



## Why Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez Leads from the Heart

Fresh off a major legislative win with the passing of California's AB-5, forcing gig-economy giants like Uber and Lyft to classify drivers as employees, Gonzalez tells Alicia, "I was so blessed by not knowing my own limitations." The product of humble beginnings, she credits her hardworking mother and local Latina leaders--"daughters of farmworkers"--for teaching her that leadership means "providing the path by which other people can lead." She says for all of her accomplishments, it's the things that aren't on her resume—an unplanned pregnancy, her experience as a single mom, and struggles to achieve perfection—that shaped her most.

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Clip, Lorena Gonzalez:

*I felt like as a parent, much more so, what kind of world do I want to make for my child? What things do I want to change that I saw, or I saw that my mother did and my grandmother did, that I want my daughter not to have to face? And I think about that even today when we think about things like pay equity or sexual harassment at work. It's like how many generations are we going to keep going until we say enough?*

Alicia Menendez:

Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez has been called the California Democrat setting the national agenda. And with good reason. She's fought to increase the state's minimum wage, expand paid sick leave; and she also took on gig economy giants like Uber. A bill she sponsored just became a law, and it will reclassify contractors from rideshare drivers to exotic dancers as employees. In a word, that is huge. But those who have been following her political career are not surprised. Lorena came to the State Assembly with an agenda. She'd just ticking things off her to-do list.

Your mom organized her fellow nurses. Did you ever shadow her?

Gonzalez:

My mom was just a nurse. And sometimes I think it's been reported a little like she was an organizer. My mom was a nurse who wanted a union in her workplace. She wasn't a union organizer. She wanted a union in her workplace, and that's so typical of so many workers out there. And so most of my life, my mom was a single mom, and I just loved every minute I could spend with her, because she worked often 60 hours a week. And I, in high school, became a candy striper at the hospital just so I could see my mom during her breaks. It was volunteer work for me, but it was also an opportunity to see my mom and understand why a union was important to her. And it wasn't about pay. She actually would tell me that she thought she had a good job.

We were able to have a house that she purchased. There was always food on the table. We had everything we needed, not a lot of what we wanted. And even though she worked

so hard, she wasn't dissatisfied with the pay. We had health insurance, that was huge. Dental insurance. But she wanted a union in order that the workplace rules could be better for her patients.

What she was fighting for was staff patient ratios and the ability to have a break. Because of course, you know when you're working 10 or 12 hours a day, if you can't take a break and reconnect, you put your patients in danger. So, those were the things that mattered to her and ultimately that I learned a lot from.

Menendez: Looking back, what was your first act of leadership?

Gonzalez: It's strange. In a way, I don't know if I can identify that, because coming out of the labor movement, working in the labor movement, leadership often means that you're providing the path by which other people can lead, and so, empowering people to take that step forward.

And so, I think a lot of times when we are working on campaigns, the ability to provide leverage and opportunity for workers to take that step forward: those were my greatest times of leadership. You know, I'm much more comfortable in a collaborative format in thinking of leadership as being something that we do together, but that we provide a path for individuals to take leadership in their own lives. And that for me was what the labor movement was all about.

Menendez: You have a Bachelor's degree from Stanford, a Master's degree from Georgetown, and a JD from UCLA. How much of your work relies on that formal education and how much relies on life experience?

Gonzalez: It's a good mix. I was so blessed by not knowing my own limitations. And my mom played such a strong role in that. You know, I was coming home from high school, and my mom just told me, "You have to go to college." Whatever. And I worked really hard. But she said, "You have to go to college." And she had no idea. I could have said, I'm going to the local community college and then transferring to a state school and she'd be happy.

But Stanford had come to our school and done a presentation, and I remember looking at the brochure and thinking, "Oh my gosh, this looks like my dream of summer camp." Like this is where I want to go. And it had nothing to do with it being Stanford. It was just so beautiful. And so I came home and I told my mom. I said, "I'm going to go to Stanford." And my mom in her total belief in me, she said, "Okay. Good luck with that."

Like, you know, she'd never tell me "no," she'd never tell me that I was aiming too high; it was just like blissful ignorance in a sense. And I knew it would take hard work, and we worked really hard, and I got to Stanford, and it opened up a whole new world to me, because--I often joke, but this is indicative of kind of my life at Stanford--I used to call my mom every day after dinner and tell her what they served in the eating hall. Now to everybody else, it may just seem like food, right? But I grew up eating basically bean burritos. You know? We had spaghetti every once in a while, and maybe some chicken, but we didn't eat out. I mean, we had what we had. And so, every day I'd say, "Mom, they had this thing called beef stroganoff or they had this quiche."

