



She Tries to Explain Her Social-Justice Activism

Irene encounters roadblocks as she tries to share her political engagement with her Mexican and Guatemalan parents. And Natalia Ortiz, a racial-justice organizer and professor of education, helps us talk with our families in concrete terms about the fight for systemic change.

Juleyka Lantigua:

Hi everybody. Today we welcome Irene. Irene is a young activist who wants to dedicate her life and career to the fight for social justice. But when she speaks with her Mexican and Guatemalan parents about her commitment and ideals, she feels they don't really understand what she's actually trying to do. Let's get into it.

Irene:

I'm Irene Franco Rubio, an activist, writer and community organizer from Phoenix, Arizona, and in my family, we like to call my parents mom and dad. I grew up in a Guatemalan and Mexican household. I think because I grew up in Arizona during a really interesting time, specifically during SB 1070 and seeing how politics and racism and those sort of things played a role in my life, really inspired me to want to take action.

SB 1070 was a racial profiling bill that pretty much gave local law enforcement the ability to racially profile or to pull you over and ask you for your papers. There was an immediate fear that was just instilled into the community, whether that meant not wanting to drive because you're undocumented and don't want to get pulled over or don't want to be in a public space for too long because of what can come out of that. So in one way or another, our lives were impacted. And I think as youth, we were seeing the effects of that on our parents.

So my household did change a bit in the ways that we engaged in political conversations. I really started to see what it meant to have a political voice because my dad was very vocal in the ways that he felt impacted, and the ways he felt discriminated against, and the ways that he saw injustice. I think hearing that, and in conversations with him, I really began to formulate my own opinion. When I got to college, I really started to see my voice as an activist, my voice as a woman of color, and the unique perspective I had to offer the world in that way. I think that was really when I decided that I was going to serve.

I started organizing locally for different orgs, for like MEFA was like the first one. I just kind of started as a communications intern and then, for the Arizona Coalition

for Change, and Progress Arizona, and all these different orgs that really taught me what it meant to recognize your political power, what it meant to have a say in direct democracy, what the power of your vote means. And I think in a lot of ways that has transformed me now into really being an abolitionist thinker and really sort of revolutionary that advocates for all historically marginalized groups, but beginning with voting as a means to share the power of your voice and lived experience.

Irene: My parents' reaction to me becoming involved...they were very supportive of it. I don't come from a sort of household that was already civically engaged. I feel like for most traditional activists, they often have that sort of history. Mine's is interesting in the way that I was the one to civically and politically empower my parents. They didn't really recognize the power of their vote until I learned about it and I made sure that they were voting. They were always wanting to do good and wanting to be in pursuit of justice, but just never really had the mindset or the skillset necessary to do that. For a while, I think I saw the different ways that oppressive systems' kind of limited their thinking and ability to really see how powerful they could be.

So in different ways, I do think my parents were able to see how involved I really got and how serious I was about doing this work. When I got to intern for Congresswoman Holland, I actually flew them out to DC and they got to come see the capital and we got to walk through it, and see Congress, and all these things that they never really imagined. That was a really powerful moment for me, them being able to understand I think for the first time, I was really serious about what I was doing and that I was making it happen.

It's been interesting in really trying to explain what it is exactly that I'm doing. I think in a lot of ways they understand that, but I don't think they really see the sort of like really revolutionary framework that I'm trying to apply to this work. I think they think of things in a very like surface level way. Like, oh, you engage in politics, so you're really into like the Biden Harris administration and that sort of thinking, which is true, but it's also like, what does it mean to live in an abolitionist world and what does it mean to enact that sort of change?

I think in different ways, it has been challenging to explain, especially in a world where everything is constantly shifting and there's no clear title for what it is that I'm trying to do. I think as far as extended family goes, if it's already difficult with my immediate family, I don't really think my extended family knows. In a lot of ways for folks that don't really see it or can't really imagine what it is that I'm trying to do, I think the time will come for them to be able to see that. But I think for now it's really being about the work and showing people that I'm really serious and intentional about this work, and then seeing where we go from there.

