

Words To Win By
Season 3
IRELAND

Irene:

Oh god, it was emotional, of course, the first time seeing them for, for over 15 years. And so my son stepped back. Is it real? Do we have a mom, a real mom, not an online one? My daughter start like running towards me and gave me a hug and said, yes, we have a mom, and she's here now.

ANAT

In 2022, Irene Jagoba – the person you just heard – returned home to the Philippines to an emotional reunion with her kids.

For fifteen years, Irene had been an undocumented immigrant in Ireland. She worked multiple jobs to stay afloat and send money back home to support her two young children. Intersecting challenges kept Irene from leaving the country: economic hardship in Ireland, her family's financial needs, the risk of permanent deportation and COVID-19.

But in 2022, the Migrant Rights Centre of Ireland helped bring about a crucial win that secured the chance at legal status for Irene and over 11,000 people like her. Finally granting her the opportunity to hug her kids.

The campaign required over a decade of tenacity, strategy and courage from undocumented leaders in order to move hearts, minds and, eventually, law.

[THEME SONG: by T.R. Richie

People say to me, you gotta be crazy. How can you sing in times like these? Don't you read the news? Don't you know the score? How can you sing when so many others grieve? By way of a reply, I say, a fool such as I. Who sees a song as somewhere to begin.]

ANAT

Welcome back to Words to Win By. I'm Anat Shenker-Osorio. I develop and test and deploy political messaging to help candidates, organizers, and activists around the world win progressive victories.

Today, we're in Ireland.

In 2022, the country passed a one-time "scheme" – the term for legislation used in Ireland – that enabled undocumented immigrants who had been living in the country for years to finally be recognized.

In 2010, 40,000 immigrants arrived in Ireland. The annual number then grew every year until it more than doubled, with 90,000 coming in 2018.¹

These figures don't include people who are *undocumented*. By 2019, there were estimated to be at least 20,000 such immigrants in Ireland – a country that had a population of *under 5* million at that time.² Prior to this, Ireland had very little experience with absorbing an influx of immigrants – with and without legal status.

Irene Jagoba was one of these newcomers. She came to Ireland in 2008, joining her sister, who already lived there. Three months was all Irene thought she would stay – to see if she could get a job and send money back home to her children.

Irene:

I have a son who has a congenital heart disease. I spent every, every single penny that I have, and I end up like, oh, I need to look for something else. So I came to Ireland and joined my sister. And then, uh, I look for a job. It's not as what you are expecting, of course, it's different place and your qualification isn't, uh, for Ireland, you know, even you have a degree back home. It's not going to work here. But I really want to work to support my kids back home. As time, uh, goes by and it's nearly the end of the permission, I just made a very difficult, uh, decision to overstay. And I said, Hmm, maybe for another two months. But no it's not that easy. So I stayed and just worked for the same employer for seven years.

ANAT

Irene found herself enmeshed in an undocumented employment trap that was largely invisible to Irish society at the time. In the mid 2010s, there weren't many legal frameworks to monitor and prosecute employers who exploited this rising number of undocumented people.³

And in that decade, the consequences of this lack of legal protections came to the fore: accounts of the exploitation of undocumented workers rose. One report states that between 2014 and 2016, 219 suspected trafficking victims were identified by authorities. None of these cases were prosecuted in the years immediately following their discovery.³

[CLIP - "Some migrants have been exploited in the workplace. Some have been bullied. Some have run into difficulties with racism. But the problem they face is that they can't go to the police and say 'I'm being bullied' or 'I'm being subjected to racist abuse.'"]⁴

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¹ [Population and Migration Estimates](#)

² [Just as the US had its undocumented Irish, so now Ireland has its own 'illegals'](#)

³ [Does Ireland have a modern slavery problem?](#)

⁴ [Ireland launches amnesty scheme for undocumented migrants](#)

Exploitation can mean many things. People may have been misled about the nature of the job for which they're hired. They could have had their passports seized upon taking a job. They could be expected to work without pay for long periods of time, or simply work long hours beyond Ireland's legal maximum of 48 hours per week.⁵

Irene:

I worked as a childminder, a carer, part-time cleaner, any job that will keep me going. And also, um, marketing manager, a balloon artist.

