



Orange Is the New Black's Diane Guerrero is Fearless and She Knows It

A rising star in Netflix's Orange is the New Black as Maritza Ramos, Lina in Jane the Virgin, and Sofia in Superior Donuts, Diane Guerrero embodies quintessential Latina powers. She's grounded in her strong family roots but still shaped by the trauma that separated them apart when she was a teenager. Somehow she harnessed the loss and pain into unmatched self-determination and drive. She opens up in this intimate convo with Alicia.

Alicia

Menendez: Hello there. Welcome back to Latina to Latina.

You probably know Diane Guerrero for her roles on Orange is the New Black, Jane the Virgin, and Superior Donuts. She's an incredible and compelling actor. But the most captivating story Diane tells is her own. When she was just 14 years old, her parents and older brother were deported to Colombia, leaving Diane to figure out how to make a life for herself in the US. Coordinating our schedules so I could fly out to LA took a minute but it was so worth it to have the type of conversation she and I had.

Where are you coming from?

Diane: I'm coming from home right now. I'm sort of a bit frazzled because I'm packing. I'm going to, I'm going away for vacation for a couple of days and then I'm gonna go see my family in Colombia for when is this coming out? Because I'm surprising them.

Menendez: Don't worry, they'll be surprised.

Guerrero: Okay, good, good, good. Yeah, so I'm going to spend some time there and so that's another thing I'm like, I'm just, I'm preparing to go see my family and stuff.

Menendez: Because you don't get to see them very often.

Guerrero: No, I don't see them very often and so like every time I do it's just like, it's a big deal. And so, um, it's all good though because last year we spent some time, um, in June and I was there for like a couple, I was there for like a month and we had a blast. And so

Menendez: Where in Colombia are they?

Guerrero: Cali. Which is, well they're actually in Palmira, which is close to Cali, like 30 minutes from Cali, but nobody when you say buy Palmira, and nobody knows what I mean. So I have to just have to say what's closest to the airport. Um, but yeah, so I'm excited. I'm excited for that. And I've had a, I've had a busy week,

Menendez: Really busy week. Big announcements.

Guerrero: Yes. Um, I, I just booked a new role on a for a DC universe a show called Doom Patrol and I'm really excited for that. I'm playing a character called Crazy Jane who has 64 different personalities and with each personality comes a different superpower. And it's just like a band of weirdos and the world that they live in is really interesting and just very weird. It's very weird comic and I'm, and they're all like, they all have like mental health issues, especially her. Obviously she has split personality disorder and so I just think it's going to be so interesting to do and I'm, I'm just, I'm stoked.

Menendez: How do you prepare a role like that?

Guerrero: Um, you just like walk around and talking to yourself and then having different voices and using different voices. How do you prepare?

I'm just reading as much material as I can. Um, I'll just ordered like all of the comic books. I'm like, uh, a series, a series of comic books from, from that, from Doom Patrol. And then I'm reading this book that the character is based on, I'm that crazy. Jane is based on, which is a book called Rabbit. I work with, um, I have a friend who's a really great acting coach and I worked with him on the project, you know, to book it and then, you know, you learn as you go, you got to get in there, you get a vibe everything out. Um,

Menendez: Can you tell him the room now if it's working or if it's not working?

Guerrero: What do you mean?

Menendez: Like when you go into an audition, do you have times where like that's just not overshoot happening?

Guerrero: Oh, for sure. I have times where I'm walking, I'm like, I'm not ready for this. But sometimes you just have to. Sometimes you, you get, you can get mixed up because sometimes you think you're not right for something, but that's just like that little voice in your head saying you're not good enough. And then sometimes you're really like, I don't really like this and you know, it's not really me, I don't think. Or I think somebody else would be better for this role and that's okay. But it's also good to just give yourself the opportunity. But yeah, sometimes when you, even when you think you're right for something, you're like, wow, that really, this is not.

Menendez: I think that's applicable even for those of us are not actors.

Guerrero: Sure.