And my mom had had more experience than me, so she'd laugh at me. But it was symbolic of the exposure I was getting at Stanford.

Menendez: You said on another podcast, "It's the things that aren't on my resume that really have made me who I am." Tell me about those things that aren't on your resume, that have made you who you are.

Gonzalez: Being the youngest and having two older brothers. They were relentless in--I don't want to say bullying me--they were lovely, but anything anyone ever says to me doesn't bother me. I've been called it all. Anyone with older brothers knows there is no way to hurt my feelings in that sense.

I think the fact is that I grew up in a multigenerational household with my grandparents there. And I learned the stories of their struggles and the things that affected them that have made me understand the cycles of what people go through and generations go through.

And then, the failures in my own life quite frankly. And I don't want to say failures; I'm very honest about... I got pregnant in graduate school, I was unmarried. I had to come home and tell my mother that. That was the hardest thing I had ever had to tell her.

Menendez: No, no, no.

Gonzalez: And in my community-

Menendez: Slow down.

Because, this is for us, this is it. Especially because it's like you came out the other side of it.

Gonzalez: Absolutely, and I told my mom I would. But you know, I grew up in a community where a lot of girls got pregnant, usually in high school or right after, and it meant a lack of opportunity for their lives, or that's how it was perceived. A lot of those women have done just fine.

But I remember coming home during graduate school and telling my mom, "I'm pregnant, I'm not going to get married right away, and I am going to finish school." And you know, she went through, I think, about two hours of disappointment, and then of course being very family oriented, she got very excited about her first grandchild.

But I finished. I finished graduate school, I finished law school, with my daughter. And it was a struggle. It wasn't easy-

Menendez: Meaning what? What was the struggle of it?

Gonzalez: Law school's tough. Law school as a single mom is balancing a lot of time commitments. I had to figure out how to live my life in a way where I could get everything done and still sleep a little bit, and give my daughter the attention she needed and deserved at such a young age. And it was tough. You know, I was still a Latino woman with... My daughter's half Black, half Latina, and people's perceptions of that and what that means about your ability to succeed and to further yourself. Even at law school, professors weren't used to seeing that. And so, I think that I had to fight back against that and just stay on course and stay disciplined enough to believe in myself when nobody else believed in me.

Menendez: How did becoming a mother shape your sense of self? Shape your own ambitions?

Gonzalez: I realized that for my entire life, I was Carmen's daughter. I still am; my mom passed away, but there's nobody who's had a bigger influence on my life than my mother. Until I became one myself. And when you realize that that overstated role that my mother played in my life, I was going to play in somebody else's life, and that everything you do will affect that person and that person's life and how that person sees the world.

And so, especially as a single mom, I think you feel it even more. Because I've had other children and sometimes it's easier when, obviously, when you're married and can kind of shoulder the blame a little. I felt like as a parent, much more so, what kind of world do I want to make for my child? What things do I want to change that I saw, or I saw that my mother did and my grandmother did, that I want my daughter not to have to face? And she's 23 now.

And I think about that even today when we think about things like pay equity or sexual harassment at work. It's like, how many generations are we going to keep going until we say "enough"? Until we say, "I know this is hard; it's hard and we have to do bold things to change it"? And we're going to have to really demand and make people uncomfortable to change these things. And so, I think in that sense, becoming a mom gave me kind of that broader responsibility.

Menendez: You recently tweeted something I want to ask you about. You wrote, "Just a note about fat shaming, a favorite tactic used against me by the anti-vaccine community. I used to have serious food issues, like here," and you included a photo. "Where I was being sworn into the bar. I could fit into a girl's size 12 so yeah, go to hell. I like my curves."

Can we talk about that for a second?

Gonzalez: Yeah.

Menendez: Okay. What were those food issues?

Gonzalez: I didn't eat a lot. I worked out a lot, and when I did eat, I threw up. And so, I had I think during different parts of my life, one right before I got pregnant and then another, a few years after I had had my daughter in law school, when I had such a drive for control over my life and perfection, that being able to control my weight and try to get to what I thought would be a good weight or a perfect weight became quite obsessive for me.

Honestly, until that tweet maybe, I think, I wrote about it on Facebook maybe a year and a half ago, kind of in a more general way. I've never spoken about it much except with my daughter. So this is the first time. But yeah, you know, I had my issues, and like so many people I think who have issues with their weight, it had very little to do with--I call it food issues, but it didn't really have to do with food; it had to do with my desire to control my own destiny.