ANAT

In the first several years following her arrival, Irene was mainly working as a nanny in the countryside. Sometimes, she pulled up to 12 hour shifts. She'd tutor her clients' children, look after the household, and all the while, she had her own kids at home, seven time zones ahead, in the Philippines.

Irene:

Sometimes you'll feel like you're the worst mom in the world because, you know, you can look after the kids here really well, and you can't do that for your own kids. You know, the time that they need you. I have to keep going and thinking that I can support them better when I'm working here.

ANAT

Even though undocumented people were technically protected against all forms of exploitation under the law, language barriers and risks of deportation often dissuaded people from alerting authorities.

A couple years into Irene's grueling work hours in the countryside, she heard about a movement called the Justice for Undocumented campaign.

Irene:

So I went to the meeting and like I met some people. And the first time it's more um you're observing what's going on and who are these people. But then, yes, it was kinda little by little properly introduced and attending that event that I first, uh, joined is that Shamrock action.

ANAT

The "shamrock action" had undocumented participants gathering in a field, forming a shamrock – the four leaf clover that symbolizes Ireland – holding green paper over their heads. Like many undocumented people, Irene was hesitant to get involved.

Irene:

And also invited a friend with a car she's driving. I said, if in case there's a problem, we can just run home. So, you know, when you're undocumented, you're always worried.

⁵ [Severe forms of Labour Exploitation](#)

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Irene overcame her fear. And that's how she became involved with the organization integral to today's story.

Edel:

My name's Edel McGinley. I'm the director with the Migrant Rights Center Ireland.

ANAT

MRCI was one powerful antidote to the exploitation happening to many undocumented people.

Anat:

When the campaign started around about 2010, where was public opinion with regards to undocumented people?

Edel:

I mean, it's very different to the United States, but the word "undocumented" resonated. You know, we didn't really talk about illegal migrants. We very much held the line around undocumented, and that's very much kind of linked to the Irish undocumented in the United States. Successive governments would always go to United States campaigning for the rights of Irish undocumented people there. But public opinion would've been low at the time because, we were trying to make it visible, you know, we were, that was our job, was to bring visibility to this group of people.

Anat:

You also focused in on this idea of fairness in the labor market and contributions. How did that narrative go and, and what do you see as the strength of that? Or what was that able to achieve?

Edel:

You know, I suppose we were trying to draw attention to what work people were doing. So, you know, in terms of a level playing field, I think that worked very well in terms of, you know, you can't exploit people. You know we don't want to feel that we're exploiting people or taking advantage of people. And it did work. You know, and we had, you know, the, um, small business Irish and small business association speaking up for the rights of undocumented people, which was very unusual at the time, because they wouldn't have been very pro, particularly worker in general. But, they were very anti exploitation.

ANAT

One of the main roadblocks for legal status was simply that Irish society wasn't thinking about undocumented people within its borders.

So MRCI made the issue salient by having undocumented people speak of and for themselves.

Edel:

When people were the spokespeople of their own lives, it's harder to, it's harder to be really horrible to people, you know? (Yeah) And it's much harder also to say no, particularly from a political perspective. So our, like, part of our role was kind of connecting people in politics. I think a lot of what we did was make it safe. Make it safe for people to come forward, make it safe for politicians to do the right thing. The first person who was undocumented speaking out, you know that's a big – that's a big thing for somebody. And there was a lot of bravery shown throughout, and so Justice for the Undocumented helped to inoculate, you know, and kind of also to kind of help help people be brave and step up and, you know, so if we didn't have Irene's and Jason's and Champa's, and loads of different people, you know, without people, you just don't win. (Yeah)

ANAT

People like Irene were an essential part of recruiting and organizing for the many events the Justice for the Undocumented campaign held. Her story resonated with so many people in Ireland – undocumented, documented and native Irish alike.

Eventually, Irene moved to Dublin, which gave her easier access to MRCI meetings.

Irene:

I had more time after work to attend and I met more people in the same situation. And we were chatting about our situation. And, um, we're talking about, you know, different stories, connecting our stories and asking each other, what do we need? We found the, the Justice for Undocumented campaign, a pathway, like we can see hope, you know, because where can we go if we stay in our comfort zone? Nothing will happen. Like there's, there will be no change. We'll be undocumented for 20 more years.

