

Announcer: Welcome to Hancock Conversations, an Allan Hancock College podcast. Join President Dr. Kevin G. Walthers and members of the Hancock community, as they explore the stories behind the people and places that make Allan Hancock College the unique hub for learning that it is today. You're sure to learn something new, and even have a little fun along the way.

Kevin Walthers: Good afternoon and welcome. This is Kevin Walthers, I'm the Superintendent/President at Allan Hancock College and we're having the very first-ever Allan Hancock College podcast. We're honored to have with us our Trustee Hilda Zacarías, who is finishing up her second term as an Allan Hancock College Trustee. Hilda is well-known in our community. She's a certified public accountant and was one of our 75 Distinguished Alumnus for our 75th anniversary, which is now 25 years ago, so that's hard to believe. She's a Hancock grad, that's the best part. She went to Hancock, she transferred to Cal Poly, and then she went on to Harvard, got her master's degree at Harvard, and now she's a local CPA. A lot of other cool stuff that she's done in her life and we're going to talk to her about that. So Hilda, welcome.

Hilda Zacarías: Thank you. Thank you for having me in this very special, special inauguration of the podcast.

KW: So, before we get into all the different offices you've held and the things you've done, tell us how you kind of got started in this activism and in the social justice movement.

HZ: Sure, I believe a life of public service is something you decide at some point in your life, for those of us who are lucky enough to serve our communities. For me it really came from loving my community, Santa Maria, been here since I was a baby, grew up on the Northwest side. I've migrated over to the Northeast side now, but still an eye shot from the house I was raised in. My mom always gave her children a sense of always thinking about others, and always helping others. And she made that visible to us by involving us in the farm worker movement of Cesar Chavez in the 60s. Even though she was a motel maid, she felt there was something important for us to get involved in, and she always used to say, if you see something wrong or unjust, you need to do something about it. And so, we never thought that we weren't supposed to do that. And it just became a way of life for me and I've been very blessed to have wonderful and positive experiences, as well as some negative things that come with any type of public service, but overall, it's been a great way to live a life.

KW: That's awesome. So, tell me, what do you think is one of the favorite things you've learned doing this for your whole adult life?

HZ: Well, one of my favorite things that I have learned is absolutely the ability of people to come together. And not necessarily having to come together for a particular purpose, but rather coming together to learn more about each other and about where they're coming from, and understanding. And I have very strong values and opinions, but I also know that other people have strong values and opinions, and the best way for us to come to agreement is to sit down and have a conversation about what people are really feeling. A lot of times that feeling is fear and misunderstanding, and certainly fear of the unknown, fear of the strange, fear of who the next person is that's moving in next door, whatever that might be. And I find that my favorite role is to connect people to what can be, which is a life not fearing your neighbors, and not feeling prejudice and not feeling like this community doesn't belong to you. And I always find that no matter where a person starts from, somehow, we're able to come a little bit closer to one another by having those conversations. Also, I think the other part of that is accepting

that many, many people make decisions about who elected officials are, before they have a chance to know who we are as individuals. So, I do differentiate between my role as an elected official, and my role as a human being. And I take very seriously the responsibility of being an elected official, and you'll find me actually being much more neutral in my, in my conversations as an elected official than when you sit down at my house over a cup of coffee.

KW: Yeah, I'm lucky enough to have got to see some of that, the passion that turns into policy on our on our board. You know, it's interesting in our community. Now, we have a lot of young people who are elected, and there's a constant thread from these young people, they're like, well Hilda did this. So, you were the youngest person ever appointed and then elected to the Santa Maria High School District Board. How do you see how you're a different policymaker today? Would you say you're working on being neutral, and thought, and more thoughtful and then when you were in your 20s and serving as a young policymaker?

HZ: I think that the thing that has not changed is still my desire to learn. When you go into different positions, whether it's a member of an advisory board, or like here at Hancock, where people have the opportunity to come be on an advisory committee for a particular field. You really don't know, and if you come in thinking you do know, then you miss opportunity to learn new things. And I think that it's that value that has helped me in every one of my elected positions. The thing that is different from Santa Maria High School District was my teachers were still there, who were my teachers when I graduated from Santa Maria High School, and trying to navigate that change in the relationships. I still couldn't call people by their first names, even though they told me I could call them by their first names. I never could do that. It was no, they're still the principal or they were the vice principal or they were my counselor, whatever it might be, or the coach. And I still even to this day, Mr. Joe Yates, who was my history teacher, I still call him Mr. Yates and he always hugs me and says 'Hilda, you know I'm Joe.' Well no Mr. Yates, you're Mr. Yates, and it's that kind of respect I always felt for that. Here at Hancock, because I am older, I have found this wonderful sense of having colleagues, even though my role as Trustee prevents me from being an actual colleague. I feel like I have a deeper understanding of what people are doing in their respective roles. And so, I can have more understanding about how things are impacting them in whatever place they may be. And I think that that really has made me a better decision maker because I have more perspectives to take into account before I make recommendations based on what I know and what I've learned.

