ESTA SOLER INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Esta Soler
Activist
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Interviewed by Steve Chang
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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Makers: Women Who Make America

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Esta Soler

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STEVE CHANG:

Tell us about where you grew up, your family and your childhood.

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ESTA SOLER:

Well, I grew up in a place called Bridgeport, Connecticut, in the 50s and early 60s, in a neighborhood where everybody knew everybody. I went to a school that I could walk too. I was active in the local synagogue that I could walk to. I grew up in a home with my mom and my dad, my mom's sister. Right across the street was my mom's other sister and my three cousins. Every night we were all together.

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So I grew up in a home that was very much a home committed to family, to breaking bread together, and to being active in the community. I have incredibly wonderful memories of what it was like to grow up, and people say, "You grew up in Bridgeport, Connecticut? That's a tough place." And it was a tough place. It was a place where people had to work hard, people didn't make a whole lot of money, but what they had was a lot of love of the family, and that's what I learned.

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I learned the most important thing in my childhood was to care about people who are in your community and people who are in your family, and so while we didn't grow up with a lot of privilege, we didn't grow up with a lot of money, we grew up with something that was very, very special. We knew everybody in the community, and people were there for each other. So it was kind of the '50s, in some ways. There are a lot of stories about what the '50s were like.

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Complications obviously, because people didn't have a lot of money, people didn't have great jobs, but at the end of the day, when I think back on it, I think back on it with a very warm and full heart.

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STEVE CHANG:

What were your parents' expectations for you and your future, and do you think they were at all gender-limited or -defined?

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ESTA SOLER:

My father was an immigrant from Russia, and they put a value on education, but my mom was really, really clear that I should study, I should do well in school, but meet a nice Jewish guy. And ultimately, that was the most important thing that we were set on a course of doing well, but the way in which that was judged, ultimately, was if we found somebody that we would marry and that we would have the wedding and the entire family were to participate. So it was gender limiting.

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And I think it was true for most of us who were growing up during that period of time, and the fact that I was the first person in my family to go to college. While education was talked about as an important value, most of the time- I mean, I didn't grow up in a home that was filled with books. *Reader's Digest* was the book I remember the most. It wasn't like the house was filled

with ideas and people talking about- engaging in the world affairs. On the other hand, we always knew that it was important to do right by others and to be kind to others.

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STEVE CHANG:

Growing up, did you aspire to something other than the nice Jewish guy?

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ESTA SOLER:

Well, it was really interesting. I was very active in my high school, on student government and participated in a lot of activities at my temple. But at the end of the day, I thought the most important thing I could do was to marry a nice Jewish guy, which I did by the way. And I always thought that I would, in fact, do something in my community. I would volunteer, I would be a good person, which was another element of my family life. But having a career?

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I never thought about having a career until a little bit later. I did go to college, but when I thought about what my career was, it was secondary to what I thought my husband was going to do.

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STEVE CHANG:

What was your parent's reaction when you said, "I want to go to college, I'm going to go to college?"

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ESTA SOLER:

They were very supportive of that. I mean, my father barely graduated from high school. My mom did. And education wasn't as central… Their friends weren't educated. Many of them had been survivors of WWII, and so, they knew it was the right thing to do but they didn't know really, how to talk about it. And then they were very proud of me that I went to college. "Oh my daughter! She went to college. This is great."

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I remember actually driving with my mom and dad when we were when I was going to my first year in college, and my father said to the toll guy, "I'm taking her to college." And he said it with such pride. I mean, what's interesting about my family, about gender limiting, is my father was the person who worked. My mom basically stayed at home, was a woman in the community and did a lot of volunteer work, but my dad was the person who went to work and was not particularly successful in the work world.

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Amazing man as a person. And he was the one who would carry a lot of the emotion in the family. He'd get so excited when there was a family dinner, and my mom would do the work, and I often thought about what it would be like if my dad were the one staying home and my mom went out to work,

because she was the business woman in the family, and the business woman at the synagogue, and the business woman in leadership in a lot of different community organizations, and my dad- They had very clear gender roles that they carried out.

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STEVE CHANG:

Your parents being socially aware, and how that affected you?

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ESTA SOLER:

Well, the thing I remember the most about my parents being so socially aware and socially committed to good is, one, my dad was an immigrant and my mom lost most of her relatives in WWII. So, they had this notion of how important it is to be involved in the community, and to make sure that things were wrong, get righted. I remember finding this note when my mom passed, in her wallet, and she had a quote from Martin Luther King.

