

Persist Podcast Episode 1 Transcript

0:00 Denise Davis

Alright everyone. Welcome to the Persist Podcast. I'm so excited about this interview today with Corona Mayor Jacque Casillas

0:09 Denise Davis [0:09]

This is a special interview for me. As you see Jacque Casillas, I see her as my political partner.

I'll never forget all of the breakfast dates we had at Jam and Bread in Riverside in 2017 in which we talk to each other into running for office and then we put our campaigns together simultaneously in different cities, all while supporting each other the whole time.

So, Jacque, you are a large part of the reason why I had the courage to run.

So, I'll start this interview by first saying thank you for that. You have inspired me and so many others for years and I'm just thrilled to have you on the Persist Podcast today.

0:45 **Jacque Casillas** [0:45]

Thank you, my friend. You are too kind too much my friend. I honestly the feeling is mutual. Um and I love that you use the word courage because that's exactly, that's exactly what those breakfasts did for me as well.

Um, I remember those breakfasts fondly talking about, well if you do it, I'll do it.

Here's the reasons why we should. Um, and what I love most about that is that that kind of, you know, support has just grown since then and we have now added new members to our breakfast club to assist and to, you know, lift each other up.

So, I love that and the feeling is mutual. So, thank you for, for all of the support and I'm so happy to be here.

1:26 Denise Davis [1:26]

Thank you so much, Jacque. And with that I'm just going to hand it over to you to get us started. Please tell us a bit about yourself and also your path into politics.

1:39 **Jacque Casillas** [1:39]

Sure, so a bit about myself. It's so funny. I don't know if this is, I haven't got any better at answering this question, but I think my story begins with my family to be honest.

I'm first generation Mexican American. My parents are both Mexican immigrants.

I was born and raised in the City of Corona, in the city that now I get the, the honor of calling, you know, in serving as Mayor.

Um, and so I, I grew up in a very tight knit Catholic Mexican immigrant family and um, it was all about hard work and giving back and lifting each other up.

2:15 Jacque Casillas [2:15]

I mean, I remember our community, our neighbors, we would help one another out with hand me downs and assistance with resources and whatnot.

And the city really helped me get going. I got scholarships for college. The public library was like my place to hang out. And so, for me now the full circle is I'm, I'm able to give back to my city who helped me and my family so much.

But a little bit about the reason why I found my way into politics.

2:41 Jacque Casillas [2:41]

You know, I think every little step of the way kind of informed that road from, you know, starting to be a community organizer in 2008 during the huge election.

I was part of a local congressional race. And since then, once you're a community organizer, it's hard not to be. So, I've been organizing ever since. I now work for Planned Parenthood as a health care advocate in the development team have been with the organization now six years, working to support and advocate for reproductive health care.

3:08 Jacque Casillas [3:08]

But on the side I get involved with civic engagement. I helped local candidates, especially local women to run for office. But specifically the reasons why I ran for Corona City Council is that I was involved in a citizen initiative to change the way we elect our Council in the City of Corona to go from at large to buy districts.

So that's more equitable, more representative. And once that passed 68% of the vote, it was a landslide, I looked around and was like, okay, so now who's going to run?

3:39 Jacque Casillas [3:39]

And the same people AKA the same men, older men, were the ones that were tossing the name in the hat, and I was like, nah, that's not gonna work for me.

So that is, that's how that's how this one came to be.

3:55 Denise Davis [3:55]

That is, it's such an incredible story and a powerful one. And I'll just say that you're such a brilliant campaign mind, like I love consulting with you and hearing your ideas on how to run a campaign.

It just seems so natural and intuitive to you. I know it's because of years of studying politics, working for planned parenthood, lots of hard work, but you also have a real natural instinct for politics.

And it was really great to watch you campaign and to run your own campaign in 2018.

There were some pretty fierce moments. Let me say, um, one moment that I won't forget is when you were being attacked by your opponent at the very end of a candidate forum that happened that did that did happen.

4:35 Denise Davis [4:35]

What from what I could recall he was being aggressive and complaining about your donors.

Really, all that I remember is you standing up after that remaining composed but powerfully commanding all the energy in the room as you eloquently detailed exactly why his criticisms were wrong and why you were proud to have such a diverse donor base from all over the state and beyond.

That was such an amazing moment. I was cheering you on from Redlands.

You do you mind reflecting on that moment and what you were thinking after that candidate forum?

5:08 **Jacque Casillas** [5:08]

Yeah, that was and that was a really vital moment in the campaign. That was a big candidate forum. It was the citizen run candidate forum.