KW: Great, great. So, you have a nice accounting practice. Tell us what drew you to accounting.

HZ: Well it was Mr. Dinapoli at Santa Maria High School, who just passed away, actually, who was the most delightful instructor that you could ever find. And I took accounting, just because it happened to be the first title on the list of classes. And so I thought, 'I'll try this,' and I got, like, 100 percent on all my tests and I just thought 'Oh, this is where you come for easy A's.' And when I spoke to him about that he says, 'Well no Hilda, that's not actually true, you're really good at this. It's just accounting is something you either get it or you don't. And some people just really get it, and you are one of them,' and it made me feel like I could be a professional. I didn't know what I want to be when I grew up, and he got me a job working for a local CPA, and I learned how to do taxes when I was 16. And I found, wow, this is great, this is interesting, this is easy and it really was a wonderful choice for the development of my skill set. But in the 90's, I decided that as much as I love my accounting, what I love more was community organizations. And so, I actually sold my first accounting practice and spent the next 15 years in the

nonprofit sector. And that was where I feel professionally, I really flourished because I have the practical background of being an accountant, as well as the knowledge of community and I can match those two to do good work in the nonprofit sector. So, but now that I'm an old lady again, and only want to work part time, I get to rely on my CPA life, to be able to enjoy my profession once again.

KW: That's cool. So, when you were when you were growing up, you're the first in your family to go to college?

HZ: I am. I have an older sister who actually got married when she was 16, and she ended up going finishing up her high school in Utah. Interestingly enough, and then she went to college, but not until about 10 years later. And for me, again it was my amazing mother, who sent every one of her children to work in the fields, so that way we would know what our choices were in life. And so, I went to go work in the potatoes and believe me, if you've ever worked in the potatoes, you'd never want to go back. And my hat's off to the people who do that for us, but I knew then there was absolutely no way. And from that moment on, it was all school, school, school, college, college, college. I wish I had been smarter about financial aid. I think I would have felt more stability going to college, but I didn't. And then I ended up getting married pretty young, at 19, and we were lucky that we had Allan Hancock College to come to because it allowed me to finish, finish my education.

KW: Yeah, I had a similar experience where I spent a summer, actually part of the summer, working on a construction project in Austin, Texas. 110-degree heat inside. And I suddenly realized man that job, part time job I had at JC Penney wasn't so bad. And I got back to school and made sure, we want to make sure I get a degree, so I can work in the air conditioning, because that outside stuff is hard, hard work and we see it every day here. Even as the crops change, we're not picking potatoes here anymore, but we've got strawberries and broccoli and we see some people out working hard. You know, what I've learned from meeting with the families that are working in those fields, is that they get it, they get that their kids need to go to college, and Hancock is a way for them to get there. And they're starting to see that with the Promise program. So, maybe you can talk a little bit about how the Promise program is changing the odds for not just the students but for the parents, who, you can see the look on their face when you tell them that their kids can go to college.

HZ: Absolutely. When I came, it was because it was here, and I appreciate that and I had my three-year-old daughter by the time I came here to Hancock, and my husband I made the decision together. And so, we have the finances to be able to pay this very small tuition and the books, and for me to be able to go. That's not the experience of our students now. And what I find is that, creating a possibility of college is really where it's at for families, and in educating parents that this is something that's possible. They can start to vision that and then grow that from when their children are very young, so it's a natural thing that they're going to go to college. And our Promise program, I think what that does is it creates the possibility but it also has the accountability. So, we're not going to just say, 'Oh, we're paying for this for free, and good luck on that, we're here.' No, you have to be a partner in making this happen, you're committing to your education and to your work ethic, which is what's required for us to be successful in college. And that comes from all of those students who may be listening now, and parents of students, that this is not a walk in the park, becoming an educated person is important part of developing as a human being. And I think that one of the most important things that happened to me here at Hancock and really contributed to who I became as a person, was a personal development class that happened to be something I had to take. It wasn't something I wanted to take, but it was one of those things that

said, if you're going to get a degree you need to take this test, this class rather. And in that class, I experienced more personal growth and development than I ever had in any other experience of my life, either before or after. And that's what happens when we become educated, is it's not just about learning how to be the accountant, or the engineer, or the teacher, it's learning how to be a participant in society and how to be engaged in the world around you.

