

## The Hum Podcast

### Episode 40: "I Needed To Deal With The Problem"

*[Theme music fades in]*

Nora: When I see the children in those cages, it was the worst thing I saw in my life. It is horrible. It is something that I don't want to see anymore in my life.

*[Music increases in volume]*

Gilad: You're listening to The Hum.

*[Music fades out]*

Gilad: Nora Sandigo is the legal guardian of over 2000 US-born children of undocumented immigrants. She holds the unwavering goal that if the parents are deported, she can keep their children out of the foster care system and keep them alive, in the hopes of reuniting them with their families. In a time when stories of families being separated at the border abound, Nora is a reminder that everyday citizens have the power to change lives. Nora is also the subject of the film *The Great Mother*, which recently had its international premiere at our 8th annual Human Rights Film Festival in Toronto, in December. We are so honored to be joined here today by Nora Sandigo. We're going to jump into it in a little bit and the work that you do, but I know that you were born in Nicaragua. How did you end up in the US?

Nora: Well, I was born in Nicaragua, but I went to the US because I was looking for political asylum for refugee. I was running from the government. They were killing many kids and people in the country. What I did is just to leave the country because criminal guy were there, and my father or my family tried to protect me, and that's why they send me outside of the country.

Gilad: And you ended up in the US. Did you go to Florida immediately?

Nora: Well, when I left my country, I went directly to Venezuela first. I lived there for three years, and then I stayed in Europe also, in France, and then I came to the United States. I came to Florida directly.

Gilad: You've been working with undocumented children for a number of years. Can you tell me a little bit more about how you started getting involved in working with children who are undocumented in the United States?

Nora: It started because when I entered into the United States, I started working with Church Wars Service, and they gave me training, how to help the immigrant community, and I was working directly with the immigrants, like me. Little by little, more and more families came to my life, and also the children. One day, two kids came to my office and asked me that they needed to live with me, and that was the beginning. And I asked them, "Why?" They explained to me that their father were without documents and the mother were in the detention center, and both of them later were deported. The kids were so young, just nine and eleven, and started to live with me.

Simona: Did you have kids at the time, your own kids at the time?

Nora: At that moment, yes. I have Attena and Jerriann, my two daughters, and they were more or less the same ages, and they become easy, very friendly, like brothers and sisters, and it was beautiful. It's like from one day to the other, I have two more kids and it was beautiful, but it was so painful also because I needed to deal with the problem, with the pain for the children. They were always crying, they were feeling alone, they were feeling a need to have a hug and a kiss from their parents and it was beautiful, but painful.

Simona: And is that the start of you becoming the eventual mother of almost 2000 children?

Nora: Yes, it was the beginning. Once that the people knew that I was able to have two kids in my house, living like my children, like if they were my own kids, more kids were coming to my house. More and more, from different countries, from different origin, and it was like in one year, I have 80 kids, with the legal process, with everything, with the power of attorney, and then more and more children came to my life. And you see now, we have a lot.

Gilad: How do you go from being the legal guardian of two children to becoming the legal guardian of 2000 children? It's just such a big idea that I'm having such a hard time understanding, where do the 2000 children ... Just guide us through the process of how you become that legal guardian of 2000 children.

Nora: It is something that just came to my life from ... Well, we didn't know how that happened, and we didn't plan anything like that. It just happened. Two kids came to my life, because they told me that the father and mother said, "If something happened to us, please go to see Nora. She will help you." But I was not, I didn't know that I was able to do something like that. You're wishing, God, two more, and two more or three more, is not easy, but Jesus provide and things are getting easier. You get more, but you get more friends around. You get more people around, volunteers that want to do something for them. Some of the kids live with me. Those who don't have any of the parents, but the others live in

different homes, with a relative, with the neighbors, with a friend, or they live in a house where the volunteers provide, or where the organization paid to have those kids live in there, with someone who is taking care of them.

Gilad: For those who are unfamiliar, because this idea of being an undocumented child is becoming more and more prevalent in the news, it's something that we're seeing more and more of, but for those who don't understand what it means to be an undocumented child, can you tell us a little bit more about how someone becomes undocumented, and what that means?

