



## Family Encouraged Military Service, But She Made Her Own Plans

When Camila changed her mind about joining the Air Force, her Colombian parents were very disillusioned. And Yasmin Navarro, a college counselor who works with first-gen students and their parents, speaks with Juleyka about exploring college and career options while managing pressures and expectations from family.

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Juleyka Lantigua:

Hi everybody. My guest today is Camila. She seriously considered joining the military after high school and her Columbian parents were really enthusiastic about the idea. But when Camila changed her mind, her family at first couldn't understand or accept her decision. Let's get into it.

Camila:

I am Camila. I am from Colombia, from Bogotá. I moved here when I was 12 years old, I call mom "ma" and I call dad "pa". Back in Colombia I used to study in a bilingual school kind of thing. So I kind of had like a little basis in English. Academically, I have been doing well my whole life, just because I'm trying to actually make it to study what I want. I've always known what I wanted to do since I was probably eight. I want to study neuro engineering.

Back in my senior year, I hadn't applied to any universities, scholarships. I felt like I was a little bit behind. And so the opportunity of going to the Air Force, it shows up my engineering teacher. He is an AirForce veteran. He was there for 14 years and he showed me the experience that he lived. Honestly, it was so convincing. I got convinced because they really have great benefits. They actually do have great benefits, paid education. Also the citizenship was also pushing me a bit onto that because I wanted to be a citizen to actually get my dad as a resident as well. The fact that I was going to be traveling that was convincing as well. And I talked to my parents. They were really happy about it. A few days after we went to the recruiter's office, I was kind of going in there already, but I took a trip back to my home country back in Colombia. I was there for probably a month, right after graduation. I actually took that time as a reflection time. When I came back, I was already doubting, if that's what I really wanted. I mean, I could not enlist immediately because I had to wait for my braces to be taken off.

Camila: As soon as I got back from Colombia, I started working and I started taking an EMT course, a paramedics course with the idea that I was actually going in the Air Force because that was going to guarantee a medical job for me. The more that I saw, how my life was going...And it was the more that I was convinced that I did not... The Air Force was not the type of life that I wanted to be in.

First of all, my family, I am a family person. I love my family and I cannot be apart from them. If I would like to travel, I feel like I could do it some other time on vacations or something like that. But not as a living. That also was a recent number two, actually, it's a bit uncertain how you're going to be living and, and the fact that you can be moving from place to place. It's just not, not my thing.

Another reason I would say is because with them, I would be studying my career, what I want to study, but I feel I can achieve more than that being outside than being inside, with a higher salary, in a better place, in a better situation. My parents they were really supportive the whole time. They took me to the exams. They took me to everything. So the moment that I was going to tell them, it was bit hard. I kept like replacing the day that I was going to talk to them for weeks, not for weeks, but for days. To my dad, I had to talk over the phone. He's still, he is living in Dallas with my mom. It was a face to face kind of thing. It was a bit harsh. In their mindset they keep saying that I'm losing a big opportunity.

They still think that it's not because of my own decisions, but for what surrounds me let's say work, friends. They even tried to settle an appointment with a recruiter without my knowledge. In a hypothetical case , if I was talking with my parents over the phone, I would probably tell them to understand me, that I'm actually going through a process and I'm just 19 and I'm still growing. I'm still trying to get into the adulthood way of living, because I have my things to do. I have to study and I still have to work to achieve what I want, but with their pressure, it's just too much. I just can't, if they're not supporting what I'm doing right now.

Lantigua: Man, those conversations with Camila and her family could not have been easy. I mean, she's trying to figure out what's best for her. She's trying to get their buy-in. There's pressure. There's expectations. There's anxiety. So much to navigate in high school, but I'm sure as many of us know when it comes to college and career plans, first gens want to involve our parents and we want to bring them along in our decision making process, but it's not always easy. Ultimately, we just want them to support what we believe is right for ourselves. So how can we do that? How can we keep them in the know, allow them to feel like they're participating? How can we get them to support what we know is the right path for us? You know, I called in an expert for this one. Definitely.

Yasmin Navarro:

My name is Yasmin Navarro. I am a college advisor at a school in the Bay Area. We're really diverse. We have approximately 3,200 students and we've got tons of programs that we have a multi-language program for students that are new to United States. We have an IB program and we have smaller schools that we divide our 3,200 students into so that they feel a little bit more held by our large staff as well.

Lantigua: Did anything stand out to you as you listened to Camila's story?

Navarro: Yeah. Tons of things stood out to me, honestly. The language she uses to describe being convinced to join Armed Forces. The feelings of... I'm not sure, I don't want to put words to her experience, but there were feelings of almost maybe rejection or being not heard by her family feeling, behind in the whole college process at senior year. So all these things stood out while listening.

Lantigua: So is this the type of conversation you have with students that you counsel?

