



How Carmen Perez Became a Forward-Thinker

The President and CEO of The Gathering for Justice and Co-Chair of the Women's March shares an alternate vision of a carceral society, describes the occasional "messiness" of organizing, and reflects on the life-changing loss that shapes her pursuit of justice and of joy.

Alicia Menendez: How do we reimagine our society as a place where we all feel safe? That question is at the heart of Carmen Perez's work as a civil rights activist, including roles as president and CEO of The Gathering for Justice movement to end racial inequities in the justice system and co-chair of the Women's March. Carmen shares the importance of learning from our elders, specifically the lessons she learned from more than 20 years working alongside Harry Belafonte, the life-changing loss that shapes her pursuit of justice and of joy and what happens when a person who prides herself on her strength learns to lean into her softness. Carmen, thank you for doing this.

Carmen Perez: Well, thank you for having me, Alicia. It's been quite some time, so I'm happy we're able to have a conversation today.

Menendez: Carmen, your sense of justice is what frames your entire life and your entire work, and so I think it's really important that we begin with the origin story of how that sense of justice was developed, which was not in a classroom though you would later go on to cultivate this sense in a classroom. It's really in your own life in one of the most trying moments of your life that this lesson is crystallized.

Perez: Absolutely. I grew up in a Chicano Mexican American family, and I grew up in Oxnard, which was right outside of Los Angeles, and we at a very early age learned how to navigate the things we were experiencing. Sexual trauma, domestic violence, alcoholism, gang violence, police surveillance. That was something that we learned very young. And luckily, I played basketball. I played ball from the age of five all the way to college. I ran track, played volleyball or showed up to volleyball games, I like to say, and played softball all year round. And so that kind of became my therapy. I remember my coach, I would come to practice experiencing something traumatic and my coach would be like, "Run it off, Perez." I just didn't know that the family that I loved and the family that I was a part of were generations involved in gangs or involved in incarceration. I had a brother, Carlos, who was just such a good guy and would get stopped by police just being profiled. And there was an incident that happened in my formative years. I was coming out of a basketball game and he gave me and all my little friends a ride. We were wearing our basketball uniforms and they happened to be red, the colors of the school, and we were stopped by police at gunpoint. And it wasn't until recently that I began to realize, wow, I've been impacted by

police violence. It wasn't anything that I thought was abnormal. It was the way of life in Oxnard, California. We always had police contact. There was a lot that we experienced, a lot that I witnessed. And I think all of that then manifested in itself when I lost my sister, Patricia. She was killed right before our birthdays.

Her and I were one day apart in two years. She's two years older than me. She was buried on my 17th birthday. And so from that moment as a little girl, I knew I wanted to change the world. It was so weird. Even though I had experienced all this trauma and didn't know it was trauma or experienced injustice, didn't know it was injustice, I used to say I wanted to change the world. And the catalyst for me stepping into that power was really when I lost Patricia.

When Patricia passed away, I felt like a piece of me died and I had to bury parts of me. I buried my art. I used to write poetry and dance hip hop and pretend I was Eazy-E and I used to love to rap, and I put that all away. I really felt like I buried my joy. I didn't want to live my life feeling like I could experience joy without her. But I remember thinking like I had life and I had to live life for her, and I had to live life because she didn't have it anymore. And so everything that I did was in memory of her.

Menendez: I want to put a pin in your personal story and ask about your theory of change. When you imagine justice in this country, what is that holistic vision of what the alternative imagination is?

Perez: For me, it's really about feeling safe. When I think about law enforcement and my husband, Jay Jordan, says this often, we don't have a public safety response system right now. We have a crime response system. So police respond to crime. They don't respond in a way that is safe for communities. And I believe that our communities actually could do better if they're well-resourced in order to have what they need to thrive. Quality education, quality healthcare, rec centers, all these different things is what really makes a thriving economic mobility jobs make a community thrive. When I think about the work that I try to spread in the world is not the absence of violence, but it's the presence of love and justice, right? Making sure that our communities aren't being harmed, that our people aren't being harmed, and that we actually value each other. And so for me, this fight around police accountability is now larger than just seeking justice for a family member or loved ones.