Nora: Well, the case of my children is not the case of the undocumented children. They are American citizen, that is worse. The problem is worse, and that is a real injustice. That is a violation of their human rights. That is a misery, that is something like that is happening in the country, because they are American citizens, but no one is paying attention to them because they are not borders yet. They are American citizen, because they were born in America, but the father and mother were without the documents. That's why they were deported, or they are in the process to be deported. But the children are American citizen. We have another group of children that are the new children that enter into the country recently, and they are without documents, but they are children. They are human beings. It doesn't matter from where they are, how they look, or the color. They are the creatures of Jesus, and we need to help them. We need to do something for them. And we have a group also that we are trying to protect.

Simona: So these are, I think, are these the families coming in through Central America, through Mexico, and then trying to file asylum once they get to the United States? And that's what we're seeing now, that these families are being detained at the border, and they're separated from their, the parents are separated from the children. So what happens after they're separated from the children? Parents are separated. What happens next?

Nora: That is terrible, what is happening. That is a real violation of the human rights. The children are part of the family and should be with the family, should be with the father and mother. It doesn't matter where they are or what is their legal status. They are supposed to be with a family. That type of separation, and to see, when I see the children in those cages, it was the worst thing I saw in my life. It is horrible. It is something that I don't want to see anymore in my life, something like that. And I pray for the children that they will forget what happened in, at this moment, when they were there. Until this moment, there is a big group of children that we don't know where they are, and their parents are looking for them. It is horrible. It is horrible. But they are coming here, just trying to find freedom, peace, and safety for their life.

Gilad: This whole process of separating, let's say, the undocumented parents from their children, who are citizens. Is this something that has been brand new, with Trump becoming president, or is this part of a much longer policy that has been going on in the United States for a while?

Nora: That is a good question because this is not, I'm not a politician, I'm just a human rights activist, and my work is somebody for the human rights of the children, in order to be the voice of them, wherever I am. But it is not about parties. It is not about one or the other party. It is about the wrong weight that we have in the immigration policies. It's something wrong that we need to fix. It's something wrong that needs to be fixed in the Congress in order to have a law that is change, that is fair for everyone, at least for everyone who is living in the country for so long, with the American citizen children, who pay the taxes, and they deserve to have a path to the citizenship. But it's not the party, right now I don't think it's the party, but is the person who is in the government, who is the president. But we need to fix the laws. And those laws were exactly like they are right now, when we have another government, also and other parties, everybody promise. But no one fixed the problem yet.

Simona: I'm really interested to know, are there ever opportunities for the parents and the children that you raised to be reunited? Do they ever get to see each other again?

Nora: Sometimes, but sometimes we need to wait until they're 21 years old and we have some cases that wouldn't, they become professional, and they don't have the opportunity to see their parents yet. And they're still waiting. And that is painful because, in the case of Sesia and Ronan, they have 14 years waiting.

Gilad: Can you tell us a little bit more about the condition of the detention centers? So, when the parents are separated from their children, the parents are often put in detention centers, maybe before they're deported. Can you tell us a little bit more about the conditions of those centers?

Nora: The condition of the centers where the parents go for detention, that is horrible. They are treated very, very bad and it's not that much that we can do, because once that they are inside, we can't do anything more than denounce and to do our work, to talk, to explain what is happening, but it's not easy. Not even for the lawyers to have something, sometimes they are released, but we need to do a lot and that is case by case. But most of them have horrible, terrible conditions inside.

Gilad: Can you describe the conditions a little bit? For those who don't know, what makes it so horrible?

Nora: It's the food, it's the treatment. Sometimes they are so sick and they don't receive any medication. They don't have a doctor. They don't believe when they say that they have fever, or they have chest pain, and we note of many that are dying inside without the proper treatment.

Simona: What does your family think about the work that you do? Are they supportive of you doing the work that you do?

Nora: Yes, my family is very supportive of everything, especially my daughters. They are incredible. They are amazing and they live, they share mama, since they were so young, and they are happy with what I am doing, and they helped me a lot.

Simona: What does a typical normal day look like for you?

Nora: Well, very busy. Everything is work. Everything is to be talking with the children or with the relatives, talking about someone who is in detention, or talking with someone who is calling to me maybe at five in the morning, because immigration knock at the door and they don't know what to do, if they will open or not, the door to the officers. I heard on the phone when the children are crying, that is horrible. Or they call me because a child is sick in school, or another one was playing, and maybe it's broken leg, and I need to run to the hospital. Or another child with crisis, crying, or very quiet in a corner in school, not paying attention. Always something is happening, every day is busy, but my group of volunteers are busy too, dealing with every problem that we have with the children.