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And I was just reading it, and it was all… it had been in her wallet for many, many years, and it was basically saying that it's important to be involved in community in Martin Luther King words. And then I remembered the evening when I was in high school, when my mom and dad and I- Martin Luther King had come to Bridgeport, Connecticut, and a lot of people were saying, "Oh, we don't know what's going to happen that night. There might be protests."

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And my mom and dad said, "No. Martin Luther King is coming to Bridgeport, and we're going to be in the room with him because he has a lot of important things to say." And my parents were always like that. They always wanted to be involved in the greater good, and it wasn't just the greater good for their family, it was the greater good for their community, and I didn't know very many people who were in downtown Bridgeport that day.

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But my mom and dad- I was sitting right between them, and I was so proud that they thought it was important for me to be there and listen to one of the world's greatest leaders, and they made sure that happened. And so I carry that with me.

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STEVE CHANG:

Did the Civil Rights movement specifically inspire you in any way?

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ESTA SOLER:

I think the Civil Rights movement was the first major movement for those of us who were growing up in the '50s and the '60s. And it was an extraordinary expression of really strong people saying, "What's happening in this country is wrong." And I wanted to be part of it. I remember my first act of defiance was—and this was before I learned about Martin Luther King and the Civil

Rights Movement—was in first grade, and our teacher decided to break us up into reading groups, and reading groups that were basically stereotyping people and labeling people.

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So you're in group A because you're a good reader, you're in group B 'cause you're not such a good reader, and you're in group C because you're a terrible reader. Well, in first grade, it's a little early to make those distinctions, so I said, "I don't want to be in group A. I want to be with everybody in the room." And I got taken out and my mother was called, and I was sitting in the principal's office. And so, my mom said, "Well, what she'd do?"

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And they made me sit with my back on the- they turned the garbage can over and they made me sit in the back, 'cause I spoke out and I was being disrespectful. And my mom said, "Well, she was just challenging the- putting people in groups saying they can't read." And what was amazing about that, that moment in time, my mom came and didn't say, "Why did you do that? You did wrong." She gave me the very lesson that I needed, which is if you have a strong opinion, you get to say it.

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She would always say, "Say it nicely and with respect, but say it." And I'll never forget that day. I mean, for me, that was a turning point. And so, I was obviously getting from my parents the message that it's okay to take a stand. So when I was in college, and the demonstrations started, and the movement

—the Civil Rights Movement—was in full bloom, I wanted to be a participant of that. And then I grew up during the Vietnam War.

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I was very active in the marches against the war. And it was during that time, during the anti-war movement, that the women's movement actually started to blossom, because we were doing all the work in the anti-war movement, organizing all the demonstrations, and then none of the women were ever asked to speak. So I think at a certain point the women's movement started flowing from the anti-war movement, which was very much influenced by the Civil Rights Movement. So am I a product of the movements? I think I am both a product of movements, but a product of parents who said, "Stand up for what's right."

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STEVE CHANG:

So you were a part of the women's movement, did you consider yourself a feminist?

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ESTA SOLER:

Yeah. I remember it pretty early on. I don't exactly remember the moment in time and who was the person who actually coined it, but early on, I think most of us would use the word and the label and what it meant. I wasn't exactly sure at the time, all the ramifications of it—the Women's Movement,

the Feminist Movement—but I was in New Haven and was participating in a consciousness raising group, probably for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

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There were so many different groups that were going on. It was extremely exciting to be a part of it, and being part of the Women's Movement, being part of consciousness raising groups, calling yourself a feminist, which it was a statement of, "I am not who I was, but I want to be." And that's what it was for me. And that's what feminism meant to me at that time.

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STEVE CHANG:

Tell me how domestic violence, seeing that you kind of got into that issue at that time when I guess, not that many people were dealing with…

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ESTA SOLER:

Very few. Very few. So, moved to California and actually worked in the—when the now governor was governor the first time—in the Department of Health and Human Services. And the person I was working for actually had a short tour of work with him. And I left, and I was doing consulting work and I was part of this group made up of about five people in San Francisco, but we called ourselves the Coalition for Justice for Battered Women and Their Children.