And that was something I could control in my desire to try to be perfect, and you know, that's something I think I luckily gave up on at some point and now kind of embrace my imperfections much more. Laugh about them. And I'm grateful that I was able to transition into that way. But it's tough. It's been tough in the last few months to have people

constantly on Twitter or Facebook tell me, "You're fat." I'm less bothered by, "You're ugly." I can take that. "You're a whore." You know, things that you're like, whatever.

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But the fat ones, it's hard, right? I'm like, "I'm not," you know, I'm a big girl and for years I've said, "I'm a big girl and I'm comfortable with that." And I have been. But you realize that it's not just me who is seeing those messages, right? It is my daughter. It is young girls out there. And so my way of dealing with things now is to fight back a little, and provide that example to people like, "Hey, you know, I was skinny, and it was not attractive. I'm much happier now as a person and I'm happier with my body and I'm happier in life." That I thought it was important to say.

Menendez: What did it take to get there?

Gonzalez: It's been a journey, you know? I think I said I was happy and fulfilled much sooner than I actually was. I was a single mom. I have failed relationships a number of times. So, I was a single mom, got married again, had a son, got divorced, you know, I think after that divorce, I just said, "None of this is going to make me happy; only I'm going to make myself happy."

And it really was a turning point in my life when I think I said, "Okay, I know what I want to do in life." I was working the labor movement, I loved my job, I loved my kids, and that all the externalities that told me it wasn't enough. We're wrong.

Menendez: You have been commended and criticized for being so authentically yourself. Were you always able to be unapologetically yourself?

Gonzalez: No, absolutely not. And so I think that's why it is so important to me to be me. Now I can say, I'm just a girl from a working class family, who nobody really thought would become anything. And I was trying to prove myself for so long that I mattered, that I was just as important as anyone else, that I was going to be able to be as pretty and as smart and as wealthy as everybody that I was surrounded by.

And I think I spent a long time trying to be what people assumed you should be when you graduate from Stanford and Georgetown and UCLA Law School.

My problem was I never had a successful role model. I mean, my mom was very out there herself, but I didn't have somebody that I aspired to be, who I felt like they had all these failures and were so honest about it--and that's when I decided I needed to be that person for myself and for other people to come along.

Menendez: I also think there's an element in this conversation about authenticity and public people being authentically themselves where we don't honor how much risk comes with authenticity. I see it in the context of the 2020 candidates, right?

You know Julián Castro gets called not authentically Latino because he didn't grow up speaking Spanish. Kamala Harris, they're always talking about, you know, is she playing it too safe? And I think that sort of belies how for those of us who come from minority communities and then make our way into institutions--elite institutions--how much code switching and bending of ourselves we do to make it, that there's a process of undoing that comes on the other side of that, if you really want to go back to being whoever your authentic self was before you started to try to fit into some social molds of what a successful upwardly mobile person looks like.

Gonzalez: Right. No, I agree.

I don't do things without not knowing how other people react to it. That's including my colleagues in the Assembly, in the State Legislature, journalists, people who deal with me. But I think about when I first got to the State Legislature, and I had to make a decision if I was ... I got told all these rules you have to live by, and I'd ask, "Where are these written?" And they're like, "It's not written." This is the institution.

It's a hundred and some years of the institution. And I was like, okay, so the rules that were adopted by like these old white guys generations ago, who have nothing in common with me, so why am I abiding by them? And so when I first got there, I remember having a conversation with somebody, one of my colleagues, and he kept stepping backwards. And I thought, why is he doing it? And he's like, "Why are you yelling at me?" And I said, "Oh, I'm not yelling at you. This is how I talk. Like I don't have an inside voice." You know?

And so I decided that that's what I was going to do. The Latina woman in politics. And the Latina women I saw that I could say, "Oh, I want to be like that." They were very proper and they had to be. And I thought, well, I'm just not going to be able to be myself and do what I want to do and put on this front of being somebody else.

And so yeah, I talk too loud. I use my hands. I'm too emotional. They told me I couldn't cry on the Assembly floor, and I'd probably cried like half a dozen times now. I was like, why wouldn't I cry if I lost a bill or if I won a bill if I was excited? If I'm sad, I cry. What's the big deal? When I'm happy, you know I'm happy. When I'm mad, you know I'm mad. Those are normal reactions. Who am I to take those away? Not just from myself but from somebody else who's watching, who wants to be in this position someday? The belief is that you have to be something else and I want to break that mold.