Gilad: They call you the Great Mother because you're the legal guardian of over 2000 children. Can you walk me through the process of how you become the legal guardian for a child? Are the courts involved? Is it a legal process? Is it just between you and the parents? How does that work?

Nora: Well, it is a legal process, because it's a document that is made normally by a lawyer, and it should be a legal document that is that they will have in the family, in order to give me the children. But it's not a rights document. But it's not, it doesn't have any relation with the court because it's something that is coming directly from the family to me, and we have so many children, so many documents, and all of them come from different cultures. It's incredible. But when you see that we have people from Central America, South America, Mexico, from India, Chinese, from everywhere, some are European, and it's incredible how, I don't know how they know about those, how they know about my name, and they call me. Like Ruthie. Ruthie was a case that came from India and they never live in, I don't know how they know about me, but they call me. People that never live in Florida.

Gilad: So you're the guardian of 2000 kids. Again, it's such a huge idea, Simona, I can't even, I don't even know how to understand this idea. I imagine you don't have a house that can fit 2000 kids. So where are the kids? Where do they stay, where do they sleep, where do they eat?

Nora: Well, in some cases, it is only like an "in case" that we need. I can think that could be symbolic, that in case something happened to the father or mother, I will be able to help, to be there to help. That's why sometimes they keep the legal guardian document. But sometimes it is a real need to serve every one child. From this big group, we have 370 that really need more help because at least one of their parents are already deported, but there is another group, that is like a hundred, that needs help every single day, and that is the group that we're serving, that we are more close to them, trying to help with everything. And that is the situation right now with my volunteers. They are just with the focus on the group that needed the most.

Gilad: You're the subject of a documentary called *The Great Mother*, which we screened at our festival a while back. And there's one scene in the film where you guys are watching the US election, the presidential election when Donald Trump got elected. And Simona, I don't know if you remember, but to me it's like when a huge tragedy happens, like, say, September 11th, you remember where you were. Even not a tragedy, any sort of monumental event happens, you remember exactly where you were and what you were doing. And I remember I was with my wife watching the TV and we're like, "Oh shit. It happened. He got elected." Sim, do you remember where you were?

Simona: I was in Berlin, so it was six, we were about seven hours ahead. And we were just watching the East coast results, and Hillary was winning, and we went to sleep, because it was two in the morning, and we were like, "No way are we going to wake up to a Donald Trump administration. No way." We woke up to a Donald Trump administration, and I remember one of the first things that he did in office was threaten DACA, threaten the Dreamers Act, which was a policy that allowed citizenship for undocumented youth who came here under the ages of 16. And I really, the reason I bring this up, because it directly impacts the work that you do and I know that you advocate for the Dreamers Act. What does that mean? If that act is passed, if that law is passed, what would it mean for the youth that you work with?

Nora: Oh, it has been horrible, all of these years after, because we have the case in court who has been fighting, and the Dreamers, they are fighting a lot to protect their rights. They are already with the legal situation, because it was approved in the last government, but the actual president is trying to stop it. Yes, and we are there. We are fighting in the federal court, in the Supreme court, and we need to

keep doing this work because if not, it's not fair. Those kids are part of the community, and the United States. They are educated in the United States.

Nora: We need to be smart. We need to use those talents, that education, and keep it back for our people. That is something that is part of our taxes, of everything. We need to take advantage of those beautiful people that deserve to stay in the United States. I think we need to keep working for them. And it is the same thing with the children. We knew that that will happen if Mr. Trump were the president that night where, wow, so difficult, because most of the children were crying. They knew that maybe more and more deportation with their parents, but sometimes it's not the reality. Not everything is black or white, because I don't want to say that everything is bad right now, because it's not the truth. It was bad before too. It was bad, the last government promised and promised, but remember that two million and a half people were deported-

Simona: Under the Obama administration.

Nora: Under Obama administration. I don't want the people to forget about that.

Simona: That gets lost a lot, because we think that this is all a Trump issue, but it actually dates back to the Bush administration, when they started to make it harder for certain countries and their citizens to immigrate here. What do you say when people argue that, "Well, if they want to be here, they should come here legally. If they just followed the rules, they wouldn't have any of this trouble." What do you say to people?

