



## Telling Them I'm Moving in with Boyfriend

Cris Ramos Greene is the author of *Embrace That Girl*, a memoir about figuring out adulthood and coming to terms with her Cuban-American identity. She talks to Juleyka about breaking the news to her traditional parents that she was moving in with her boyfriend. And, a marriage and family therapist shares strategies to assert your independence without drama.

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Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Welcome back to How to Talk to [Mami and Papi] About Anything. I'm Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. Hi, new listeners. Today I'm speaking with author Cris Ramos Greene. She just published a memoir called *Embrace That Girl* about navigating adulthood, searching for meaning, and coming to terms with her identity as a second generation Cuban American. Spot on for our show.

Cris grew up in a tight knit Cuban household in Miami, but she had difficulty asserting herself and her independence in important areas of her life, like dating and moving in with her boyfriend. Oh boy. Let's get into it.

Cris:

Hi, my name is Cris, and I'm the author of *Embrace That Girl*, and in my family we grew up calling my parents mom and dad. I grew up in Miami, Florida. Both my parents were born in Cuba. My mom was raised in Spain and immigrated when she was about 14. My dad immigrated when he was a toddler. So, we definitely grew up speaking Spanglish. I'm the older sister, I have a younger sister, and it was just us four, and both of my parents are actually only children, so we were like *cuatro gatos*.

So, when I started dating and specifically in my teenage years, me and my dad would butt heads, like we would get into screaming matches over 15-minute increments on my curfew. He was extremely overprotective. It was really hard, especially because we were so tight knit, because it's just us four. Being a family to my parents meant that everyone had sort of like a vote in everyone's decisions, so being a family meant sharing these things and having basically... I don't know. Everything was just very enmeshed. Not a lot of boundaries.

And when my dad and I got into these fights over me wanting to be independent, my comeback was, "I'm 18. I'm an adult now." He would be like, "eso es una americanada." Like, "No. You're not." So, telling my dad that I had made this grownup decision to move in with my boyfriend, I was so nervous. I basically

avoided it, like I told my mom, and she wasn't happy, and in our family the dynamic, which I think is just very Latin, is that my dad blew up at me. He wouldn't talk to me. My mom wanted to keep the peace, but she definitely, *lo soltó*, in conversations, and it was really tough. It was not an easy situation to navigate.

I did not try to persuade them because I felt like I had struggled from my teenage years, my early twenties, to assert my independence, and everything felt like it was a negotiation or an enrollment, so by 25, I had already been living in my own apartment. I was financially independent. I felt that this was more of an information, but I didn't want to be callous about it, because I care about my parents and I really wanted them to love my boyfriend, because I knew he would be eventually my forever partner, so I was really careful in how I informed them that it was definitely a *debrief*. Not a, "We're at the table and you have a vote," which definitely didn't work out well, because in my family the dynamic is we share in the decision making. We all have a vote. We all consult each other before we pull the trigger.

And so that, I think in and of itself, besides the fact that it was very sensitive because they're traditional and I wasn't married, felt like a betrayal, I think, which I really hated. It was hard.

Shortly after I bought an apartment with my husband, we still weren't married at the time or engaged, and we... I shared with my parents like, "Oh, I put an offer on this amazing place." And at that point they weren't mad and enraged like I think they were originally, because they understood, "Oh, there's a shift in the dynamic." But I can tell they were hurt because they were like, "Wait, but why didn't you show it to me?" And I didn't even think of showing it to them, you know? I was like, "Well, because you're not gonna live here."

And I think after that, they didn't get angry with me the same way. They were just more hurt that, "Wow, like this really means she's in her own family or her own situation now. We don't get consulted. We're not the *cuatro gatos* anymore."

My sister is definitely, as a younger sibling, didn't have to fight for the same things. Grew up, basically saw me fight for my independence. My parents were definitely like, "Okay, fine," when it came to her. Like my sister now lives with her fiancé, almost husband, and my parents helped them move in. It wasn't even... I know, it's so unfair! Yeah, it really is.

Although they've come a long way in respecting my boundaries, and I've come a long way too in communicating with them and learning to let them in and share in a way that still makes it clear that this is sharing, but it still creeps up from time to time. I just kind of lovingly... I accept that they're my parents. They're always gonna want the best for me, like I know it doesn't come from a place of judgment. It's just they don't know how to say it in a different way and the approach is always to come from a space of love, and compassion, and understanding of this is what family means to them and be gentle in your approach.

