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Phil - How'd you end up in L.A.?

Sara - You wanna hear the long story or the short story?

Phil - Whichever one you want to tell.

Sara - So I have an older brother and sister that were born here in California. When my dad's contract with NASA was up the family moved back to Mexico. That's when I was born. Then he got another contract and we moved back to California. — We came legally, again my dad was working for NASA but this time when his contract was up we just stayed in California. This technically made me an illegal immigrant (now a Dreamer) even though the only life my whole family has known for a long time has been in the U.S. We eventually settled in Victorville.

Phil - Where is that?

Sara - Ha, yah, most people haven't heard of it. It's like the last pit stop before getting to Vegas. Ha. Yah, way out there. — So we applied for citizenship. I remember going to the lawyers office and signing papers when I was 7. Kinda crazy. So, everything was progressing and in order but when I was a Sophomore my parents tell me that there was a mix up and our paperwork was canceled. And I was like, so what happens when I graduate. Because I was planning to go to Cal State Arts. They said it would work itself out but it didn't. So I graduated and was stuck. We thought that when my sister turned 21 she could help but I turned 18 before she turned 21, so she couldn't help. So I was just stuck at home, I couldn't get a job, couldn't go to college, I had nothing, but I had art.



Sara - Yah, I watched your videos and was like, I want to do that but different. So I started getting interested in creating art that you couldn't see what it was until the very end. So I got into stencils and spray paint because you can't really see what it is till the very end.

Phil - How'd you get into stencils? How did your style develop?

Sara - Have you ever seen the documentary Popaganda by Rob English. So he's a street artist and I thought his work looked amazing. And I thought, I want to do that! So I just jumped on YouTube and started looking up how to make stencils.

Topic: Setting out on her own

Sara - In High School I had a YouTube channel with my friends, doing like dumb skits and stuff. And after High School I wanted to keep doing YouTube but all my friends were off doing their own thing. I didn't really want to be in front of the camera myself so I just started filming myself drawing and stuff. That was when I created my own art channel. That was when I started getting asked to do commissions and that gave me some kind of hope.

Phil - I find it amazing that going viral can create hope in interesting ways these days. Because when I first started posting videos in the early days of YouTube, if something went viral, that was it, it just went viral and people saw it. There wasn't a clear path to financial success from it. But now, if something goes viral there's more of an infrastructure in place to turn that exposure into something.

Sara - I gotta say, to be honest, your videos were a huge inspiration for me.

Phil - Oh, no way. That's amazing to hear!



Topic: Early Commissions

Phil - So you started making videos, getting commission, and people would just reach out to you via email?

Sara - Yah, yah, and in the beginning I was selling pieces for like thirty bucks then spending that on more spray paint and canvas so I really wasn't making anything.

(We laugh in the shared experience many of us artists have)

Phil - And it's so hard to price art because it's the question of; Do you want to sell it because someone is excited to have it? Do you want to sell it to afford more supplies? Do you want to sell it and save a little money? Or do you want to sell it to make a living? The age old question.

Sara - Totally. So I started charging more. 60 dollars. 80 dollars. Okay, 100 dollars. And then more of my videos started going viral and one time I was just like, I'm going to try something crazy and next request for a commission that came in, I said it would cost 300 dollars and the person said 'okay, I'll take it' and I was like, "Wow okay. I can do this."



Topic: Pandemic and more

Sara - Right before the pandemic things were going great. I had jobs lined up. I had 3 murals that were all going to pay really well. Things were finally looking up and I was getting consistent work. And the pandemic just took it all away, I got emails one by one saying 'we can't do it'.

Phil - They just got canceled?

Sara - Yah, one of the biggest murals I had. I was going to work with a bunch of LGBT youth and teach them how to paint murals. It was going to be great. But the pandemic. And on top of that DACA was in the news and it was just a constant worry if they were going to take our DACA away. And if they do, are they just going to show up at the door and deport us. So my gigs are gone, and DACA is in the news and then someone crashed into my car while it was parked. Been a hell of a couple years man.



Topic: Commercial Art Challenges

Phil - You've mentioned managers a couple times. I'll be honest, it's something I know nothing about. So what do the managers do?

Sara - They really just try to connect you with people and get you jobs. There might be a company who wants a mural and rather than look for artists directly they contact a manager who makes sure the fit between the job and artist is good for everyone. Well hopefully that's how it happens.

So as I was getting more exposure I had managers that wanted to rep me and that was when things actually got a bit rocky. Because the managers said they wanted me to be my most artistic self and expressive self. I pitched a mural that I was excited about and they'd tell me to change something about it. Or say 'For your best interest you should do this.' Or the companies would say 'We really want to work with someone who is a woman and who is undocumented'. And I'm like, this is great, a company wants to showcase somebody who's like me so I'll sign all of the NDAs and contracts and we're moving forward, then at the last minute they're like 'We decided to go in a different direction.' And shortly after that I'll see the same project that I was supposed to be a part of but done with a white male. I look at it and think, that just doesn't feel right.

Not to go on but I've been through many experiences where companies say they want to be an advocate and share a story like mine.... but they can't pay me. And I'm like, but you're a billion dollar company.... how is that being an advocate or an ally if you're going to make an undocumented person or an LGBT person work for free.

So going through all of that. I'm just like, I'm done. I feel very used. And what's worse is now when I make something for myself I get this weird anxiety that someone is going to try to dig their hands into it.

Phil - Oh gaww, that's an awful feeling.

Sara - So now I'm just trying to figure it out for myself. Trying to manage things on my own. Take back the control.





Topic: Really? Privilege?

Sara - I always knew that the street art scene came from people of color back in New York. But then after living in LA for a while it hit me that the biggest names in street art today are white men. And since I'm undocumented, I can't really go on the streets and spraypaint something like so many people do. Because an arrest could create massive problems for me. It wouldn't just be a ticket. Then I began to hear more and more stories from white artists who are like 'Yeah, I get stopped by cops, and I just tell them that I'll paint over it. And the cops laugh and let me go.' And it all started clicking, that's privilege. And since they are out there spray painting illegally and I can't, they get that leg up to get the jobs because people see their work. And I just never expected to find white privilege in street art, but it's there, and it really sucks.



Topic: Art or Nothin

Sara - So I was doing commissions and saving money. When I finally had enough saved up I moved out of Victorville and to LA. I moved in with some roommates and they were like 'so, do you have a job?' and I was like 'no'. And they were like, 'how are you going to pay rent?' and I'm like 'My art.' and they said 'But that's not going to be consistent.' and I'm like 'Don't worry, I'm putting applications in.' But I didn't put one application in. I kept lying to my roommates 'Yah I'm putting applications in' but I was just meeting up with people for coffee looking for gigs. I started working for people on their murals, helping out, learning a lot. And after 6 months I was like "Wow, I've never put in an application for a regular job but still paid all my bills. I could definitely do this full time!"