This fight for police accountability in this present moment in 2023 has evolved outside of the terms of abolition, outside of the terms of defund the police. In the Latino community, I'm always going to show up in solidarity with others. But in the Latino community, we've been facing police violence for over 200 years since the beginning of manifest destiny. And there's been different incidents where Mexicans, particularly Mexicans, because those were the first folks that were in this country before became the US, were targeted by policing kill. There's been a recorded 597 lynchings of Mexicans in this country from 1836 to 1919, which I don't think is an accurate number. When Latinos are being killed at the hands of police, they are miscategorized or they're not counted properly, they're categorized as Black, white or other. And my purpose right now, in 2023, I've done all these things.

I've organized a Women's March. I've worked on supporting Black Lives Matter and Free Meek Mill and take a knee with Colin Kaepernick. I've done some really big things, but I feel right now in this moment, I want to make sure that for the next

200 years, my people are properly categorized and that they are no longer othered in this conversation of police brutality and that we are not siloed into a one issue box like immigration. And so I want to expand our conversation so that people know that Latinos are not a monolith.

And so when I think about what I want to do and I want to create safe spaces for my community, hopefully one day I could retire and oversee a rec center the way my coach oversaw me and provide sports and music and dancing and rapping to kids. But I think right now, my eyes and my sight is set to make sure that Latinos are no longer othered in our criminal legal system. Because if you don't see us in the data, if you don't hear us in the narrative, then we're never going to be able to get the justice that our communities deserve.

Menendez: Carmen, you and I were supposed to speak several weeks ago and on the day that we were designated to speak, it was actually the day that Mr. Belafonte passed. And I want to know to me on the outside, you seem like the keeper of his legacy. It seems that the mantle, the baton, it is now handed to you. And I wonder both if that feels accurate and fair and what then it is that you intend to do with that privilege and that responsibility.

Perez: I've been ready to continue his legacy through the work that I do at The Gathering for Justice and everything that we've touched at the gathering, Mr. B sat with me. There was a time from 2005 to 2010, I was in California, and so our relationship was long distance. But in 2010, '11, I moved to New York City. I left everything so I could sit at the feet of this giant, and he taught me everything. He had conversations with me about his relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King and the strategies that they used in the 1960s and what his role was as an artist to ensure that the movement was funded and that Dr. King had access to presidents and had access to people that he had affiliations with. And he also mentioned to me and talked often about Eleanor Roosevelt, who he and Eleanor Roosevelt had commissioned a airplane from Kenya with Kenyan students who had Barack Obama Sr. on that plane to come to the United States and study here.

And so Mr. B shared stories, and every time I had a question around organizing or strategy, he was always there to give me a historical analysis of why we needed to do something. What I will say is that I miss our conversations, and I get emotional because there are times when you have no reference to what elders teach you. And so at the time, you don't really know how to digest that information until maybe they're trying to prepare you so that you won't have to go through something so horrendous the way in which they did, or they're trying to give you insight and sometimes you just got to go through it yourself.

And I've been organizing through a lot of madness, a lot of harm through the work is messy. And a lot of us come in initially because pain has brought us here, and we're able to transform our pain into gifts and share that with the world. However, I miss the times we were in the office, and so there was truly an intergenerational exchange between him and I. And on Friday nights, we would turn on the music and we'd dance and we'd laugh, and he would break out a 70-year-old bottle of rum and ask you to have just one swig with him. But the conversations were so deep and 11 years ago, seven years ago, I've always felt this connection to continue his work. The legacy will continue with me and the people that we work with at The Gathering for Justice and so many who he mentored. And I also feel a responsibility because there is no one like Mr. Belafonte.

Menendez: Carmen, you alluded to organizing being messy. Can you give me an example of a time when it was particularly messy?

Perez: Absolutely. I think when we were organizing the Women's March, usually when we organize around police brutality, we have very small circle of people that are the trusted few, and we organize with a set of demands. We know our goals, we know who our target is. We're grounded in the ideology of Dr. King, where we use the six principles of nonviolence. And we all, within our organizing community, within The Gathering and Justice League have all been trained on the same thing, how to organize King and nonviolence. So we operate from the same place that is our foundation. But when we organized a Women's March, we didn't know these women. We organized a Women's March in eight weeks, and we hadn't built relationships.