There was a lot of folks watching. There was a lot at stake there. And you know, this, it was, it was clear to me from the very beginning, and this was a lesson that was handed down to me.

And I internalized really early, especially since I work for an uh, reproductive healthcare organizations, like Planned Parenthood, which, you know, causes

people to feel very strongly sometimes. The reality is that like you have to own who you are and when you own who you are, no one can weaponize that against you.

5:48 Jacque Casillas [5:48]

And so, during this candidate forum, uh this person I was running against, um we were actually supposed to deliver our closing statement and I had a whole script in my mind of the things I wanted to close with, but rather than use that opportunity to talk about his platform and what he was going to do for the city, he tried to weaponize who I am against me. And in the moment, with his face 6" away from mine as he was yelling and shouting at me into a microphone, my mind went blank and I tell you what came to mind, was this Maya Angelou quote, which was "When people show you who they are, you just have to believe them."

And I was like, oh my gosh, people have to be looking at him right now and seeing what this is. And so, when he finished talking, I just I remember I took the mic and I just, like, put my hand over my chest, because my heartbeat was like, beating through my shirt.

I feel like everyone could hear it. And I just took a deep breath and just said, wow, you know, when someone shows you who they are, you just have to believe them, and I said it out loud, which was not my intention because it was just what I was telling myself. But that helped me just like, level out because my people were like, exactly, that's exactly right.

You've been, you know, they applauded, they supported the fact that I've the entire campaign, I ran it with integrity, and I was the only candidate in that race who never went negative, and I was not about to do it in that moment.

7:19 Jacque Casillas [7:19]

So, I got my Maya Angelou strength on, I stood up and I delivered closing, which I can't even remember, but it was one of those moments where I was like, wow, okay, this is exactly this is you could not have drawn the larger contrast better than this moment.

7:39 Denise Davis [7:39]

That was such a striking moment. I remember going back to the video and replaying it over and over again thinking, wow, what a powerful woman Jacque is first of all, but also, I love hearing the internal dialogue of what was going on for you in that moment and I love that you said that out loud.

7:56 Jacque Casillas [7:56]

Yeah, I mean I'm telling you it's just the plans and I and you know, we like to plan, the plan went out the window, what I had in mind went out the one that is just what

I kept thinking to myself and so yeah, I just kind of, I kind of went a little bit on autopilot and Maya spoke through me.

8:33 Denise Davis

That incredible moment, but you've had many incredible moments, it's been so much fun to watch, you know, to get sworn in in late 2018 and you've been an amazing council member ever since and it was so exciting to see you sworn in as mayor this year, which we'll talk about in a minute.

But first I'm curious to know about what is the accomplishment that you're most proud of thus far in your time on the council.

Jacque Casillas

You're so kind because it's, and I feel like we've had this conversation offline, there are moments when I don't feel like I've gotten a lot done since being elected in 2018 and even though when I sit and really think about and write down accomplishments and try to keep a list of all the things that we've gotten done afterwards and go, actually, it's been quite productive.

You know, we've done things like we are reopening Griffin Park in my district, which is the park that's been closed for over 10 years and it's going to be our second dog park in the city. So, I'm very excited about that. Um, you know, we've established, um, I've established open office hours and began the first ever since this um, city council internship program.

You know, um, we established a strategic homeless solutions plan and invested, um, um, initially \$1 million and now it's, it's a line item in our budget with over \$3 million as we're getting match state and federal funds To address homelessness in the city of Corona. We're opening up a shelter this summer.

9:46 **Jacque Casillas** [9:46]

We've executed a trails master plan. We bought 292 acres of land for preservation in the Cleveland National Forest. It's going to be dedicated to trails. We are going to make Corona the City of Trails. We are reinvesting in, you know, um, in our community's cleanliness.

We are being very proactive about graffiti and have just started a program that's going to tackle our graffiti within 24 to 48 hours of report time.

We've, you know, started and brought back, Corona Beautiful clean up events every quarter, which were the things that I used to do as a kid that I thought this is great because it brings us together in service, makes our city look beautiful while we're at it. And in our last cleanup had over 100 volunteers.

10:31 **Jacque Casillas** [10:31]

So, we've done all these great things. But the thing I, to be honest that I'm most proud of is that we've shifted the culture at City Hall to be one of being more proactive and also a little bit open to taking these like calculated risks to try new things.

And that that I feel is new. This perspective of we've never tried this before, but we're not gonna knock it before we try it.