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Lantigua-Williams:

I can relate to Cris's story in so many ways. I also had to tell my mom that I was moving in with my boyfriend in my mid-twenties. I'm also the oldest daughter. I also have younger sisters. And like her, I've also been the first to make big changes happen in our family. First to go away to college, first to live abroad, lots and lots of firsts. Like Cris, I also had to figure out how to communicate those important decisions in my life while keeping the peace and safeguarding the environment for my siblings, my sisters, and my brother, who would eventually also face big, life-affirming decisions.

But with my mom, even when we were not talking about taboo subjects like dating, it still got messy. And so, it got me thinking about Cris's scenario and my scenario and so many of our scenarios in which these big, big, big, big, big life decisions can sometimes feel like dropping a bomb on the dinner table. So, I called in an expert.

Sara Stanizai: My name is Sara Stanizai. I'm a licensed marriage and family therapist and I'm the owner of Prospect Therapy here in Long Beach, California. We are a queer and trans affirming therapy practice with a special focus on mental health in first generation American and other bicultural communities.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, you're my expert today, Sara. You heard Cris's story. What do you hear?

Stanizai: I love hearing Cris's story. I hear stories like this often and I'm gonna be very on brand and as a marriage and family therapist, one of the things I heard was she talked about in her family, everyone plays a role and that's what we look at when we look at a family system or any sort of relationship system, is what role does everyone play, and it may seem obvious to us now looking back on it, but people don't realize that we often reenact those roles in our new families, and in the relationships that we create as adults.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, Cris was very aware of how exactly she changed the dynamic when she informed them that she was gonna move in with her boyfriend, so she says that they were shocked because this was not a, "Let's have a vote. Let's have a family discussion." This was, "Here's what my plan is, you have now been informed." So,

walk me through what happens in the family when a key player like the oldest daughter decides to drastically change the dynamic about such a major decision.

Stanizai: Yes. I love the oldest daughter who changes the dynamic. I may have some personal experience with that. I'm teasing, but it could be anyone. What happens is that system I just described gets disrupted. We don't live in a vacuum, and so when something comes from outside like a new partner, or a new job, or a goal that doesn't align with "how we've always done things," that person has the role of disrupting that system, and that doesn't have to necessarily be a bad thing. I think one thing I tell my clients a lot is you can cloak informing them in a way that sounds like you're asking them or getting their buy in, and people sometimes have a hard time with that.

They say, "Well, I should just... I need to stand up for myself. Enough is enough. It's not fair. They need to know how I feel." Which is true, but when you are trying to essentially disrupt a pattern that has been there for a long time, you're gonna make it harder for yourself the harder you stand up against them. And I often tell clients it's probably safer and easier to sound like you're asking them and have them think it's their idea and you can then more safely disrupt that pattern. You can meet your goal.

For example, for Cris, she can move out. And then there's plenty of time afterwards to practice informing them and separate yourself little by little over time, rather than feeling like it has to be this big battle and you have to prove something.

Lantigua-Williams:

Besides cloaking, is there another strategy or a couple of other strategies that people can utilize to reduce the potential harm and the potential blowup while still achieving the goal that they want to achieve?

Stanizai: Yeah. So, there's a couple ways. One is to relate it back to your values and your beliefs that you probably do share a lot with your family if you dig deep enough. Sometimes, these manifest in different ways, and they might feel controlling, or stifling, but if you go deep enough, the values are, "I just want you to be safe. I want you to be happy." If you remind them, "Well, if you want me to be safe, this is how I'm gonna meet that need. You raised me right. I love you. I'm smart. I can figure this out. Maybe it's not what you intended, but trust me, I'm not doing this just to rebel. I'm not doing this to get away from the values that you taught me. This is just the way that I'm meeting them."

But the other way that I tell people is you can still involve them in the process, and I imagined the rest of Cris's story, which was she informed her parents that she's moving out and then I imagined it's okay, they can still be involved. Maybe the parents want to help decorate the new place, or maybe you want to invite them over for a meal so they can see it's not a terrible situation.