Navarro: Yes. Often. The amount of emails that I get from students at the beginning of senior year saying, I think I'm really behind. I haven't started yet. I don't know what I'm doing. Or I'm a first generation college student. Am I behind? Am I too late? And just telling students, you are not too late, that it's now you're never behind everybody's on their own path. We will all have the opportunity to find our way and you don't need to have the same path that other people have. It's okay to take some time and kind of understand what it is that you want.

Lantigua: Do you find that there's a difference between first gen students versus other generational students in what they perceive as their readiness or even what they perceive as their likelihood of going and getting into college?

Navarro: Yes, that is definitely something that I notice within my students and particularly our first gen students. I think they perceive, or they feel as if they're missing something, even if they've had the same curriculum as other students. Students speak and they talk to each other and they identify that some students have college advisors outside of school and some students can afford resources that are not necessarily available to everyone. Right now, my caseload I'm one college advisor for 400 students.

Lantigua: Whoa. How do you manage that?

Navarro: A lot of it is just making sure that I've got my students who I identify as students who are first gen. I'm kind of building these support words or these systems, because as a first gen student myself, I didn't feel supported by my college counselor in high school.

Lantigua: First of all, when did you figure out that you were not being properly supported, and then how did you go about remedying that?

Navarro: So it was around probably sophomore or junior year in high school where I was in a gifted and talented program in Houston, Texas, where I would get bused to my school. It was known as a magnet school. So I remember going to my college counselor and knocking on her door and saying, "Hey, I'm thinking about applying to the school called Amherst. And I'm thinking about applying to these other schools." And I just remember my college counselor, not even looking up for her paper and just saying, "Yeah, I don't know if that's a school for you."

Lantigua: Whoa.

Navarro: And I was crushed and I was also... I was crushed and I was like, you know what? You don't know me. You literally do not even know who I am. I've never met you. And I decided, well, I'm going to try it. And so I applied, I also supported several of my friends through the college process, edited their essays. And then I started this whole advising process when I was a teacher. And at some point I was feeling so burnt out teaching and said, wait, what are the common threads? It's always back to college advising and how excited and passionate I am about supporting students and finding whatever choice they want. It's not about what I think is best for them, but supporting them and finding different options and knowing how many options are available. There's dozens of them!

Lantigua: Okay. But I need to know, did you get into Amherst?

Navarro: I did.

Lantigua: Yes!

Navarro: It was my first choice.

Lantigua: Oh my God. I love the story so much. I have a very similar story and I would try and tell it in 30 seconds, which is that I had an older cousin who I went to high school with and she was a star. She was in honors class like me. She was one year ahead. She got into Wellesley and I was like, well, if Mabel could in go to Wellesley, I can go to Wellesley. And I applied, got into Wellesley. And then my college advisor said, I don't know if you can hack it at Wellesley. And I never went,

Navarro: Oh, Juleyka.

Lantigua: I know.

Navarro: It's heartbreaking.

Lantigua: One person. But I ended up at exactly the right school for me. And I'm really glad, but I still carry that with me.

Navarro: Yeah.

Lantigua: Right. That I let someone who had no say in the admissions process after the college had admitted me.

Navarro: Yeah.

Lantigua: Derail me and thank you for sharing that story because I think people need to hear this. Need to understand that you can not let someone else determine what is possible for you. You are the only one who can determine that.

Lantigua: All right. Let's go back to Camila's story because there's a bunch of stuff in Camila's story that really interests me.

Navarro: Yeah.

Lantigua: One of the things that emerged for me was this notion that our immigrant parents want financial security above all for their kids, right. It comes up all the time. And so, one of the things that the parents thought, an air force career would provide for her would be financial and career security. Can you talk to me a little bit about at the intersection of first gens, immigrant parents and the probability and possibility of college, what is the pressure that students are under from parents and how do you help them navigate that?

Navarro: It's like an Instapot. It is intense.

Lantigua: Please say more.

Navarro: So I don't know if you've ever had an Instapot and if you're not very familiar in using them, they can just blow up and you end up with potato on the ceiling. Our students are under so much pressure to not just be true to themselves, but also to support their family and to whether that's financial support, whether it's stability and being present in order to support with other family members, our students are just under so much pressure and trying to find a balance of being able to kind of work with them, to express what it is that they want, or even find what it is that they want. It's like a lot of searching, a lot of reflection. I sometimes have students telling me, "my parents want me to do this" and I ask, "what do you want to do?" And they say, "I actually don't know yet."

Lantigua: So what do you... When students come to you and they're feeling all this pressure from parents, what do you advise them to say to their parents to help explain what is actually happening in the college application process and in the college selection process?

Navarro: Yeah, that's a great question. So sometimes what we do is the first thing we do is with our juniors, we start them with meetings for juniors and then meetings for parents to kind of manage expectations of like, this is what's happening at this

timeline. We tell parents, "Hey, this is really a process for them." And to kind of understand that it is a self discovery and understand that it's going to take a while. So sometimes it's about finding like, "oh, I actually don't like living in a city" or "I think I feel more comfortable living in a rural area," or "I actually don't know, but I do know that I want schools that provide good financial aid" or "I'll need some merit scholarships," or "I'm going to need this, or based on my family's financial situation." So we actually advise that parents and students sit down and really talk about what are the things that want for each other or what they want for this process.