And that's what I'm most proud of, that. We are willing to try new things now, um like summer night markets, which are coming this summer as well. I mean, the list goes on, but really, it's that culture.

11:10 Denise Davis [11:10]

I love the fact that the list does go on and on and when I first got elected, I remember people saying to me, don't get your hopes up because local government moves very slowly, right?

But I love that list that you shared with us because that dispels that myth immediately.

You've accomplished so much in your time already. And one thing that you didn't mention that I love that you do is after every council meeting, you do a Facebook live, you do a recap, which I you know, I have a notification on my phone. I get notified every time Jacque goes live, all of her recaps.

Um and I just love that because it's such an accessible way to get people involved.

11:53 Denise Davis [11:53]

I often hear from people, you know, I don't really want to watch the council meetings because they can be long and boring, right?

So, I think it's brilliant that you do this, you know, five minutes, sometimes more than five minutes.

12:04 **Jacque Casillas** [12:04]

Yeah, sometimes I talk a little bit more than five minutes.

But I try very--I try to keep it within that frame, but you're right.

It's the conversation is and to be honest, I don't blame people if on a Tuesday night if on a Wednesday night after work, they don't want to sit in front of a computer for three hours to watch you know, their council members deliberate over all the minutia that we get to--that we have the honor honestly of combing through.

But that's why they elected us right to do that work because they trust our judgment, they trust that we're gonna do the reading, we're gonna do the research and we're gonna go in there prepared to cast an educated vote.

And so, I--you do this too though Denise. We try to find ways to engage on social media platforms to try and deliver the information and make sure that we're still engaging with our community so that they know what's happening and they're being active in it.

We have we have to be that we have to, I heard someone say this and then like, you know, we are as electees. You know, we stand in that gap right between the public and our government and we have to live in that and bridge it.

13:18 **Jacque Casillas** [13:18]

And so, I'm still learning. I take notes from you and want to do better all the time and I steal ideas when I see that they're working well for others.

But it's a thing that I think it's just you have to take on as an elected official now.

13:34 Denise Davis [13:34]

Definitely and this just having this conversation made me reflect on when we ran for office. We talked about transparency and really bringing more people into local government.

And I think that's because you and I and most of the people you know that we invite to the Persist conference and the Persist Podcast, like we're not your typical politician, like we're not the demographic that's always been in political office.

13:57 Denise Davis [13:57]

And so, we understand firsthand the importance of needing to bring other people into the conversation. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this. And also, what it's like for you being the only woman, um and a woman of color on your city council.

What kind of challenges have you faced?

Jacque Casillas

Yeah. And you're right bringing making that table wider.

But again, you know, going back to being a, you know, a community organizer, we have to meet people where they are.

So, trying to ask folks to come to city hall, trying to ask folks to, you know, come in our city council meetings is um, it's almost, you know, it's like it's putting the responsibility, you know, I think in the wrong place, as elected as we need to go out into the community and make sure that the community knows what's happening. And so, trying to keep those relationships alive and finding ways

to, you know, for instance, have town halls, um, or go to community meetings and just like introducing yourself and making yourself available to ask questions and maybe sharing out a little bit about the city and what's happening.

14:56 **Jacque Casillas** [14:56]

Um, I think and I'm looking forward to, you know, more of us getting vaccinated and those opportunities becoming more prevalent so that we can do those things.

But yeah, you know, I am the only woman on the council and I'm also the youngest and the only millennial and you know, and I'm a woman of color, but I've got to be honest, I'm light skinned Latina, you know, I'm white passing and so I walked this world with that privilege that folks don't assume that I'm a woman of color.

Um, but I feel very much, um, you know, a sense of duty and indebtedness to both my community and to my family, my community to represent well. And you know, some of the challenges can be...and I know I said this at one of our persists one of the persistent, uh, panels that you graciously invited me to join was, and it continues to this day.

People speaking over you. It happens, it happens so frequently, and they don't notice it.

And I literally had a meeting a couple of days ago where one of my colleagues, I was not finished with what I had to say, and I was making a very important point and they started speaking and I literally put my hand up and just continue talking.

16:07 **Jacque Casillas** [16:07]

I mean, we just, we have to take up that space and we don't have to be mean about it, but it's, it's almost like we're we have to train one another and demand the respect that we're giving others.

So that's one of the challenges of I just want to finish my sentence. Can I just finish my sentence?

Denise Davis

Yes. That's a great example and you're right, happens so often to women everywhere, but we see it play out vividly in the political arena, especially in public meetings.

Thank you. Thank you for sharing that. And I know that we've alluded to the fact that you're now the mayor of your hometown.