Menendez: We talked so much about federal office holders. What do you see as the benefit of working at the state level?

Gonzalez: In a state like California, I mean, there's a Congressional seat up right now in San Diego and everybody said, "Are you going to run?" And I was like, "Why would I want to go to Congress?" You hear these stories, you're there for 35 years, and your list of accomplishments, what you've actually changed are so small, unless you just happen to be one of those people that caught the right moment at the right time.

But in the state legislature, especially a state like California where we have supermajorities, Democratic supermajorities, I have been able to pass what I think are really big, important bills every year I've been there. I've been able to change overtime for farm workers and to become the first state to provide paid sick leave for every single worker; we raised the minimum wage; and we provided diapers for working moms; and automatic registration to be able to vote; to be registered automatically at the DMV; this year with AB-5 and the misclassification issue.

Every year, I get to do something that is actually changing people's lives, and that's why I want to be in office. I don't want to be in office to be making a speech on CSPAN with nobody around, just so my kids can be like, "Isn't it cool? My mom's a Congresswoman and she's on CSPAN, and nobody cares what she's saying."

I don't think the pomp and circumstance is fun. I think the ability to take real people's lives and the challenges they face and the things that you know that they're dealing with, and make government work for them. That's what's fun. And you get to do that at the state level.

Menendez: So, Governor Newsom signed Assembly Bill 5 just a few days ago. It goes into effect January 1. How do you feel?

Gonzalez: A strange mixture of relief and excitement. And I'm ready for battle. I don't think the fight's over, but I know what we did was big.

Menendez: For those who don't know, what's at the heart of AB-5?

Gonzalez: Well for years, really decades, employers have skirted labor laws basically by telling people that they were independent contractors and issuing them a 1099 rather than a W-2, which is an employee. And this is important because the differences in California law--and all laws, but California in particular has really strong workplace laws--is that if you're a W-2 employee, an actual employee, whether part-time or full-time, you have the right to minimum wage and overtime. You have the right to, of course, the employer contribution to social security and Medicare. You have the right to paid sick days, paid family leave, unemployment insurance, worker's compensation, and in some cases healthcare.

And so that's a lot of things that come along with that employment status, and then the gig economy came about, and we've seen Uber and Lyft and DoorDash and Postmates. All of these companies just say, "Oh, these drivers: they're their own companies, they're their own small businesses, they're out of our control." And so it was time to kind of put an end to that and say, "No, the California Supreme Court unanimous bipartisan decision in April of last year said, 'This is enough, this misclassification has been going on too long. We're going to make it simple. Basically, if you do the work of the company, you're an employee.'" And so we did the bill to codify that.

Menendez: You referenced earlier gearing up for war. Uber and Lyft are pledging \$60 million dollars to fight this law. How is California going to fight back?

Gonzalez: You know, and DoorDash I think has said they're going to put another \$30 million in, and ultimately it's not the first time California has seen initiatives being driven by billionaire companies really aimed at worker's rights. We've battled those back before. We have strong unions in California who spend a lot of money and time battling those.

And we have a discussion we're going to have, and I think this is an important discussion. We have just staggering levels of income inequality in our state. We have a very productive and strong economy, but that's because we're creating billionaires and multimillionaires at a staggering rate while leaving the working class behind.

And so when you have companies, CEOs and CFOs are making \$45 or \$47 million dollars a year, who became billionaires off of stock options, and yet they're saying they can't pay their drivers a minimum wage. I think that's a discussion that California should have. It's a preview for discussion, I think that the entire country can have.

Menendez: 57 million people in the US who today have some type of gig work, often in addition to their full time work, as you said. So how do you see this law changing the national debate around the gig economy?

Gonzalez: Well, hopefully we get back to this idea of one job being enough. You know, people lost their lives in previous generations over the eight hour work day and the 40 hour work week. And here we are saying, "Well people need to have the right to have three or four jobs." There's something wrong with that.

Menendez: I use all of these services. I'm a big user of ride sharing apps, I'm a big user of on-demand delivery services. I am a working mom of two. In some ways it makes my life work. What responsibility do you believe that consumers like me have to the workers on the other end of this equation?

Gonzalez: I use these services, too. I previously wrote a bill in fact that forced Uber to allow in-App tips, because I was so frustrated by the fact that I wasn't supposed to tip an Uber driver. And it's frustrating, because as a responsible consumer, I always tip. And then, when you find out that there are companies who are actually taking that tip and putting it towards the base salary of a worker, that's just wrong, and I think we have to be cognizant of that. What I tell people, "Please tip, and tip in cash, so that you know that the person receiving it actually gets to keep it."