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And the word “coalition” implied that there were hundreds of people, but there were five of us. It was Eva Jefferson Paterson who's a well-known civil rights lawyer, and Mimi Silbert who founded Delancey Street, and it was Nancy Walker who was soon to become President of the Board of Supervisors in San Francisco, myself and a few others. And so, we were meeting to try to help the women who were in the jails and women who were going to different shelters, and get them the help that they need for themselves and their kids.

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And one night, Nancy Walker comes in ‘cause she was running this program non-profit in San Francisco, and she said, "Oh, I have this RFP, request for proposal, from the Federal Government, from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration-" Under the Carter administration, just so we can date this, "And we can get some money for the work we're doing for our coalition." And so, Eva said, "Well, I have a day job. I'm an attorney." Mimi says, "I'm running Delancey Street." Nancy said, "I'm trying to run the board of supervisors."

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And then they looked at me ‘cause I was a consultant. They said, "You don't have a real job, so why don't you write the grant?" It was 1980. So I remember 48 hours, staying up all night, writing this grant, and then we send it off to the Federal Government, never expecting that the grant was either competitive or that we would get it. And lo and behold, six months later, we were notified:-

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San Francisco was one of six cities that was selected to start a project that would work with battered women and their kids, and would really start talking to the police and their prosecutor about how serious these issues were, and to start really developing programs around the country. So we were one of just a few programs that got some federal money to be a part of a national demonstration effort.

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STEVE CHANG:
How did the criminal justice system deal with domestic violence?

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ESTA SOLER:
Let's say up to the '80s, early '80s, because I think there was a lot of change during the '80s. I think the police basically, they were called to the home and they basically tried to say to the guy—which it was mostly guys beating up—"Take a walk around the block," and they went back to do their “real work.” So I think for many, many years, certainly the '60s and the '70s, early 80's, but then there's the change.

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Police were more like social workers with a gun than they were law enforcement officers seeing this as a crime. And I think part of what we were doing in San Francisco and across this country is saying, "This is not okay.

And if there's an injury, if somebody is hurt, it's a crime. It's not a private matter."

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STEVE CHANG:

Wasn't the sentiment though, that, “It's between those two? It’s a family matter, it’s not anything for-”

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ESTA SOLER:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I think part of the- One of the biggest things we did in the '80s was to call attention to the fact that what was happening behind closed doors- if somebody was hurt behind closed doors and it rose to the level of police action and intervention, then you have to see that what was happening within that context might be criminal behavior.

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So what was once perceived to be just private is not any longer. And it's not like we changed all the laws. The laws were already in the books. Assault, battery- I mean, if you think about it, it's assault, battery, homicide. The laws were on the books, but nobody- if two people knew each other or two people were married, those laws weren't applied. And we just said, "That's not okay anymore."

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STEVE CHANG:

What about shelter for victims of domestic violence? Where did that begin?

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Well, it began in England. And then in the United States, what was happening is that women were meeting because they were part of the women's movement, and they heard all these stories about women getting beaten up in their homes, and women started opening up their homes for other women who needed a safe place. So, it wasn't a rocket science where people sat down and did this elaborate planning.

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It really happened from people sitting in people's kitchens, opening up their home, and then all the sudden realizing that their homes were not necessarily gonna be able to serve all the women who needed a safe place. So at the end of the day, shelters started- actually La Casa de las Madres in San Francisco was one of the first shelters in California. So it just spread like wildfire. I mean, sometimes when you come up with an idea, you know the idea is right.

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Because people read about it, and all of the sudden, there's a meeting, and next day, some house is given over to servicing battered women and their kids. And that's exactly the way the battered women's shelter movement started in the United States.

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STEVE CHANG:

How big a problem was domestic violence when you got into the field?

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ESTA SOLER:

I don't know. I mean, that was the big thing. It was a private issue. And I actually do remember, early on, when I kept saying, "How big a problem is it in San Francisco? How big a problem is it in California? What do we know about it nationwide?" And nobody had any data. Nobody collected the data. One of the biggest things we did actually in San Francisco was we got the police department to change their incident report form. And it took me a year to get them to do it.

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I said, "Just put a box. Domestic violence: yes or no?" Finally, I persuaded them, because I think as you probably know right now that I don't give up easily. But at the end of the day, we had to change the forms across the country. When 911 calls would come in, they weren't coded. When homicides were recorded, they weren't coded. So we had no idea how big a problem it was. We knew it must be a big problem if you open up a shelter and it's filled the next day.