ANAT

Justice for the Undocumented hosted more and more events, and membership started to climb. The organization ran solidarity marches and vigils. It arranged speeches and threw parties.⁶ And, MRCI conducted surveys among the undocumented community, gathering statistics in order to back up the human stories with numbers. These included the job sectors where undocumented immigrants worked, their average income, how much they paid in taxes and, during COVID, how many were providing invaluable services.

The messaging was clear: undocumented people are all around us, part of our community, and contributing to our society.

Slowly but surely, MRCI's events garnered attention. In 2016, Justice for the Undocumented launched an art installation called "A Thousand Reasons, One Wish." Hundreds of

⁶ MRCI

undocumented families folded paper cranes, inspired by the Japanese legend that states whoever folds 1000 paper cranes is granted a wish. Their wish? A path to papers.⁷

Ireland's President Michael Higgins visited the installation to offer his support, signaling a turning point.

With political approval rising, the Justice for the Undocumented campaign doubled down on visibility.

Irene:

So I spoke to RD news. God, the nerve the first time is like, you need to pee in your pants or something. Like of course, it's scary because what will happen to me after exposing myself in public, speaking about your, your current situation now and you're undocumented, but it helped raise the awareness of other people. In my personal experience, my phone become kind of noisy and busier after speaking in public because they contacted me directly on how to get involved. You spoke in public and you're still there. You weren't deported.

ANAT

This fearless visibility was embodied in another art installation – “Can You See Me Now?” – 11 large portraits of undocumented immigrants, including Irene, alongside short bios.

In the press release for the installation, Irene said, “Years of working, caring for the elderly, cleaning offices, paying taxes – our work may be invisible to the government but it’s essential to Ireland.”⁸

Visibility and humanization were critical to MRCI’s strategy. And, as we heard from Edel, Irish society had a tangible connection to being or knowing someone undocumented.

So, as part of the campaign, undocumented people in Ireland connected with undocumented Irish people in the US. In 2015, MRCI released a short documentary, “Half the World Away: Undocumented in Dublin & New York.”⁹

[Clip - “Hi, my name is Pat. I’m from Keenrath County, Cork, Ireland. I’ve been in the United States coming up on 12 years now undocumented.” “My name is Marites. I’m from Philippines, from Batangas. I’ve been here for 10 years. I’ve been undocumented since I came.” “You know, some of my friends from back home in Ireland, my relatives, have passed away. And I just haven’t been able to be there.” “It’s not the same, Christmas, if you don’t have your family.”]

ANAT

⁷ [President Higgins visits art installation created by undocumented migrants](#)

⁸ [Unique portraits of undocumented migrants go on show in Dublin](#)

⁹ [Half the World Away: Undocumented in Dublin & New York](#)

In tying together the shared struggles of each group of immigrants, MRCI embraced a key component of persuasive messaging, creating an overlap of identity between the target audience and the people or cause you're promoting. In this case, the universality of moving to make a better life forged that shared experience.

Edel:

I think there was solidarity out there though, as well, because, and I think we believed that there was, so we were trying to kinda activate that a bit, because I think Ireland has a very strong history of migration, of immigration. So you know we have kind of this, I suppose grand narrative around, you know immigration, and you know people understood what it means to immigrate, and people understood what it meant to immigrate without papers and to overstay as well. Because immigration affects everybody in every corner of Ireland. You know, at some point in their family history.

Anat:

And also use that knowledge and that awareness to be a hook and a basis of understanding for why people move to here, not just from here, so that people could see it sort of both ways, which is fascinating 'cause that's very much an empathy-based argument as opposed to a sympathy-based argument. A sympathy-based argument would say essentially, hey, you should feel badly for these people. They've, you know, escaped these conditions and this is what they're running from, and this is how bad it is for them. An empathy-based argument is basically people move and who knows that better than the Irish who are intensely mobile and have found themselves in this same situation. So that's one value. This kind of idea of universality, empathy, sort of seeing yourself in the other, what are some of the other values you feel like the campaign really emphasized?

Edel:

I mean we, we very much used St. Patrick's Day. That was like one of our key days to, you know, kind of activate that identity and culture value as well for people, I think because well, St. Patrick's Day, it's like, you know, people celebrate it all over the world.

Anat:

I've heard of it. I've heard of it once or twice.

Edel:

Yeah. So St. Patrick's Day became sort of our day that we tried to capitalize and mobilize, and we always did an action. We always told stories. We always tried to you know showcase, the work of Justice for the Undocumented, the people involved, the bravery of people standing up and, you know, speaking out and, you know, so it was, that was really import – it was another really important day and hook for us to get people to listen and empathize, as you say.