We hadn't slept on floors with them. We hadn't marched 250 miles like we did with other people, and we trusted too much. We gave everything that we had to the Women's March. And in return, there was a lot of ego that interfered with the larger purpose and mission and vision and what the Women's March could be. I think people saw celebrity, saw access, and wanted that. And I feel that ego, that narcissism, that idea of celebrity activism is what derailed what the purpose of the Women's March initially was.

Menendez: Carmen, do you consider yourself a radical?

Perez: I don't. I consider myself a forward thinker.

Menendez: What's the difference?

Perez: I don't even know, because again, that word radical has been imposed on me, and there's things that I believe in. I believe that we all deserve equity. I believe in trans lives and Black lives. I believe in our dreamers. For me, that just is a humanitarian is somebody who believes in the civil and human rights of an individual. And I feel like I'm a forward thinker in the sense of there's times when I think about things that my generation hasn't necessarily thought about. And it's the reason why I'm always in the presence of old people. My father was 53 years older than me, and I was always at his hip hearing about the Repatriation Act, hearing about the stories of the 1930s and the 1940s. And it was just natural that I would then sit at the feet of an elder for the last 20 years of his life that mirrored my childhood. And so I think I'm a forward thinker. I am not sure what the term radical is, but if that means that I believe in equity for all marginalized communities, then I may be a radical. But I haven't labeled myself that yet.

Menendez: Carmen, how did becoming a mom change the work?

Perez: I used to operate from a place of hardness in the past, not because I didn't have empathy, but because I grew up hard. And when I had children, my role became very soft. I cry. I cry for them. I want better for them. Before, I used to think about my purpose being, wanting to live life for my sister, and now I just feel like I want to cultivate the leadership of other people so that then I could be a mom to my children.

I used to think of this as a lifelong journey. I consider myself a long distance runner. I've been in this field for 30 years, and I will always use any gift that I have,

and I will share that with the world. But I want to be a mom. I want to be a mom to my children. I want to laugh with them. I want to play with them. Currently, right now, I do take them to places with me, but I think that at some point I need to pass the baton to somebody else and to many other people and really be a mom to DeMasio and to Jay Marcello.

Menendez: Here's my last question for you, Carmen, which is I'm going through a season of loss. I lost one of my best friends this past year. And so when you talk about your sister and about honoring your sister and living your life for your sister, I just wonder what that looks like 30 years out? How do you both hold space for honoring her legacy, this gift that you have been given, that you are alive and with us in the world, and the reality that you are not your sister and you can't live her life or live for her, and that overwhelming desire, I would imagine, or sort of instinct to allow that loss to define an entire life?

Perez: I used to get asked why I cared so much, right? Why do you care about the people in Flint? Why do you care about Black Lives Matter? And I used to say because my humanity did not allow me not to, but also because I wondered what would it have looked like to have had a fierce advocate for my sister when she was going through what she was going through. What would it look like if feminism accepted a young Chicana from Oxnard, California and made her part of that movement? And so I feel I've been trying to create these spaces that would've accepted myself and my sister. And I'm at a point in my life where I'm never going to bring her back. I have to live life for Carmen Perez. And for many years I have served and have been at the feet of these giants.

And at this moment, I just need to stand still within myself and I need to figure out what does it look like? Not waking up, responding to trauma, but to really living a life that is full of love, that is full of grace and gratitude. And I don't know the answer to that, but that's where I am at 46 years old, I'm wanting to take a pause and I need support in doing that. And we talk a lot about self-care, and what I know I need in this moment is community care. I also know in this moment that I need to be more selfish with my time and my time isn't just for me, but for the little two humans that I love seeing every single day. And I'm finding joy. I had said in the beginning is I used to feel really guilty about finding joy without living with my sister. And in actuality, I actually love having joy in my life, and I want that back.

Menendez: Carmen, thank you so much for doing this.

Perez: Thank you so much, Alicia, and thank you for having me on and so many memories that were brought up. Appreciate you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you, email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us @latinatolatina.

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