Navarro: So that's really the first space. Like a student can say, I want to leave the state. And that's usually when you start to hear, well actually we want you to stay home or we want you to stay in the state or we want you to consider going to community college first because of finances. And we are the amount of parents or the amount of students that come to me and say, my parents won't tell me anything about our finances.

Lantigua: Whew. Let's talk about it.

Navarro: Yeah.

Lantigua: Please let's talk about it.

Navarro: And it can be a hard conversation because sometimes there's a lot of shame or a lot protectiveness over that information.

Lantigua: That financial point is pivotal. And in many instances, it completely derails some students because parents simply will not share that information.

Navarro: Yeah.

Lantigua: So I really, really want to emphasize how important it is that parents disclose that information in a way that can be helpful and that doesn't hamper the students.

So I want to ask you about another really important thing that came up in coming last story, which is that initially joining the Air Force seemed to her like a clear pathway to citizenship. And for the average college applicant, that's not an issue. They were probably born in the United States, but more and more, it is an issue. So when you come across this, if you've come across it, how do you advise students? If they're thinking, "well, I could get my education and I could get my citizenship." How do you get them to really think through the decision?

Navarro: I think the way that Camila did it was just absolutely beautifully. Taking that time to reflect. I don't... Something that struck me that connects to this is how, when she had the opportunity to take time away. And I think she mentioned like I was ready. I was already ready to enlist right then and there, but they, and they were ready to take me, but I had to take my braces off. That just reminds me of that time

pressure, that time crunch, that feels like this is an opportunity that you have to take right now, or it's not going to happen.

Navarro: If I can share a little bit about my personal background, I have an older brother who came to the United States when he was about 11 or 12 years old. And he, while in high school joined ROTC and at the age of 17, he told my mom that he was going to be joining the Marines. He said, mom, if you don't let me go at the age of 17 and sign the papers, I'm going to go at 18 and I'm never coming back.

Lantigua: Wow.

Navarro: Yeah. And she signed the papers and he was undocumented at the time and spent 20 years in the military.

Lantigua: Wow. That's incredible. I mean, that's a career, that's a Military career.

Navarro: Yeah. He built out a career, but there was that pressure and that recruiting and that ROTC that's in most schools. And that is where I would advise students to just really say, "You can join the military now, you can join the military in five years, you can join the military in 10 years. Take your time. Really process this because you're, these are the risks and the benefits that you're getting from it. Give yourself some time."

Lantigua: Yeah, absolutely. All right. My final question to you is for first gen students listening and for their parents, to ease the pressure and the fear that, oh, we're behind. What can people start doing sophomore year, junior year, as they're thinking about getting their student ready for college?

Navarro: I think the first thing to do is understand the graduation requirements that are within your state. So for example, there could be a graduation requirement for the school that you're in and there could still be state requirements to go to state school. So that would be my one thing. And start with your summers, like identifying one or two things that you want to do outside of home to kind of cultivate who you are as a person and what brings you passion. So what are the things that you want to study? What are the things that bring you joy that like you enjoy learning about to then start identifying whether there are careers that you could pursue in those fields. I also think that for our students, for first gen students, there's a lot of, be a doctor, be a lawyer, be this.

Lantigua: Yep. We want that label!

Navarro: Yeah. When there's just so many careers out there, there's just so much out there and you don't have to be pigeonholed or put in a box or identify like you have to be a lawyer. I remember mamá would tell me, you got to be a doctor. And dad would say, you got to be a lawyer. And I'd be like, you know what? I don't want to be either of those things. And honestly, I sometimes I feel like it's because who our

community tends to be in touch with, like we know of lawyers, we know of doctors, we know of teachers and counselors and yeah. So I think those would be my top things just kind of widen the scope of what the world looks like for you. Whether it's like picking up graphic novels and starting to look at who really designs all these graphic novels or what goes into making them. It's okay to have a summer job. And it's okay if those summer jobs end up kind of providing you connections to people that say, oh, hey, you'd be really good at this. Or you'd be really great at that.

Navarro: And then it's okay if you're like, "you know what? I really hated that, that was terrible." And that's just something that you can say, you know what that goes, and then no pile.

Lantigua: But then you could write about those experiences in your college essay.

Navarro: Yes.

Lantigua: Right.

Navarro: "Ah, the summer I spent up cleaning dung."

Lantigua: All right. I think that there's really no better way to end Yasmin. You're amazing. Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Navarro: Thank you for having me on.

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

Discuss your wants and needs. To help manage your parents' expectations. Start a conversation with them about what's important to you in your college search and what you want from your college experience.

Explore many career options. Take a summer job, sign up to volunteer. These small steps can help you experience the many career possibilities beyond traditional professions.

And remember, take your time when deciding what you want professionally or otherwise. Don't let anyone else rush or derail you. You are on your own path and on your own timeline.

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Lantigua:       Bye everybody. Same place next week.

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