If the parents want to help with the purchase or negotiation, they probably have skills in that area, so they can still be involved and still feel like the collective unit is still taking part in this decision, so that Cris feels more supported and the parents don't feel so betrayed.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, Cris did not escape the guilt. She says that making those big decisions independently of her family sometimes felt like a betrayal. How can we manage that guilt, even when we are making absolutely the best decisions for us?

Stanizai: Yeah. That's something that's very, very common in first gens, where it feels like a betrayal because this is how we've always made decisions and here I am changing sort of what we agreed on. One thing I say a lot about immigrant communities, a lot of us come from much more collectivist cultures, and that's this idea that in America, it's very focused on the individual and the greatest virtue you can have is you do your best. And in a lot of other cultures, especially where people are immigrating from, it's a much more collectivist culture, meaning we put the needs of the family, or the group, or the unit at the priority.

What I love about these collectivist cultures is it reminds me that immigrants and children of immigrants, we do this better than anyone else, and I think sometimes people who don't come from those cultures don't understand it and frankly, they're missing out. We know that collectivism can be a little bit frustrating and annoying, because it feels like everyone's in your business and I can't make any decisions by myself ever. There has to be a vote on what I have for breakfast. But if we can leverage this, because we do this better than anyone else, we know what it's like to have a whole group of people who are loyal to us, and who will protect us, and who will back us up, and if we can simply shift that so that they're supporting us rather than making it feel like they're holding us down, or holding us back, and if we can reframe it in that way, usually by getting more in touch with our values or really just saying these are the lessons my family taught me. This is what I'm grateful for. This is what I appreciate. That's sort of an advantage to us.

That's something that we do that other people can't do.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, this is a perfect place to talk about something that I also experienced as a hard wall, which was traditionally, Americans declare their independence at 18 and it is culturally understood in the United States that you're an adult. And that's not so much the case in immigrant households. 18 doesn't mean squat. How does someone, and I think Cris navigated it well, but how does someone who's 18, or 28, navigate that really stark line between the culture that we're coming from and the American culture that we're growing into?

Stanizai: I think every family, and larger than that, every culture has these markers of which box do you check and does that mean you're successful? Does that mean you're

happy? Does that even mean that you are an adult and can make decisions independently? So, maybe in our family, it's not turning 18. Maybe it is getting married. Maybe it's having a child. Maybe it's completing your education, or once you are financially able to provide for yourself, that counts as adulthood and that can happen at any age.

So, focusing on those rather than being fixated just on the date on the calendar.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, my last question, one of the things that I really related to with Cris as the oldest sister is that she's also paving the way for her younger sister much in the way that I did. You know, like I went away to college four and a half hours a way, and that enabled my other siblings to do the same, and I think that this is also an important role that the first gen kid plays in the household. What is your advice in general when we are doing these sort of barrier-breaking things in our families? In terms of thinking about how they impact our siblings who are coming up behind us.

Stanizai: Yeah. I have a younger sister too, so this part of the story really warmed my heart, and the oldest sibling in many ways plays the role of the American parent, so we know a little bit more about how to navigate that. And I think any younger sibling would say just because you did that didn't make it easier for me.

Lantigua-Williams:

Yep.

Stanizai: But I think the distinction is they may not be fighting for the same things. For example, if the older sibling is the first to marry someone outside of the culture, or the first to move away for school, the younger sibling may know that that is okay to do, but then they have their own issues of what they're fighting for, which is usually some version of, "I just want to be taken seriously. I don't want to be the baby anymore." I feel like I'm putting my sister on blast. It's cool.

But I think if the oldest sibling can be mindful that they do, whether they want to or not, end up playing that sort of parental role, and to have a little bit more empathy and learn to tolerate that frustration, that can not only pave the way for the younger sibling, but honestly, I think it strengthens the siblings' relationship, too.

Lantigua-Williams:

Sara, thank you so much. So good to have you back on the show.

Stanizai: Thank you. Thanks for having me. This was really fun.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, let's recap what we learned from Sara. Skip the confrontation entirely. Cloak your language with friendly and conciliatory words instead of grandstanding with declarations of independence. Keep them involved. Your parents don't have

to be part of the decision-making process. Letting them be part of the aftermath can go a long way in honoring your relationship and maintaining boundaries. And remember, use the collective framing to show them that what they've taught you in terms of values is still very much reflected in the decisions that you're making. It's not about asserting your independence and it's not about separating. It is really about exercising the same values in your own way, in your own life.

Lantigua-Williams:

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