Menendez: Where it's like sometimes in a job interview you're like, "Oh, I see what you're looking for and I am not the right person.

Guerrero: You will find someone perfect. I'm sure.

Menendez: Can you give me a sense of what your day to day is like? Because you have, like, 17 jobs.

Guerrero: I know, right? Why did I do that to myself? I hate being ... I'm so busy

Menendez: Because that's a choice.

Guerrero: It's a choice. You choose to do this. Well I have obviously the responsibility of booking a show. Like if I'm not on a show, you know, where I'm like, okay, I'm a series reg and I have, I

have to be somewhere everyday like that is actually easier for your schedule because then you can just schedule everything around your, this job that you have, that is the most important thing in your life because that's what you are. You're an actor and I'm an actor. So that's always my focus is I need an acting job. And so once that is taken care of, everything else just flows. But you all, you know, I have um, the book that I do a lot of work with. And I also work with different organizations and I'm just speaking about issues that matter to me. But how do I handle it?

I try to schedule, I try to just, you know, make sure I schedule everything in my calendar. Sometimes that doesn't go according to plan because you also need time for yourself and self care. So I always have like a dentist appointment and we were talking about we have like a debt. I like after this, I'm trying to rush to go get my retainer tightened. And like right now is the only slot that I have to do that. And I need a facial because you know, you have to, you have to take care of yourself in that way and I want to do that. But that's all work too. So you have to schedule that in, in your everyday aside from having like meetings that may or may not go somewhere and you know, it's all opportunity.

Menendez: Yep.

Guerrero: And so I'm, I'm all about that. I'm all about giving myself the opportunity and knowing, um, and, and trying, trying things out. Sometimes you get involved in a project and you figure out that it's not for you and then somebody else will come in and like I said, like we said, we'll be the right person for the job.

Menendez: Can we talk about the dentist thing for a second? Because I really need you to tell everyone what you told me before we started recording

Guerrero: That I eat too much sour candy and I got cavities?

Menendez: No, about your dentist, malpractice from your youth.

Guerrero: Oh my God. Yes. I'm so, I was on, I was a kid and I mean, I, I guess my family, my family hasn't had the greatest teeth. Like my, I always thought my mom always had issues with her teeth. I mean I always ate a lot of candy just even now and as a kid, so that was probably it.

So when I was a kid, uh, I had to have a tooth pulled out. And I went to the dentist and they pulled the wrong tooth out. So they went to my mother and they go, so we have to reset, we have to bring you back. And My mother's like, why? And they go, well, we pulled the wrong tooth out. My mom was like, what are we in Columbia? You know, she was like so upset. Of course we had to come back and pull out the tooth and I had to go through that freaking pain all over again. And I mean I think it's because we were, we had Medicaid or what does that Matt. Oh, I was. So I was in Massachusetts. I'm from Massachusetts, so it was like MassHealth. So like, yeah, free care. And so when you have that, it's like you can't really complain. There's like nothing you can say.

Menendez: That story is like too real.

Guerrero: Oh yeah.

Menendez: I mean, do you, do you look back on your childhood? Not having a lot of means and like are there things that now stick out to you were like, oh, that, that's not necessarily normal?

Guerrero: I'm sure. I mean, um, yeah, there was a lot of things that were like, I mean, what, what is normal?

Menendez: Fair.

Guerrero: I think that now I just, I just realized things that weren't that easy. Like it wasn't easy if you were having trouble in school. Like we didn't have money for a tutor. So like those kinds of things I started seeing like, oh wait, what is stability and what is wealth? Well, to me that means being able to provide certain help, um, when you really need it. It's not about really sure taking vacations are nice, having a nice car, having a nice house, buying clothes. Those things are nice, but those are extras with stability is being able to get you the help that you need so that you can read better, so that you can eat so that you know, your math skills improve those kinds of things that are really shaping your brain and that are going to make and like health care, right?