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And police would say, "Oh, we get a lot of those calls," but what does "a lot of those calls" mean? So part of what we did, again, in the early '90s was- one of

the first things we did was we demanded that data be collected. But in the '80s, anytime we did a study, we actually had to go through all the 911 calls and all the police reports and all- I mean, it was all hand done. We had no data basically.

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STEVE CHANG:
What did that tell you about where domestic violence ranked in the law enforcement priorities et. cetera?

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ESTA SOLER:
Well I think it's- The law enforcement priorities and priorities of the country- I mean, it didn't rank anywhere. If you can't even have a box to check off, "Domestic violence: yes or no," there was- Nobody was recording whether or not it was a problem, so it had absolutely- domestic violence had no ranking. It had nobody paying attention to it, and that is what we needed to change, and that's what we did in the '90s.

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STEVE CHANG:
What options did battered women have before shelters came along?

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ESTA SOLER:

I think battered women- I think women who were being beaten had very few resources. Those who had financial resources were able to find a hotel room. Those who didn't have financial resources were trapped.

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STEVE CHANG:

One of the things you mentioned earlier, you said you encountered shame among some of these women you saw in the shelters. Can you speak about that?

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ESTA SOLER:

When you're in a relationship, and you're being beaten and you're being undermine and you're being belittled and you're being called names, and you're in a relationship with somebody who professes to love you, and because you don't feel you have an option to leave or you felt like you didn't have an option to leave, I think you feel like you have an option to leave now more than you did then. You start taking on the problem. You start thinking, "Well, what if I did this differently?"

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And I think at that point in time, what happens is you start believing that you are in part responsible for being beaten and being belittled and being demeaned, and that feels really awful. And I think that's what I mean when I

say that I think many years ago, I think we've changed that a lot. Many women who are battered and beaten in their home were ashamed to tell that they were battered and beaten, and now more and more people are speaking up and getting out.

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STEVE CHANG:
How have you changed that, that shame, and made it okay to speak out?

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ESTA SOLER:
I think we made it okay to speak out because we made sure that people were speaking out and we were telling the stories. I remember in the '90s, when OJ Simpson was arrested for the murder of Nicole Brown, I'll never forget that day. Prior to that day, I had talked to the media at different points, but that day, it was hundreds of thousands of calls were coming in, wanting to tell the story about women who were battered and women who were beaten.

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And I think that was the huge sea change. I think the story of domestic violence, while it was being told throughout the '80s and even a little bit in the '70s, the main turning point happened in the 90s. First when President Clinton was at the Democratic Convention, and told the story in his biography film of stepping in between- Do you remember the story of stepping in

between his mother and stepfather when his stepfather was about to beat his mother?

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Here is a man who is about to become the President of the United States, telling what was once a private story and making it very public that he stood in between his step father and his mother to protect his mother. And then, the OJ Simpson trial of the century happened, and the stories of battered women were being told in every local community. Hundreds of thousands of media calls came in, and we literally- the story went from the back page to the front page.

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And so, what you heard was- you heard the trial of the century, and then every local media station talked about the local story. And in the local story, local people told their stories. And as their stories were told, our quilt was being formed, and more and more people heard people tell their story from all walks of life, and people who were saying, "It happened to the President in his family, it happened in all of these other situations," including what was happening in the OJ Simpson case.

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And I think that was a sea change for us, because not only were we on the news everyday, but the media was finding people to tell their story to humanize what was happening. And I think at a certain point in time, what was once considered an issue that nobody wanted to talk about, lots of people started wanting to talk about it.

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STEVE CHANG:

What kind of reaction did you get when you would go out and say, “I’m working on domestic violence, can you help me?”

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ESTA SOLER:

Well, when I would call people for money or write letters or write proposals, I would almost- I would say mostly get rejected. I had this big cardboard box in my office that didn't have the proposals I wrote, just had the letters of rejection. And nobody would return my calls. I mean in the early '80s, people just didn't return calls, and it was very, very difficult to raise the money to do the work. But that changed.

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I mean, it changed in '84 when we passed the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act, and it changed when President Clinton became the President, and then OJ Simpson was arraigned, because that's when we passed the Violence Against Women Act. And we not only passed the Violence Against Women Act- and it wasn't a little bill. It was a big bill, it was under the Crime Bill, and it was multiple millions of money that went to change the way law enforcement dealt with these issues, changed the way the courts dealt with these issues, provided critical resources for shelters, and also helped support public education campaigns.

