contribute our purpose, but also we start developing connections and leading our tribe, as I like to call it, as opposed to limiting ourselves to the group that we're working with. It does often imply risk and even maybe less popularity, but by combining forces with others and stepping out a little, I feel one can increase one's courage to be that voice and to break the silence of things that are happening.

In my organization, I tended to be one who would approach our directive team, our president, to speak about inequalities in either income or growth. It would've been very hard for me to go and approach someone to just request, for example, a raise for me. But when I aligned it to a purpose where I felt I was bringing a whole group with me, it just gave me a lot of courage to do so.

**Meghan:** That sentiment of being change agents, you're affecting the next generation of leaders and encouraging these vulnerable students to become their own change agents, and to take control of their futures.

**Denise:** I had an experience very early on about how important it is to have someone believe in our potential. It can be dramatic from a very early age to know that someone cares, and that someone is there to support their future.

**Dave:** With our listening audience, many HR people, is there anything that you could share from your experiences that you think could be valuable to them in general? Either from the Aspen Leadership Institute or just knowing a little bit about how HR might be practiced in different countries?

**Denise:** To me, the importance of developing, not just individuals. There's a lot of focus, and rightly so, in coaching and developing talent and management talent, but also in really seeing how that management talent is part of a team. We can end up having, and my experience both in the human resources department, but also in the managerial part, is that we can have very talented individuals all moving forward. But if we're not aligned, it actually can slow down progress so much more than even one individual who's not really carrying the load. So to me the focus on team synergy for job satisfaction and engagement, but also for productivity and results directly related to the profit line.

When we asked a group of managers how many people are in their team, they tend to mention the people that are part of their department. And the two members of their team are their peers, the people that they're supposed to be connecting with and interconnecting with. And often they tell me, "I have 18 people in my team," and really what they have is five people in their team of their peers, but they don't see themselves as a team. They see their individual department as a team first.

**Dave:** That's really good. That's excellent. If you could give advice to Denise at 25, 30 years old, what would you write to Denise?

**Denise:** So much. So much, I really...

**Dave:** It might even be a poem.



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**Denise:** Actually, I'm going to write that down. I can think of at least two. Start getting involved in entrepreneurial activities much earlier. I was a very devoted employee and that's good, but I also think that it's important to develop your whole self and to start experiencing that entrepreneurial drive, but also the experience of resilience and making decisions on your own, and standing on your own.

The second would be to both mentor someone very early on, and to take on mentorship. My greatest progress or achievements have been related to having a mentor, the appropriate mentor at the right time, a teacher, someone who has supported me. And also many of my most fulfilling moments have been mentoring others.

**Meghan:** How can employees and their organizations find purpose outside of themselves and outside of their small mission to greater support social entrepreneurship?

**Denise:** Well, that's a great question actually, and one that I wish I had addressed earlier on in my career. One is to make time to get involved. There are so many ways and so many amazing projects already going. A very good friend of mine from the Aspen Institute, when I switched careers, he said to me, "Give yourself time to explore. Do not feel you have to commit to one thing or achieve something. The journey of exploring, even though it could feel like moving is fast forward, it will lead you to the right place." And I think that it's one suggestion I would make for anyone. Get connected with the community, explore different avenues. Either way, it's a worthwhile endeavor.

**Dave:** If you could go to dinner with anybody, who would it be?

**Denise:** I would definitely go to dinner with the poet Wisława Szymborska. She is a Polish poet and I read her autobiography, and I've purchased as many of her books as possible. I just think that she has a very different personality from my own, but I would love to ask her so many things about how she developed that sense of irony and fierce independence, and how she also managed to devote her life entirely to the words.

**Dave:** Excellent. Well, on that note, can we request a little bit of your poetry to close the podcast? Maybe you have something you're willing to share with our audience.

**Denise:** Okay, this one doesn't have a title, but it goes like this:

I traveled down my sentences as though they were old Santa Lucia streets. Wandering into the open windows of people's faces, passing by sunlit sheets and cotton blouses that flag from clotheslines over stone paved streets, thinking about how much I miss my country. When suddenly the man walking next to me stops, baffled at the way I say the word cotton with the foreign sound of a round edged T. And with a question, he brings me back to smooth New Hampshire greens. "Where are you from?" How to answer only, "I'm from Honduras?" I stagger over a silent H that resonates with loaded whispers.

Honduras. So much to cradle in a single word. I'm from a land where stories soar and plunge like mountains into shores, where mornings glide endless and gentle over jagged rooftops, where hope takes shelter in anonymous faces. Before I touched its grass, I shared my mother's skin. I'm from her





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coffee tinted sadness and her spirit, her fierce soul of womanhood. I'm from my father's eyes when they mirror the laughter of lemon leaves. I'm from a stranger's laughter, from a dancing girl on the street. If anything, I'm from that side of the window where the fog can touch the crystal and condense into the shape of rain, of rivers, of lakes or tears, of any form of water, for in the end, we are all the same thing. It is only our voices that differ.

**Dave:** Little bit of your Dartmouth education in that one. Back to New England here, where were recording.

**Denise:** That's true. The poem is titled *Shadow*:

Ponder for a moment what a shadow is, a space without light, presence in absence, the shape of anything but itself. I see you playing on the grass beneath the trees, and I believe it's not too soon for me to tell you this. Never be shadow, child. Color the wind with your laughter, moisten the ground with your tears. Be the oar that stirs the water, not the ripple. Be the voice that breaks the silence, not the echo. Be song, be scar, be question, be anything but shadow. Be life in all its complicated splendor.

Thank you so much.

**Dave:** Denise, thank you so much for being a guest on our podcast.

**Denise:** Thank you so much, Dave, and it was wonderful to be here to share, to learn. And thank you Meghan for your great questions. Thank you both.

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