KW: Yeah, we see that in all the stats, right? So people, the more education you have, the more likely you are to vote, the less likely you are to be unemployed. All of those great social things that we need, come right out of the fact that people have gone to college. And, when we see these kids come on campus on the Promise program, you just missed a whole bunch of seventh or eighth-graders who were on campus today running around screaming, 'First year free at AHC!' It was fantastic. It was a wonderful, wonderful day on campus. And now, you know I kind of skipped over where you were born, because this is one of my favorite things. Where were you born?

HZ: I was born in McAllen, Texas.

KW: That's right, fellow Texan.

HZ: That's right, woo-hoo! South Texas, I mean talk about poverty.

KW: I have a good friend, I'll never forget spending a weekend in McAllen, Texas when he was getting married and I'll tell you what, South Texas Catholics know how to have a party.

HZ: Oh yes, they do! They might still be having that party, actually.

KW: They shut down the whole street and they didn't have a permit and nobody seemed to care. No, we had a great time down there. You know when you were thinking about running for office, what got you to decide to come run for the Hancock office?

HZ: Well I had been on the city council, and I left that position in 2010 at the end of my term, and decided not to run at that time for city council, because I didn't feel like it was the right place for me at the time, and didn't know exactly what I was going to do to continue my public service. But when I got the idea I could be at Allan Hancock College, other people had talked to me about it over the years and I was at 'Oh no, you know that's, that's good. They're doing fine.' You know, it just really wasn't in my radar. But when we knew that we were going to be getting a new president, I said, "Hmm, one of the things we actually can get involved in." And I said, 'Maybe this is a good time.' And if I can come be a part of that change, and really it was a wave of change that came at that time, then I'll feel like I'm honoring my commitment to community. And it has been probably my favorite public service opportunity, because not just the connection, the personal connection, but rather the long-term commitment of everybody who works here. It's not something, we don't become an educated community overnight. It's something that becomes integrated into the culture. And I think, and I have shared this with you personally, but I think one of the things that you have really done is really take on Allan Hancock College into the community. Prior to that time, I would speak to lots of people who'd never even been on Hancock College. Now, everybody talks about Hancock College, and the kids are thinking about Hancock College. This is a true community college. And I think that comes from your commitment, and your evolution over time, and your leadership, and also the Board of Trustees who are there to support that happening, but it really comes from all the staff who are making it happen every day. And they're the ones who are seeing that one young person, or that one returning student who

looks a little scared, a little bit wide-eyed and maybe a little lost and they're the ones who go up to them say, 'Can I help you?' That's what Hancock has become, and so I'm grateful for the opportunity to serve as a trustee. And I hope that people out there when you think about your own commitment to community service to please consider, if we have a vacancy, or if you want to challenge one of us, please do. Because I'll tell you, it's an honor. It's an honor to be on the Hancock board and to be able to participate in decisions that improve the lives of so many people.

KW: It's you know, it's truly an amazing place, and when I came here the board said, 'We want you to get out in the community and reestablish that connection.' And it wasn't the previous people. The budget crunch from the end of the 2000 into 2012 was just brutal, and everybody kind of hunkered down and you know, it's great now, you know we've got a little bit of money from the state, we've got a great foundation supporting us, and we've hired great faculty and staff that, you know, we don't have to spend a lot of time, they're on it. They know what they're doing, and I love when I go in the community and I tell people all the time, 'If your event doesn't have a Hancock logo on it, it's just because your request got lost in the mail.' We want to help everybody we can and we want Hancock to be the first place of choice. Let's talk about the future. And what do you see for the college coming up in the next five years?

HZ: Well at our last board meeting, I was given a true gift, and that was the development of the Latino Studies degree. I remember when I first came on it was one of the first things I talked to you about. And that was before I really learned about how long a process it is, but by being a partner to that particular process, I saw how everybody is involved in decision making, around a lot of different things here at Hancock, and it made me really proud that it went through all those processes and now we have this new program. So now, okay, who are we going to get to teach? And what about our English instructors? And what about our business people? And of course, I always want us to have great accounting faculty, and our early care and education. And for me, I think we must strive to creating that diverse faculty. The diverse faculty, not just in ethnicity and culture and language, but in experience, in where they come from and what they've had to go through that they would in fact be able to connect to the students better. They are better faculty because of what they've experienced, or what, what they have seen out in the communities that they come from. And so, I feel that that's the next piece the icing on the cake that will then become part of the whole fabric of our college. And I know it's hard and there's a lot of competition, but I think this is a great place to live and I'd be happy to sit down with anybody to tell him what a great place it is to live.