Anat:

What argument from the opposition do you find hardest to rebut?

Edel:

Just that they broke laws. You can't, you can't just come here and break a law. So that kind of stuff was sort of difficult. Although we would try and swing that so actually it was a state failure. Because if there's a demand for, for people and employment, then there should be the corresponding, you know, kind of rights framework that allows people to be secure and safe and work, you know, regularly. And we didn't have that, and lots of states don't have that. So we would try and look at a system's failure rather than blaming people, it's the system.

Anat:

In the U.S. there is a default to what we call nation of immigrants messaging, where we say we are a nation of immigrants and we show a picture of the Statue of Liberty, and we try to make a case for immigrants on the basis of this is kind of part of our national character. And what we've seen in testing is that that actually doesn't work because first of all, it's insulting to Native Americans for reasons I'm guessing are obvious. It's insulting to many Black Americans because it implies a volition where there was none. Some people were immigrants because they had no choice, because they were literally enslaved and stolen from their homelands. And then for the average American who was just statistically speaking, born in the United States, it's not part of their lived experience. They did not immigrate. And so what's interesting is that the narrative that we find to be far more effective in testing is people move.

Edel:

We do use that narrative as well. People move, people move for love, for, um, for work, for, we have definitely, you know, near the end, or I, and maybe after you came actually and, and did some work with us, but yeah, you know, we, we definitely our messaging and got much better.

ANAT

“People Move” is, indeed, a potent, universalizing message. We know because, as part of the 2022 midterms, my team partnered with Way to Win Action fund to create and test an ad on immigration we called, you guessed it: People Move.

[Way to Win Action Fund - “Most of us will do whatever it takes to make a better life. We work, sacrifice, and even pack up everything to put food on the table, provide for our families, or send our kids to a decent school. Immigrant Americans move here for the promise of freedom and opportunity. America’s supposed to be the land of the free and the home of the brave. Let’s vote to make it that way.”]

ANAT

This ad proved effective at moving a broad range of voters on vote choice and also helped diminish the potency of right wing anti-immigrant messaging. The fact that this storyline, rooted

in the essential value of freedom, works in the U.S. isn't surprising. And, given that Ireland is a nation of emigrants, it suited the MRCI's efforts to make persuadable voters see themselves in the lives and needs of newcomers.

MRCI's successful campaigning started to gain traction. And thanks to a movement of powerful youth activists, news coverage of undocumented students and children began to rise.

To leverage this effort to the fullest, a group of 14-21 year old undocumented people joined in on the Justice for the Undocumented campaign. They came with a message of their own: "Young, Paperless, and Powerful."¹⁰

*[CLIP - "Hi I'm Sumaya, and I'm 15." "Kevin, 16," "Diksha, 14." "Dishan, 17." "We all live in Ireland. Our parents brought us here for a better life. We go to school here. Our families and friends are here. Ireland is our home now."]*¹¹

Edel:

Public opinion really shifted when young people came to the fore. Our worker was becoming intergenerational, we established "Young, Paperless and Powerful" after, after a group in America. We robbed it. We thought it was really good. So we set up "Young, Paperless, and Powerful," again, for young people to come together to, with shared experience for support for each other, first and foremost, but also for them to be you know to be able to be political and to share their stories and what it meant to them.

ANAT

Young people became a key voice in a campaign that had originally been focused primarily on adults, and that focus was for good reason. In 2019, of the over 20,000 undocumented immigrants in Ireland, only an estimated two to three thousand were young people.¹² Nonetheless, their stories captured the public's attention, and their leadership became essential to the broader effort.

In 2018, as political support for the cause grew, the Irish Parliament introduced legislation for undocumented students. It allowed people who came to Ireland as international students between 2005 and 2010, and stayed, to regularize their legal status.

It was a huge win, but only provided tangible benefits to those lucky few. This legislation did not impact the majority of hopeful adults bravely campaigning for legal status. Nevertheless, the campaign had *momentum*. They just needed to keep pushing their successful narratives, providing platforms for their courageous spokespeople and working the inside game within the Irish Parliament.