Lantigua: I related so much to Irene's story. For me, college was also the start of my political engagement and awareness. And as excited as I was to discover this part of myself, whenever I came home, the conversations with my mom around my activism as a student felt really conflicted. As first gens, how can we talk about social justice and activism in a way that doesn't alienate our loved ones? How can we discuss what can be very abstract ideals in a way that feels grounded and relevant to their lives? To help us figure it out, you know I had to call in an expert.

Natalia Ortiz: Mi nombre es Natalia Ortiz. My pronouns are she, her and ella. So I am Chilena-Riqueña, right? My mom comes to us from Chile and my father comes to us from Puerto Rico. I am first generation United States ian, as I like to say. I am an education professor at Barnard College right now actually, but how I got here is a journey if you will. I consider myself a teacher and parent activist and organizer. Started teaching when I was a baby, maybe 23 years old. It was that entry point for me that got me into the organizing activist world.

Lantigua: What did you hear when you listened to Irene's story?

Ortiz: Taking deep breaths here. So there was so much in Irene's story that resonated with me, specifically when I heard Irene speak to her politicization and how she found her voice in college in particular, did resonate strongly with me in my experience. Coming from a background where our parents are immigrants to this country and not growing up with, let's say, just like social justice constantly being discussed at the dinner table. I mean, I also came home to have more political consciousness conversations with my mother, like shifting consciousness and educating my mom.

Lantigua: I want to start with sort of like a broad strokes question because this is something I think about a lot. From my point of view as an immigrant and also as a first gen, I see immigrating to another country as one of the most emboldened political acts a human can possibly take. So I always find it really ironic, even in conversations with my own family about politics, that there is this cognitive dissonance between their lived experience and what younger people in the family areq more vocal and politically active people in the family want to be involved in. How do we bridge that cognitive gap for our families?

Ortiz: That's powerful. First of all, it's important to just say the political is personal. But the cognitive dissonance, because one of the things I wanted to mention about Irene. Irene did say that her father would constantly talk about the discrimination and the injustice that he was experiencing, especially around this law, the SB 1070. In my head I'm like, pero, eso that right there is politicization. That perspective is politicization.

The younger generation, as you spoke to, we kind of go to college and we are now able to see perhaps like the frameworks or the key terminology. We can say,

"Oh, well, that is systemic oppression." We're able to kind of give name to the experiences of our families. We see our own stories as just not individual stories, as something that now is connected to our larger narrative, our country's history around immigration and policies and the deportations and the limited access to citizenship.

Ortiz: I think we should give our parents credit for the naming of their experiences, the risk taking of their experiences, the resistance, the pushback around the injustice, the daily survival even of going to work and raising our children and not, kind of see us as distinct because now we have more language or more study. Seeing that as also political and not distinct from like political only being understood as civic, meaning like you can only be political if you're voting or actively participating in the democratic process. Telling stories, grassroots organizing, survival work is political work.

Lantigua: When we go to college as first gens, I mean, it is the explosion in a way of our reality when many of us do that and when we are the first and when we go away and when we drop into environments that are really foreign to us. Often, that sort of rapid knowledge acquisition, and especially the growth in our ability to process ideas, can be alienating to our families who tend to see themselves more as working class, who tend to see themselves more as "regular people". So help me think through ways of how we can talk about movement building, how we can talk about abolition, how we can talk about social justice with our family and create a context that can resonate with them.

Ortiz: So I think we're storytellers. We like to sit around, en la cocina, at a table and have conversations, about anything in the news. My mom always seems to know everything that's happening and wants to engage in dialogue around it. So I see that as an opportunity to just be in continual conversation around issues of injustice or making the connections continually, if you will. First I always, con mi mamá, with my mom, I'm like ma okay, so this is how you feel. This is what you think. Tell me more, right. Why do you think this? Dame some, alternativas.

Ortiz: Like, how does this impact your own story? And then when I hear her kind of struggle with, I don't know, abortion laws or anything that she wants to bring to the table, I often then try to take whatever it is that she's sharing to just a larger, connected weaving of information that I have had the privilege of getting to learn and know. So just thinking about poverty and through poverty and how that is violent for people and women. I start to take one event that she's speaking to and start to kind of weave a larger story so that she's able to see like the systemic approach. Right. Then from that moment, right, my mom, because she sees me as the college educated one and almost sometimes feels like maybe I should be listening to my daughter, but she still is very strong in her thoughts, which I appreciate. For me, it's not also just like she has to change or shift her perspective.