That's a really big, so cool.

Jacque Casillas

It is cool. I feel like I'm like Leslie Knope and then some like, it's so cool.

16:59 Denise Davis [16:59]

You are, you absolutely are. Um side note during this pandemic, I rewatched all of Parks and Rec.

It's the best. It resonates for sure with what we go through on our local city councils. But I want to hear more about what does it mean to you to be the mayor of your hometown?

17:18 **Jacque Casillas** [17:18]

Again, I have to go back to the feeling that I don't separate, you know, the little Jacque who was going to the library and dependent on the resources of the library to have access to a computer, to have access to books, to have access to any sort of extracurricular activities.

Um You know, we it was we had a very humble home and um there wasn't extra to explore or, you know, take field trips.

And so, it was the parks in this community that allowed me to have, you know, wonderful experiences outdoors, the library, the community events that were put on. And so, you know, even though that was years ago, decades ago, I'm 35 now, I remember so fondly what it was like to grow up in this community that I feel a real sense of responsibility and duty to make it that great, if not better for the kids and the families that are here now.

So, it's a mix of like pride and like, oh my gosh, I better not mess this up.

18:28 Denise Davis [18:28]

I love that so much; I can tell you you're not messing it up. And that's a beautiful response. I love that you have first-hand experience of the city, and it means so much to you, but also because of that, you're working so hard to make it better for the next generation.

And it is just truly inspiring and lovely to watch. Thank you.

18:54 **Jacque Casillas** [18:54]

Thank you. It's fun to do it. It's even when even when it's hard, it's a fun response and I it really is an honor to be able to serve my community in this way.

19:06 Denise Davis [19:06]

Absolutely. So, Jacque, what do you now know about politics that you wish you had known before you decided to run for office?

19:15 **Jacque Casillas** [19:15]

And this is a hard one because to be honest, I can we can go down the technical route, you know, the little things about passing policy that you discover, you know, once you get on the job, um, but then we can go a little bit just bigger and I think, you know, the thing that I wish I knew before I decided to run for office was that, you know, the things that are important to you don't stop being important to you and so you have to you have to protect them at all costs.

I think you're just gonna get busier and people are just gonna expect more.

And the people who don't like, you're likely going to continue to not like you and the people who are in your corner are the ones that are likely going to continue in your corner.

20:03 **Jacque Casillas** [20:03]

And so you just have to, you know, put your, put your head down, get the work done, stick to the things, you know, and play to your strengths and keep those important people and things in your life protected, because it's only going to get busier.

So, you know, there's a lot of comparison and I don't know if this is a um, I don't I don't know if anyone else does it.

I can only speak to my only own experience, but I love that you and I ran at a time when other women across this region were also running for office. And so, there's kind of like a little bit of a class, you know, like there's a there's a there's this this freshman class of young local elected women.

And so, um, it's both, you know, gives us courage and holds us up when we need it, when I need a little pick me up or whatever.

20:58 **Jacque Casillas** [20:58]

I can text you all and you're there for me.

It also helps us discover how to do this job better.

But I I do this even amongst my friends is uh, you know, I compare myself to where all of you are at your own cities and to see how much you're getting done and what I could be doing better.

And if it catches me on the wrong day, you know, I could really get down on myself and I don't think that's any different from anybody else and any other career.

But something that I wish I knew about politics that I, you know, before I I jumped in and run for office is that that doesn't change.

21:34 **Jacque Casillas** [21:34]

You're going to have that same feeling and you just have to give yourself enough grace in those moments to be like, you know, play to your strengths, you pick up where you can, but you cannot live in a constant comparison.

You just gotta...just gotta do you.

Denise Davis

That is such a brilliant and honest answer.

I appreciate you saying that because I think that that's so true and that's often something that we don't talk about, right.

Like there's so much inherent competition in politics. You have to compete just to get elected.

22:06 Denise Davis [22:06]

But then once you are elected, the competition doesn't end right, Or at least the psychology of the competition doesn't end.

And I think that what what's important to remember is you're right. We should not compare ourselves. But the playing field is not the same rate.

22:22 **Jacque Casillas** [22:22]

Our cities are different things we're facing are different. Our colleagues are different.

22:29 Denise Davis [22:29]

Yeah. Yeah. I it's something that's hard for me is I'm expecting to walk into an equal playing field even within my own environment, in my own city.

And that's not the case, right? We have to remember that this space, this political space wasn't built for people like you and me, right?