Those type of things are the things that I'm really noticing now that we were missing or, you know, being able to say, hey mom, I liked singing and for her to, you know, put you in singing lessons or with a private tutor. That is privilege, that is wealth, really. And so instead for us, I had to really do my own little research at school and see what kind of free programs were available. And now those programs are less and less for people. And that's what really, um, that's what really scares me and what really makes me sad and why I'm determined to talk about my experience wherever I go. About where I grew up, what are the things that worked, what are the things I'm grateful for. Because I'm grateful for a good community. I'm grateful for a city that provided an art school that I could go to, that there were at least these resources that I could go after, like right now, there's less and less money for arts education. Some. One of the things that really saved me I think.

Ad

Menendez: I was reading the beginning of your new young adult book, *My Family Divided*. And it starts with you sort of running out the door, so excited to go to school. So excited to saying--and part of what I love is how sassy you are because that, I mean, who wasn't at that age?

Guerrero: Everybody, everybody was.

Menendez: But then you come home and things aren't the way you left them. Um, you know, the book opens with a day your, your parents were taken in by ICE, later deported. Do you have guilt about the fact that you were so Sassy as you walked out the door that day?

Guerrero: Well, yeah, of course, that's always in my mind and I usually tell the story like that. I start with, my mom wanted me to have a healthy breakfast and I was nasty back. And I said, "I don't know, I'm going to be late to school and I care about school. So leave me alone."

That morning I just thought instead of thinking and saying, oh my gosh, my mom's being sweet and she wants me to eat. "Mom, I really can't eat. I already got to go. I'm sorry. Let me take this banana instead." I took it so far as to think, "Mom, you don't care about my education and I'm pissed off and I'm just going to go." And, you know, I see her in the door holding the plate of food. Um, and uh, and I'm just leaving in a huff. And I'm just so, I'm heartbroken and I see that she's so sad and I hurt her feelings. And so I went about my day and I, that's all I could think about was that I was mean to my mother. And of course that was the day that my nightmare came to life, which is, I came home after having a terrible moment with my mother. All I wanted to do was apologize to her. And I get home and she's gone and you know, a lot. I'm sure a lot of people have, there's a lot of people have fights with their parents and then their parents actually die. Like there's crazy stories like that and I know that that can be heartbreaking, but it's sorta the same thing, right? My family unit sort of died. And my hopes and dreams for my family kind of died at that moment. Well, the old ones, right? You make new ones eventually. But I didn't know that at the time.

Menendez: So in that moment. Did you process what had happened? I mean, who told you what had actually happened?

Guerrero: When I got home my door was open, you know, I went in, my mother's food was like for that she was making for dinner was like started. So like beans, rice, plantation cut. I was like, she's of course making my favorite meal. So annoying. And then I walked in and I go, oh my gosh, something's wrong. And so of course the neighbor came in and said, I'm so sorry to tell you, but immigration came and took your parents. And it was this thing where I could not believe that it was like, wait, both my parents because I was like, I figured, okay, my mom but not my dad. And so that was a moment where I felt really alone. And as a Catholic girl, um, you know, for me it was like, oh, this happened because I was bad, because I did this to my, I deserve this and I'm guilty for this. Can you imagine like a kid just being like, this is my fault because I was mean to my mom? But that's just the way you grow up. It's like if you do anything, it's God's watching you and he's going to punish you and things will, you'll regret it because. He'll take something away from you. That on top of like, you know, you're mad at your parents for not having their, their, you know, their documentation in order. You have no idea what the immigration system is in this country. You are not really well prepared and you don't know your history. Nobody in the country is talking about this stuff. I don't have neighbors, I don't have kids who are like, Hey, I'm going through this too.

Menendez: It also struck me, um, I've been reading what they call emergency preparedness forms, which is what they recommend the people are undocumented fill out so that if someone else needs to take care of their child's, now that I'm a mom, I look at it really differently where it's like they're just things I know about my kid that nobody else knows, like what she was allergic to and what her favorite song is to be sung at night. And like when you start thinking about like, what if this were my kid and I had to hand her over to somebody else, it becomes really real to you what that must mean, not just to the kid but to a parent.