Menendez: When you step back and you think about the politics of California--the labor movement in California--what does it mean that the daughter of a farm worker was the one who sponsored this legislation and got it signed into law?

Gonzalez: Well, it's funny, because in California, I was the head of the Central Labor Council in San Diego, the AFL-CIO, and at that time the head of the LA Labor Fed, the head of the San Jose Labor Fed, the South Bay Labor Fed, we were all daughters of farm workers. It's a very normal story, if you will, in California. So many of us who are Latina. And I think it's a realization that hard work deserves something.

You know, we come from parents who worked really hard. And really did it so that their children could have opportunity. And, when you see folks working today, that hope that even their children are going to be in a better spot is starting to get lost. And that's scary. And it's something that we need to ensure. The idea and the California dream that if you work really hard and do your best, that you're going to do better for your children, your children are going to do better than you: that's still something we have to work towards.

Menendez: You announced that you're running for California Secretary of State 2022. Why that office?

Gonzalez: You know, it was something that was so easy for me to decide on. Secretary of State in California decides--or not decides, I guess--it is the Chief Elections Officer in the state. And so, we've done a bunch of bills to help take away the barriers to voting, but I know that the more people who vote, especially from untraditional communities, the better representation we will have.

That when you have a wider, more diverse electorate that you elect people who have different backgrounds in life. Who have different priorities who see the world in a different way. And so without it being partisan or ideological, just the diversity of voters matters, and so I want to take my organizing skills and all the bills that we've been able to put



forward to really remove barriers from registration, barriers from voting. We did the bill to ensure every vote by mail has a stamp on it.

I have a story that will always stick with me, that my mom coming home from work, and I used to always go with her to the church, which was our precinct to vote, and I'd wait for her to come home so we could go do it. It was really important to me, and it was really important to her to vote in every election, and I remember it was the 1988 presidential election and it was Dukakis and Bush--so Michael Dukakis and George Bush. And she's a good Democrat. She's going to vote for Dukakis no matter what. But she came home, I think there was maybe 15 minutes before the polls closed, and that was back when they unfortunately were calling states in the win-loss column before the states had even finished voting, because of exit polls.

And so I had been watching the news, and my mom rushes in and she literally is coming straight from the hospital, has blood on her shoes, is in her scrubs. And she says, "We got to get to the church to vote," and I said, "Well mom, like it doesn't matter. They've already called the election, Dukakis lost."

And she looked at me, and I'll never forget the look in her face, and she said, "You know, mija, it does not matter. The only thing they can't take away from us is our voice through a vote." So, even if you feel like it's just going to be another vote, it's going to count, and I want everybody to feel that way, that their vote matters that much. Where, you know, she's dog-tired and has blood on her shoes and is running to the church. Because even if her candidate was going to lose, that it was that important to register her opinion and her vote.

Menendez: If you win. You'd be the first Latina elected statewide in California. Is that an achievement that's important to you?

Gonzalez: It is. It's important for me to help elect--this is kind of funny--it's always been important to me to help elect the first Latina statewide in California. It's the only demographic that hasn't held statewide office in California despite the fact that we're close to 20% of the population here. I never imagined that I would be wanting to help myself basically fulfill that role because it just hasn't been fulfilled. But it's an important first.

: I often joke about how pathetic it is that we're just now achieving firsts, when it should have happened years and years ago, but we've got to get through them, and we've got to do it, because there can't be a second or third until there's a first.

Menendez: What's your advice to other Latinas who feel called to service?

Gonzalez: Be yourself. And I think that's really important. Know why you want to do it and stick true to that. I think that that's important. Whether it's you know, issues on immigration or workers or business or opportunity or education. What is it that drives you and makes you want to serve others?

And the other thing is, don't be afraid to fail. I think so often, and this is something that took me so long to learn, that it's okay to fail. That the only way we achieve great things or do big things is often by failing first. And so, you know, you fall down, and you get back up, and you kind of wipe the dirt off, and you keep going and that's okay. That's admirable.

It's not even something to be ashamed of. Because those who do big things, if they haven't failed then they're not reaching high enough. So I would tell them that.

Menendez: Assemblywoman, thank you so much.

Gonzalez: Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Thanks as always for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is Executive Produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me. Maria Murriel is our Producer. Carolina Rodriguez is our Sound Engineer. Emma Forbes is our Assistant Producer.

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