Like, ahora, but it's more about leaving possibility open because I know that, that conversation is going to continue. So sometimes her response will be like, mm, no se, right?

Ortiz: So in that moment, it's more of like, okay, I can choose in that moment to say, let me respond. Pero mami, ¿qué no sabes? A ver, dime mas. What's coming up for you. Or I'm going to just leave it at that, depending on how much capacity and time I have. And I might just say, okay we'll talk about it whenever it is, we're ready. Right. And that, when I hear Irene, because Irene is like, I don't always know how much they really understand my abolitionist thinking. Right. Or my true deep revolutionary spirit. I don't think my mom entirely understands it either. Like my mom still calls, I organize with the New York Collective of Radical Educators. NYCORE in New York and she refers to them as my teacher group or in Spanish, she says el grupo de maestros, and she's like, "okay, what do y'all do in that group of teachers?"

Lantigua: I want to pick up on that point, because this is something that I have experienced with my mom too, where she sanitizes a version of things for herself. Right. So to your mom "el grupo de maestros is more innocent." It's "oh, it's a bunch of well-intentioned caring teachers who are getting together." My mom used to do the same. Like I once literally organized a student protest that interrupted a trustee meeting at my college. When she tells that story, it's a story about that time that I misbehaved, versus story of that time that I organized students to stand up and protest something.

Ortiz: Yeah. I think it was like the time that in college, we like stormed the president's office and we didn't let them leave the office until they responded to our demands as students. Right. I was nervous to tell my mom that I was part of that. It's fear in some ways I think for my mom, a little bit of like, "ay please be careful." It's a part of me is like trying to figure out what about the behavior or the fear, como lowering our heads, going with the flow and saying, well that's just the way it is, Natalia. We have to just learn to live with it. That's what I, yeah... What is it, what is it about that behavior that we come to learn?

Lantigua: At some point, do you think it's wiser perhaps healthier to make the choice to just not share as much?

Ortiz: Ooh. My gut is saying, no, we should tell our parents and we should work. First of all, I think it depends on many things like age, how old are you? Is it just telling them, and then bouncing? It's like, "okay mom ciao, like I'm doing this," or "peace, love you." You know, versus let me actually give myself the time knowing my mom is going to react in this way and bring her into the conversation in a way that I know, with love. Right? Listen, you may not want this for me. You may not understand it entirely right now. Here are all the reasons I think it is important, and that sometimes it is the public push the protests, the boycotting, the sit downs that

bring attention to something that isn't unjust. I will do my best to take care of myself, to protect myself and loved ones. Also I will be on the streets, right? Marching and walking across the Brooklyn bridge, demanding justice for George Floyd. Right.

Lantigua: I love how you came back to one of the first things that you said, which is politics is personal. For us there isn't anything more precious and more personal than our family. So if we are going to be agents of change, if we are going to live our political identities, we have to deal with the fact that politics is very personal and it starts with our loved ones.

Ortiz: Absolutely.

Lantigua: Is there anything else I haven't asked you that you think bears remembering or something that people should consider as they take on this work of both acting on our collective behalf to improve our conditions, but also really educating and bringing their families along?

Ortiz: Homework is radical work. When I say not homework, like homework, you get into school. But like how we be with our families, right? The conversations we have is radical, is political, is frontline work.

Lantigua: What a great conversation, please, please come back.

Ortiz: Mm. Thank you Juleyka.

Lantigua: All right. Here's what we learned from Natalia today.

Connect them to the larger whole. Help your loved ones, recognize systemic problems by pointing out the connection between their personal experiences and the broader historical context.

Give them credit. Remember that many of the choices your parents made throughout their lives and yours have been political acts. Political action comes in many different forms, it's not just about participating in the democratic process.

Remember, do the work at home. The internal and personal work of having these ongoing conversations with our families is also a political act. So keep at it.

Thank you for listening and for sharing us. How to talk to [Mamá & Papá] about Anything is an original production of LWC Studios. Virginia Lora is the show's producer. Kojin Tashiro is our mixer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. I'm the creator Juleyka Lantigua. On Twitter and Instagram we're at "Talk to Mami Papi." Bye everybody. Same place next week.

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