Guerrero: Right.

Menendez: So who raised you?

Guerrero: Who raised me? My parents stayed until I was 14 and from that moment, from that moment the community did. And uh, my friend's parents, her mother took me in. I spent about a year and a half with them and then I went and I stayed with another family after that. And my school did, I let my art school know what was going on and my principal and my music teacher were very involved. I mean that involved in the, in the fact that they're like, are you coming to school? You're in school. Okay, we take care of you here. We check in with you occasionally. Hey, hi. How are you doing? Not to say that they were making house calls because it wasn't like that. I had a job and so that also became my family. You know, anybody who I worked with my friends.

Menendez: And at any point did your parents say just come to Columbia?

Guerrero: My mother, yes. My mother wanted me to come to Columbia and I, I had just made it very clear that I had goals that I wanted to achieve and that I had to, I had to do them in the States. My parents didn't have money and usually in a place like Columbia, like educate, a good education for someone like me who speaks English, who needs to continue her, her career in English or speak in, in, in this language, it costs money, right? And to go to like the top schools in Columbia that were all bilingual schools, which would, I would, I would have needed. We wouldn't have been able to afford that. And so it just made sense for me to stay. I mean, I was going to an art school, I was pursuing my passions and I said, this is free. No one's scrambling for money. I'm going to work it out on my own. And all I need is a place to stay. So my friends were offering that and I said to my parents, as soon as I get to college, which, which will be in three years, I'll figure it out.

Menendez: And you did.

Guerrero: And I did.

Menendez: We talk a lot, especially with the family separation crisis that's happening in the US, about the long-term consequences of this trauma on children. I mean, for you as a 32 year old woman-

Guerrero: Love you. Thirty two...shshshs

Menendez: it's been almost 20 years. I mean, how does this still affect you?

Guerrero: I'm still traumatized by it. Um, it's not something that you can get over as easily. This is a lifelong trauma that you will always have and you just have to work through it. You know, I, I have issues with, I've had issues with relationships and I mean who doesn't, right? But like when, when you're a child of trauma, um, it's almost, it's just intensified, right? So you have a lot of issues with yourself, you have issues with your parents and your family. And it just seems like it's so hard to really hold on to something and have that be.

I don't want to say perfect and I've taught myself not to say the word perfect because it's like, I know perfection doesn't exist, but there is just, nothing is easy, nothing is easy. It hasn't been easy and everything is just so much hard work. I want to retreat sometimes. I want to just get under my covers and just not get out of bed. And I know this is the case for a lot of people, which is why people who have trauma is so important for them to seek mental health. And why we need to acknowledge that that family separation is not just, Oh, we're just going to take these people who are half human, send them off. We never hear from them again and their kids, well we don't know. It's not right. It's not right. We have to understand that there's more science behind it. And then there are people behind it.

Menendez: You were, apparently, though hiding this all really well for a very long time.

Guerrero: Oh yeah.

Menendez: I mean, were you, were you voted most happy? Go lucky, happy go lucky and looks so. Were people not paying attention or were you already a terrific actor?

Guerrero: I was already a terrific actor. No, I was just, first of all, I am a happy person. Um, but when you are trying to mask something so difficult, like you don't have any parents here because of this issue that you barely understand, but you are feeling sad all the time. You know, you learn to sort of put a pep in your step and just shake it off. And even when things. I mean, I was bleeding. It was so sensitive as a kid, because...

Menendez: Are you a Cancer or a Leo?

Guerrero: I'm a Cancer.

Menendez: There you go.

Guerrero: Yeah, I know. And of course my sign is cancer. And so that, that's why I'm obviously wicked a sensitive, but I was even more sensitive. I thought I was worth worthless, you know, I mean, I would wake up and say, I have no parents. I'm a loser, I'm and I'm not talented even though this is all I want and I, I'm not smart enough. This is all very hard for me. I'm tired, I'm hungry. There's so many things I want. I'm a loser. But I also am a loser with a lot pride and there was no way that I could go to school and show people this. And so even when like a

simple argument between a friend and I or a boy didn't like me or somebody made fun of me or I would take it so personally that my first instinct was to be upset and sad and say, hey, you hurt my feelings. But instead I would say nothing's wrong. Everything's okay. I'm super strong and my parents weren't deported and I'm super happy and I have no problems. Imagine if you continue bottling this up for so long, you know, it's gonna come out at some point. And it did, of course, later on.