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"There's No Excuse for Domestic Violence" was a major campaign that we actually did with the Ad Council and the Ford Foundation. And so there was a huge sea change. And I think it started at the convention when President Clinton talked about it. And then one of the first things that President Cilnton did was he said to the Department of Health and Human Services, The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and The Department of Justice, "Collect data. We need to know how big this problem is." And that's why we know how big the problem is, and we know whether or not we're doing a good job.

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STEVE CHANG:
What were the impact of what you did here in San Francisco nationally?

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ESTA SOLER:
Well, I think early on, because we were part of a federal demonstration effort, San Francisco was one of six cities that was looked to as a demonstration effort of best practice. So from the early days of our work, we took everything that we did here, we went to the state legislature, and then we are the group that was behind all of the major federal legislation. But this was our laboratory. We were not a think-tank.

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We were a “doing” organization. We had, actually, services in the DA's office where we were supporting battered women who called the police. We had services at San Francisco General Hospital. So at the end of the day, the Violence Against Women Act that we helped draft came out of real people's experience because we were on the ground, in the hospital, on the ground, in the DA's office. And to the extent that people who write legislation write it from their experience, it's informed with the person and the personal experience in a much deeper way.

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And that's how we did our work. So for us, it was just a natural for us to go from the local to the state to the federal, in part because we were part of a federal initiative in the beginning.

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STEVE CHANG:

Why do you need a Violence Against Women Act at all?

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ESTA SOLER:

The Violence Against Women Act provides critical resources to people in law enforcement to make sure that the laws are upheld, that women are provided legal protection, that shelters are funded and communities can coordinate their response, so that women and children can live in a much safer community. It provides critical resources. It is a bill that provides millions of

dollars across this country, so police departments can be on the frontline and shelters can be there 24/7 to save people's lives.

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STEVE CHANG:

You reach out not just to women, but to men and boys, is that correct?

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ESTA SOLER:

Absolutely.

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STEVE CHANG:

Why, and what do you do?

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ESTA SOLER:

Well, we reach out to men and boys… We realized early on, about ten years ago, that while we were effectively reaching women and saying, "This is not okay. There's no excuse." Men in America said, "Well, wait a second. You're not including us in your programs, you're not including us in the conversation. And yet we're dads, we're coaches, we're teachers—we want to work with you."

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I remember a conversation I had with a coach in Salinas, and we were doing this event and he was one of our speakers. And he talked about how important it is for men to stand with women to say, "No more," and that there's no excuse. And he was part of our program called "Coaching Boys Into Men." And he said, "Coaching Boys Into Men is really important. We need to give our boys the tools to have good relationships and to respect women and to say, 'You never use violence. Violence does not equal strength.'"

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And he gave this eloquent speech to the Giants and a number of male supporters, and then he said, "But I want to tell you why I'm doing this work. I'm doing it 'cause I know it's the right thing." And then he looked in the audience and there was this young girl who was nine years old, and he asked her to come up. And she comes up and she's like, "Oh, no…" And he said, "I want you to meet my daughter, and I don't want anybody to hurt her. That's why I'm doing this work, and I'm going to make sure that everybody I know, every coach that I coach with and every teacher that I teach with, is going to join me in this campaign."

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And I think for us it was a real turning point, because so many men felt that we were indicting them and not inviting them into the conversation. Yes, we want male violence against women to stop, but most men aren't violent. We need them to be our partners.

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STEVE CHANG:

What’s your legacy going to be?

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ESTA SOLER:

Well, I hope my legacy is that homes are a lot safer, fewer women are killed or beaten in the home, fewer kids see it and repeat it, that parents can send their kids to college without the fear that they’re going to get a call and learn that their daughter was raped. They can send their girls and boys to school and their kids won't be bullied.

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My legacy to me is very much wrapped up in how human beings treat each other. And if I can leave this work and know that schools are safer and homes are safer and people get to thrive and choose their life without fear, then I will have done my job.

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I don't think I finished it yet, so I have a little bit more work I want to do, but I do think, knowing that for adult women in the United States that it's a lot safer today in 2012 than in it was in 1980, and I had a role to play in that, I'm glad.

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