¹⁰ [Young, Paperless and Powerful](#)

¹¹ [Young, Paperless, and Powerful](#)

¹² [Joy for undocumented teen granted right to remain](#)

MRCI continued releasing videos showing, not telling, the three dimensional lives of undocumented people. And, at the same time, they amped up the political pressure. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization wrote an open letter to the country's two main political parties.¹³

It said, "Now, more than ever, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that we are dependent on each other."

Edel:

I think we created the conditions for kind of people to empathize. I think we, people understood who undocumented people were um I mean I knew we were winning when I got a call from kind of a senior civil servant, at the beginning of the pandemic of COVID to ask us how can we support undocumented people? What can we do? We went hell for leather as COVID hit. So we were in the midst of an election in 2020. We had got cross party support, we had got business support, we had got civil society support. People were visible. They were out there. We kind of flooded the media with stories. When people were kind of retreating because of COVID, we were actually going harder. It was tough. And because there was an election, we were holding kind of political parties to account, we were getting them in manifestos. We were saying, do you support us? You know, go on the record and, and say, do you support us? So, and as an organization, we went after one, one thing and, and that was it.

ANAT

After over a decade of campaigning... the big payoff.

[CLIP - "They've been campaigning for years for this moment, described by the government today as a 'once in a generation scheme']"¹⁴

[CLIP - "A new scheme that could allow migrants residing in the country to gain full legal status. The amnesty scheme will allow adults who have live in the country for four years or children who have been there three years to apply."]¹⁵

Edel:

Oh my God. I mean, it, it, it's transformational. I mean, we talk to people whose lives are just completely changed. They can go visit their families. They can leave exploitative employment. They can be reunited with children. They can progress in, in careers. They can take up education. They can, you know, be visible just that you know the weight, like, you can see it on people's faces. Their faces lift. It's very different.

ANAT

¹³ [Coalition of firms and unions calls for regularisation of undocumented workers](#)

¹⁴ [Scheme to regularise thousands of undocumented migrants](#)

¹⁵ [Ireland launches amnesty scheme for undocumented migrants](#)

One of the people who could finally see her kids again was Irene.

Anat:

How did you feel when the scheme was passed? When the regularization happened?

Irene:

Overjoyed, like, I can't believe that really. Like, we were working hard on this, but I don't, cannot explain how happy we are. That means I was able to go home and visit my kids and come back to Ireland and work and live in a normal life without fear.

ANAT

While no two countries are exactly alike in public sentiment or political proclivities, key elements of the Justice for the Undocumented campaign are worth keeping in mind. First, provide a supportive space for those most impacted by the injustice to lead, shape and speak for your campaign.

Use empathy, rather than sympathy. To be sure, the Irish public has a unique understanding of undocumented immigrants' need to move and their desire to take control of their own lives. But moving to make a better life is a universal human drive. Rather than attempting to stir sympathy about the plight of the undocumented, which risks falsely portraying them as needy victims, it's more effective to evoke a shared connection to the audience you seek to move.

Nothing succeeds like success. When political support for young undocumented people started to grow, the organization nurtured their involvement and fought for legislation for them. This allowed them to declare a victory and portray themselves as a winning proposition. Whenever they could, they pressured legislators to declare their support publicly. This cumulatively pushed public and political sentiment that enabled a more universal win to be passed only a few years later.

Above all, they remained relentlessly active and hopeful. That is essential for a decade-long campaign.

Edel:

For me and for the Migrant Rights Center Ireland that, you know, I think we're a hopeful organization. The campaign was hopeful and it can be hard to hold on to hope, but I think it's, it's something that I think we strive to do as well. The involvement of people taking collective action together, um, is just so powerful and really is what won this campaign.

ANAT

Words to Win By is a Wonder Media Network production. The show is produced by Carmen Borca-Carrillo, Brittany Martinez, and Edie Allard. Our editor is Grace Lynch. With editorial support from Liz Brown and Luci Jones. Thanks to Siobhan O'Donoghue and Emily Duffy. Our

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To learn more about the Migrant Rights Center of Ireland go to [MRCI.IE](https://mrci.ie)

To find out more about this, or any of our episodes, go to Words to Win by hyphen pod dot com.

If your words don't spread, they don't work. So please let others know and rate and review the show, wherever you listen to your podcasts.

[THEME SONG: A song is somewhere to begin. To search for something worth believing in. If changes are to come, there are things that must be done. And a song is somewhere to begin.]