Nora: That is not possible. Well, it's probably is good for a few people, for a small group of people, but not for everyone. When you live in another country, you don't have the means, the experience, how to do that process, how to come, or how to enter in another country legally. You don't know how is the process, and when you have a real emergency, you don't think in anything like that. It is my case. I was a minor. I was not thinking about that. I just was thinking to be alive, to survive, to be a refugee somewhere, it doesn't matter where, but to be alive. That is what my family wanted, and it happened that way. People can say whatever, and in the book everything is easy, but in the reality it's not that easy.

Gilad: Nora, how do you stay so strong despite the battles that you're having to fight every single day? Where do you find that strength?

Nora: That strength is from Jesus. I pray. I pray a lot, and I believe in Jesus. I believe that I'm working for Jesus to protect his children, and even though that I'm doing a little bit, it's not that much that I can do, I'm able to do something, because we have a group of volunteers that are my guardian angels, that are always helping the children. But even they are part of my life, and they are with me, and they

are with my children because, just because of Jesus. Because it is what he want. And right now I'm here talking with you guys, but my volunteer, Sarah, there in my ranch preparing food, doing the job that I am not able to do now, I'm not personally there, but Jesus have other people working for the children right now.

Gilad: Is there a candidate in the United States right now that excites you? Someone that you think is on your side, the side of the children and their parents politically? Right now you're in the middle of a huge process to decide who the next Democratic nominee will be to challenge Trump in the next federal election, which is coming up very soon. Is there anyone that excites you more than anybody else?

Nora: No, not really. I think all of them are politicians. They will promise a lot, and I don't want to have that big expectative of one of them. I prefer to wait to see what happen. And I pray and I hope that we will have a person who is fair, who will come to protect the human rights of the people of America, and who will be the best president for my country.

Gilad: Do you have faith, I mean I know have faith, obviously you have faith. We just talked about your faith, and your spiritual faith. Do you have belief to feel or to think that things will improve? Where do you see the future?

Nora: No, I think things will be improved. Yes. Will be a change. In the name of Jesus, we will have, we will see that. We will have a change and we will have a furnace in the country and justice, and I'm praying for that, and in the name of Jesus that we will have a real change, a real America for everyone, with the same rights.

Gilad: What can we do to help? We live in Canada. We have listeners in Canada, obviously, and we have listeners in the United States. What can those who are living in the US, and others like us here in Canada, and other parts of the world, do to help you, and what can we do to help those children who are separated from their parents?

Nora: People can help in many ways. Bring, those who once who enter in our page, Nora Sandigo Children Foundation, that org. Also they can put a donate, even \$1 will be a lot for me because we need the money to make the construction for the children, to build the rooms, because my house is small. It's not that big enough to protect at least the most needed children. They can donate the food through different ways, through Amazon, through any way that they prefer, but they can donate food. It's something that we need for every single day, three times per day, for every child.

Gilad: And beyond a donation, is there any other way, for those who are on the ground in the United States, is there any way that they can help you out?



Nora: They can come to volunteers, to help with every child, and they can come to my house and help directly with the children, to work directly with the children.

Simona: Awesome, thank you.

Nora: Thank you very much to all of you. Thank you for the invitation. Thank you for, I'm so happy to be in Toronto with beautiful people. Yeah, I find that in Toronto, everyone is so kind, so sweet. Oh, wow. I have a beautiful experience in Toronto. God bless everyone in Toronto, Canada and everywhere. My blessing to all of you. Thank you.

Gilad: You already have a very big family. You have a family of over 2000 people, but just know that your family got a little bit bigger here in Toronto. Anytime you come back, you have a family here to visit. You're welcome to come back anytime and visit us.

Nora: That is sweet. Thank you very much.

*[Theme music fades in]*

Gilad: Thank you so much, Nora.

Simona: Thank you.

Gilad: My name's Gilad Cohen.

Simona: And I'm Simona Ramkisson.

Gilad: This podcast is edited and produced by Brandon Fragomeni and Alex Castellani. Our associate producer is Ron Ma.

Simona: This is an initiative of JAYU, a charity that shares human rights stories through the arts.

*[Music fades out]*

Gilad: If you enjoyed this podcast, help us make more of them by donating whatever you can. Visit us online at [jayu.ca/donate](http://jayu.ca/donate).