KW: Well that's great. That's a big state initiative, is to really increase the diversity of our faculty, it's so important. We've moved the needle some, we move the needle some, and you know really what I've been talking to our faculty about – we had a guest speaker on campus today talking about inclusion and how we check our unconscious bias in the hiring process and things like that. As you know, we're for the long-term fix. What we really have to do, and I think what we're doing a good job of here, is telling our students, 'Hey, come and learn accounting, if you want to come back to work at Hancock come back as an instructional faculty member.' Go out, get some experience, get a master's degree, come back and teach English or chemistry or whatever it is, we would love to have the students come back. And you see our STEM program, we're turning out and I can just see five, six, seven years down the road, those kids that are there today, and I call them kids, I know they're young adults, but you know they'll be back and they'll be, you know, 26, 27 years old and they'll be ready to step in and, and teach the next generation. I think that's gonna be a really cool thing.

HZ: Absolutely. And I know I got to do that for Cal Poly and here at Hancock as well. And going back also keeps you fresh, fresh on your game and makes you a better professional. So yes, and also to teach our students, what it is to get a master's degree, what it is to get a Ph.D., that a Ph.D. doesn't mean you're a medical doctor, things like that. Nobody sat down and explained those things to us, and so we can help inspire them to academically to excel, then they can come back and share their wisdom.

KW: Yeah, I don't remember anybody telling me about college president at the job fair. No one came to me and told me that. So, alright, so the staff have come up with what they're calling the lightning round, I'm a little scared of it because they didn't let me see it, they just slipped this piece of paper to me.

HZ: Alrighty.

KW: Hopefully we won't have to edit this in post-production. All right. Oh, these are fun, these are easy. Okay, all right, what's your favorite day of the week?

HZ: Oh, my goodness. Uh, let's say Sundays.

KW: Sundays? Why's that?

HZ: Sundays, because they're mellow and slow.

KW: I like that, it's good. So, if you if you didn't live in Santa Maria, and you could live anywhere else where would you live?

HZ: Los Alamos.

KW: Los Alamos, I love that. Would you rather be able to speak any language in the world or talk to animals?

HZ: Oh, I would love to talk to animals. Oh, absolutely. I'd love to. I do talk to animals. Yes, I mean, didn't you know that? It was on my resume.

KW: We all talk to animals, sometimes they don't understand us. All they all they hear is food. Would you rather be invisible or super strong?

HZ: Hmm, I think super strong. I don't think I want to know what I would find out if I were invisible. I think it would break my heart.

KW: You know it's not that hard to be invisible, all you have to do is finish third in the Iowa caucus. And everybody forgets about you. So, cake or pie cake?

HZ: Cake.

KW: I knew that one. What's the best age?

HZ: Hmm. Well, I stayed at 32 for three years. And I think it was because that was when I was first running for office, and a lot of people ask me how old I was so I stayed 32, but that doesn't make it the best age. I think whatever age you're at has the potential to be the best age. I'm thrilled to be my age right now and to be a granny to two little granddaughters and to be silly, and I feel like I'm actually reverting to childhood, and I am loving it, loving it, loving it, so I think it's just, you know, every age has potential.

KW: That's Willie Nelson's answer, when somebody asked Willie Nelson what's the best age, he said, 'This one.'

HZ: This one. That's it, I like it.

KW: So, all right, last one. What's for dinner tonight?

HZ: Oh, actually, we're going to The Habit tonight, because it's Friday night, and I'm only working 'til 5:30, so we're all going to go to The Habit. We're very happy campers when we go to The Habit.

KW: What are you having?

HZ: I always have the grilled chicken sandwich.

KW: So yes, I know you were there the other day, that was awesome.

HZ: And we might splurge for a vanilla cone.

KW: How about the vanilla milkshakes?

HZ: Oh, my gosh they're crazy and wonderful. Yes. Although I do love Cracker Barrel, you know that as well, especially the country store. Yeah, so it's a toss-up.

KW: Well good. Well, since I work for you, you know people expect me to say this, but it's a real pleasure having a trustee like you and our other board members, but particularly, you've been a good mentor to me. I think I've helped mentor you a little bit, and I've learned so much and about how to express what I believe in a way that actually makes it sound like, I actually believe this. But, but we're a better college because you're one of our trustees and we're a better community, as you are here, and nobody better could do the first podcast for the Allan Hancock College pod- what are we calling this podcast? Hancock Conversations.

HZ: You know, that's beautiful, that's great. And you know what, we'll encourage everyone to have their own Hancock Conversations.

KW: All they got to do is call us up. We got a whole studio. How cool is that?

HZ: That's great. Thank you so much. It's my honor. Thanks.

KW: Thanks, Hilda.