Menendez: So let's talk about how that supposed loser becomes a really big winner. Because you then go to college, you're, you're on this path that's not an acting path. In fact, like at 24, all of a sudden you decide, which I think some people would consider late.

Guerrero: It is late. I thought it was late too.

Menendez: We're going to go to law school. I mean, you're going to pursue more of a policy activism career. How do you make that left turn into acting?

Guerrero: I've always been interested in social justice and how, I mean, believe me, I tried different ways where I would fit in because and when I say fit in is like where I could excel in. I just found out I had learning disabilities when I got to college.

Menendez: What type of learning disabilities?

Guerrero: Like dyslexia and in both math and in reading.

Menendez: Wow.

Guerrero: So I have these disabilities I didn't know about, so, you know, I get to college and I'm like, everything is super hard. Everything is like, I mean, you know, I didn't know I needed more time on tests. I didn't know that you could do that, that, that can happen.

Menendez: Some major challenges.

Guerrero: You know, there are some challenges. And so I was trying to figure out where I would fit in. And so at this point I'm not doing the arts anymore because I'm thinking that's a pipe dream. That's dumb. You don't have a family. There's no way that you can become an actor. Actors, you know, actors can be actors because they don't have to-

Menendez: Pay their bills.

Guerrero: Exactly, pay their bills.

Menendez: And their parents'.

Guerrero: And their parents' bills. Exactly. So I was like, okay, that's gone. But I still had an interest in social justice and so I was trying to figure out a way where I can put those passions together and I, I thought it was going to be like a news reporter at some point or something. I want it to be on TV and tell you. So I dunno. I was trying to figure it out. Then at one point I thought I was going to be a diplomat. Then at one point I thought I was going to be a paralegal and a lawyer. So what brought me here was that I was just, I got to the point where I was too damn depressed to like, do anything else that made me unhappy. And so I started seeing a therapist who suggested that I go back. She was like, what are you really want to do? What do you really want to do with your life? And I was like, well, I want to be you. I want to help my community. And how do you want to do that? Well, I'm just, I'm not good at anything else. I'm not going to pass the bar, I don't know what I'm going to do. What do you really want to do?

I want to be an actor. Fuck! Okay. So that's, that. There, that is so different from what you just told me. I'm like, well, this is what I really want to do. But it's scary to say it. I can't say it out loud. She was like, just start taking acting classes and just see where that goes. You don't just don't have any expectations. Just take the class and see how that makes you feel. And I started doing it and it did. It gave me new purpose. It was challenging, but something that I could handle, something that I could actually put my skills to my ability to empathize and my ability to, uh, I guess access feelings that I was feeling all the time.

And, and I had a sense of humor and I really wanted to use that. You know, every time I would work at a law office, you know, I'd be like, "Hey, how you doing John? How are you doing? Hey Brent," you know? Yeah, exactly. "Hey, this person called."

Menendez: So then when you read, did you read for Maritza?

Guerrero: I say yes. So, um, so I was in Boston and I was just like auditioning. I mean who auditions in Boston? But you get what you can, you know, you gotta start somewhere, honey. Um, so I was just there and I was like, I was auditioning for like random stuff, like my friends had music videos that they were doing and like, you know, scary movies in their backyard. And it was just like literally just taking advantage of every single thing. And I was like, I have to wet my feet before I go into like a real audition room.