We have, like, broken the door down to get in. And sometimes it's hard for people to accept that we're here. So, there's a lot of inherent challenges there. But you're right.

22:57 Denise Davis [22:57]

We do have this amazing freshman class cohort of women who are elected in the region and we're all at different stages doing different things.

Uh and sometimes it's hard not to compare ourselves. And so, thank you for that honest answer that the honest and authentic answer

Jacque Casillas

Any time.

23:16 Denise Davis [23:16]

Mhm. And I know that, you know, you gave us a long list of things that you have accomplished already, and I love, you know, calling you up and telling you that I'm your biggest fan because it's true, you're doing amazing things.

And I'm curious to know about, you know, what's on your list for things that you want to pursue in the future.

23:34 **Jacque Casillas** [23:34]

So, here's what I'm going to tell you two things that I'm just so thrilled about for Corona's future. When I already mentioned it's our trails. I'm telling you, give us just a few more years.

We will be the city of trails. We share 13 acres of border with the Cleveland national Forest. 13 miles, not 13 acres. My apologies. 13 miles of border with the Cleveland National Forest.

Um, and I think, you know what we saw during this pandemic is a real, you know, affinity for being in the outdoors.

People like we started actually realizing that it is not only good for our health.

Look, it's beautiful, it's, it's gorgeous. And then it's safe to do. And so, we have currently skyline access, it's called the skyline trails.

24:24 **Jacque Casillas** [24:24]

If you're ever in the City of Corona, you can enter it into your google maps and it will direct you to the trailhead.

But there are several trails off from there and now it's this purchase of land for preservation.

I really see a future for the City of Corona to capitalize and become the city of this outdoor activity. The second thing I'm very excited about is that we are, we have started a downtown revitalization plan.

We have a downtown that has needs TLC and some real intentional love, real intentional investment, and we have a developer who owns the majority of the Corona Mall.

25:06 **Jacque Casillas** [25:06]

If you've ever come to Corona, that's, that's kind of like the flagship center of the, of the city. They're the same developers that created um, the Anaheim packing house and the camp.

And so, they have this real, great aesthetic to help little businesses.

It's actually their name is the LAB, Little American Business. They help Little American Businesses, and it creates a, just a walkable space where you just, it creates a sense of space.

It's a place where you want to be and hang out in the evenings.

25:32 **Jacque Casillas** [25:32]

And so what I'm most excited about is our downtown. You know, getting this kind of love and intention to become a walkable place allow Redlands Downtown.

I love your downtown. I want that same feel in Corona.

I want our Corona-ins to not go to Redlands. Sorry, Redlands on the weekend.

I want them to stay in Corona. I want them to walk around in our downtown, enjoy dinner, enjoy some live music, go and have dessert and just stay here and invest in here and have a good time here. So that's what makes me the most excited about our future.

26:05 Denise Davis [26:05]

I love those examples and those examples just show me like what it, what it really means to have a true leader in office, right.

And what can be done in local government. I think so often people are confused about what we do with the local government level, but what you've just described is life changing for people who live in the City of Corona, and I can't wait to see these goals come to fruition.

I have no doubt that you will make it happen. And yeah, I'm excited.

26:32 **Jacque Casillas** [26:32]

I'm excited for it. It does. It is a, it is a partnership.

You can't do it all alone. You know, it's a, we are limited in some regards as a government, as a government, but working in tandem these as you've heard it before, public private partnerships, The P 3s, that's where it's at.

26:49 Denise Davis [26:49]

It is absolutely. That can do wonders for your community.

So, Jacque, this has been an amazing interview. I have one final question for you and that question is, if you could give one piece of advice to our listeners, especially college students thinking about running for office or getting involved in the political arena, what would that be?

27:17 **Jacque Casillas** [27:17]

So, I gave this one a lot of thought and I'm split between two words, but I'm gonna go with the one where my heart is at which is: to honor your curiosity.

So, if you're curious about running for office, honor that curiosity and go and get involved in a local campaign, find out what it's like to be a part of a campaign.

Go and ask one of the elected officials that you, you know is in your city or near you.

If you can shadow them or if you can have a 30-minute coffee career interview. See if there are internships, just honor that curiosity because it will lead you to great relationships.

It will lead you to really good experiences and it will more than likely lead you to opportunities that you just never thought could be a possibility.

So, honor your curiosity.

Denise Davis

I love that. Always great words of wisdom from you. Thank you for that and thank you for this Persist podcast interview.

28:17 **Jacque Casillas** [28:17]

Thank you, I'm so happy to do this with you. Thank you so much Denise. Appreciate you.