And then I started, I started, um, I auditioned for this one thing, for this one show and I got it. It was like literally driving over a dead person, this show called Body of Proof. And I was like, that's all I needed for me to be like, I'm going to a star. You know, I was like, oh, that's it. I got this role, I could fall asleep at the wheel believable. It's believable enough to, you know, fall asleep at the wheel and run over a dead guy and then not know what was going on. And I got that role. And so I'm like, imagine the possibilities? And that's who I am. Like all I need is a taste of success to know that they're, that they're, that there can be open doors, that I can open doors as small or large as it is, you know. And so, and then I just moved to New York and I, and I started auditioning. I started working at, um, at Susan Batson Studios, which is great. And I was, I met finally, I met like a big community of actors and I'm, well, I already had met a community of actors too in Boston who were very supportive. And I think that's been the thing really, is that all of my life I have been able to show some vulnerability that has, that has allowed for others to help me. And I have been able to accept help even though there were times where it was hard.

Menendez: How, though, in those early days of Orange did you make ends meet?

Guerrero: Oh, ... I worked at a bar, man. Yeah. That was the way to do it. Yeah. You got to work at bars. I'm not, you, you don't have to, but if you have like no money and you don't have time to be on in a nine-to-five during the day, which is when you have to audition. Yeah. You got to work at night. So you know, you're in New York, everybody's a bartender, everybody's, you know, a bottle service person. And it was great. I worked at night and then I would audition during the day and that's how, that's how it would make it. I mean, believe me, it was, it was like by the skin of my teeth. I was just working at night and in Orange actually I read for the part, I didn't, I didn't know what Orange was, but I was excited to, to, to audition, obviously. I didn't get many auditions when you're starting out. That's another thing when you're starting out, you can't even get in the room, you know, you cannot even get into the room. So this was something my manager had found for me and I went in and I just, I just decided I was just going to try to just be.

Menendez: And did you know it in the room? Were you, like, this is it?

Guerrero: No, I had no idea. No, I did it and I let. That was, I did leave happy as hell out of that audition and I'll tell you why, it's because I left it at the door. I left it at the door and I already had

started, like sort of, um, practicing this is that every time I would go to an audition, you have sides with you, the material. And so I would like, I would do the audition whether I did well or not so good or who knows, I would throw those sides away. As soon as I walked out of the room, I throw the sides away and I'd be like, this is done. I'm done with this. If they call me again, great. If they don't, that's fine. That this is how I'm going to survive this whole rejection process because the rejection is so real that it hurts. And, and if you hold onto these things, it's hard for you to be ready for the next opportunity because this business is just so fast. And so yeah, I, I felt really good leaving out of there. I called my dad. I was like, Dad, I think I did well. He's like, Oh, do you think you're going to get it? I'm like, no, I don't think so, but I think I really, you know, I had a good time in there. And I went home and then like literally like two months, I think it was like a month later you're like called me.

Menendez: And then you get Jane.

Guerrero: Yeah.

Menendez: And you get Superior Donuts. I mean it feels like then the ball really starts rolling.

Guerrero: Sure, sure. And Orange especially, it was just like a huge deal. Because of the stories that we're telling and because it was a show with all of these amazing women who so many people could relate to. I mean, look, if you couldn't relate to me, you could relate to another girl. And, and, and it went on and on and on. And so women were so hungry for that. And also how Netflix was being watched. I mean this was so new binge watching that, like we started all of that, like House of Cards. Orange is the New Black.

Menendez: I feel like this is going to be like Al Gore invented the Internet.

Guerrero: No, no, this is not actually saying I invented Netflix is what I'm saying. Well look, we were watching was already being done. However original content like that really wasn't. And when we all got, like you'll talk to anybody on Orange, everybody will tell you, oh we thought it was a web series. That's what I thought, which and web series are killing it. And they have. And so-

Menendez: It was not a web series.

Guerrero: No it wasn't. But I'm telling you that was a very new way to, to, to watch content. And so we, that was a way that people were able to see me.

Menendez: Let's get you to the dentist.

Guerrero: Thank you so much. I have a cavity.

Menendez: As she grabs her candy.

Guerrero: As I grab a Sour Punch Straw. Listen, thank you so much.

Menendez: Thank you.

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