



This is Why María Elena Salinas is a Legend

After decades of beaming into our homes from her perch on the Univision anchor desk, María Elena Salinas is enjoying finally speaking for herself and pursuing her own ideas and work. She jokes that she didn't want her legacy to be that "I worked at Univision and then I died," but Alicia also gets her to open up about that lingering doubt we all feel, the hard choices of being a working mom, and the freedom that comes with stepping boldly into your destiny.

Alicia Menendez: Hey everybody. Welcome back to Latina to Latina. On this podcast, I talk with Latinas about how they got to be so amazing.

How do you introduce a legend? For more than 30 years, María Elena Salinas was one of the most recognizable faces of Univision. She came into our homes via the nightly newscast and brought us reports from around the country and around the world. Not only did her work inform and empower Latinos, it inspired an entire generation of Latinas like me to become journalists. Then last year, María Elena announced that she was leaving the network to pursue new opportunities.

On one of the rare days when we were both in Miami, we sat down to talk about the sacrifices she made along the way, how she knew when to leave, and what it has taken to reinvent herself.

Thanks for doing this. How exciting to do it in Miami.

María Salinas: I know.

Menendez: I've been watching you on Instagram, and it's what I like to call the emancipation of María Elena Salinas. It's like you have a different life than you did a few months ago and I wonder what that feels like to you.

Salinas: It's nice. It is a different life. There's a lot of good parts to it, and there's some awkward parts to it. I say awkward because especially in the beginning, I told myself, "You're on vacation." But when January came along, every day around noon, I would look at my watch and think it's time for me to get ready to go to work. Oh no, I don't have to go to work. But there was a sense of freedom, where I'm happy and proud of the decision that I made. I own my own time. I can basically do what I want. I try to do all the things that I was never able to do.

Menendez: Like what?

Salinas: Well, the frivolous things that I always said. What did I want to do? I want to go to happy hour. It's been nine months and I've been to one happy hour that was scheduled by someone else. But I spend more time with my daughters, I'm taking care of myself a little bit more than I used to, I'm traveling not only for work but also for pleasure, and I am going around the country doing a lot of these speeches that I used to be invited to and I couldn't because the company that I worked for didn't allow me to. I feel a lot freer when I speak. Whatever I say, I feel like I'm saying it for me and from me, and not on behalf of a company.

Menendez: When did you know it was time to leave?

Salinas: Well, time wise, I think I knew that it was time to leave about maybe three to four years before I did leave. When you're news, everything revolves around politics, whether you like it or not. I sort of timed it that way. No, I can't leave right now because these elections are coming up. No, I can't leave now because then there's these other elections that are important. But if you look at it that way, then you'll never leave because there's always something important to cover. But there comes a time when you have to say, okay, what am I doing with my life and my career? What is my life? My professional life. I worked at Univision and then I died. You know? I didn't want it to be that. That was an important part of my career and it lasted 37 years and it was very important, but I felt that I needed to do something else. Something different.

Menendez: It was very interesting when you announced your decision, how quick people were to transpose their own narratives onto it. That you had been pushed out, that it wasn't your choice; which was far from the truth. So much so that it pushed you out there to really assert what the truth was, that they had fought for you to stay. It occurs to me, I don't think we're accustomed to seeing women leave.

Salinas: I know. One of my colleagues who works in the digital division of Univision News came into my office and he said, "You can't leave. Anchors are supposed to die on the set."

Menendez: "Scrape her off."

Salinas: Really? Okay. I didn't know that. Or, "It's time for you to retire." I didn't want it to be until I retired, then I leave. Because I wanted, I guess, it's sort of like a challenge to myself. You know? You always have that little doubt up to the last minute.

Menendez: Okay, it's good to know that you do too.

Salinas: Up to the last minute you say, "Is this the right decision? Is that the right?" I would meet with my banker. "Okay, can I afford to do this?" I would meet with my daughters. I remember one of my best friends, about a month before, I said, "I just sort of like need a sign from somewhere that tells me, 'Yes, it's okay. You're doing the right thing.'" And she said, "You know, you just moved to an apartment. You're opening up your personal spaces. You also need to open up your professional spaces and start a new life. It's not starting from scratch."

Salinas: Because, there's a saying in Spanish that says, "Lo bailado nadie me lo quita." It's difficult to translate because literally it just means, "What I dance, no one can take

away from me.” But it basically means that your trajectory is there, your legacy is there, and that’s not going to disappear. Your past is not going to disappear the moment that you walk out of a place that you’ve worked in for so long. Especially in the type of field I’m in.

Menendez: I want to go back to 1981. You got that first job at KMX, KMX. You’d come from radio. You had a background in marketing. That is what you had studied. Did you just learn on the job?

Salinas: Yeah, I learned on the job. It’s very different. In 1981, Spanish language media at the time was perceived as low quality programming that nobody watched except recently arrived immigrants. For those who work in mainstream media, if anything, or were interested in the medium, it would be a stepping stone to go on to bigger and better places. We now see that it’s the other way around. People come from mainstream media to work at Univision. But at the time, I did learn on the job. I did go back to school, of course, to UCLA extension to study broadcast journalism on weekends and at nights.

Menendez: Did you feel that was important? Did you learn enough there that you weren’t learning in the newsroom?

Salinas: No. I was learning in the newsroom. But immediately I did that because I grew up with this idea that I always got from my parents. Don’t be a conformist and don’t allow yourself to be mediocre. I know you’ve heard me say that a million times, but it’s so true. I realized when I first went into my job, what the need that there was in the community for information, a thirst for information. The difference that you make to these people on a daily basis. Because I didn’t only do news. I used to be a reporter, an anchor, I used to host a public affairs program, on weekends I did entertainment shows.

Menendez: Everything.

Salinas: Yeah, I did everything. I worked seven days a week. The good thing is that you learn so much from that, but I wanted to make sure I did it and I did it right.

Menendez: Let’s talk about your perfectionism, because it is a thing about you that I admire and envy. Your nails are always done. We’ve had conversations where I’ve said to you 18%; you said to me, actually, Alicia, it’s 19%. You are so detailed oriented, and it is very hard to build-

Salinas: OCD.

Menendez: ... a team that is as committed to that perfection ideal as you are. Have you ever encountered conflict because you wanted things to be right and to be perfect and people around you did not hold themselves to the same standard?

Salinas: Yes. I’m not saying that my standards are higher than those people who didn’t think that those details were important. It’s just different. There’s some people that look at the big picture and say, "What’s important is the big picture, not the details." To me, the facts are important. It could be very annoying. I can be very annoying that way. I go on vacation with a group of friends and they say something ... We were in China. "These buildings are empty." I said, "No, they’re

not empty. Some of them are empty. Not all of them are empty." It could be very, very annoying.

Salinas: But to me, those things are important, especially working in news. People are depending on you. They trust you. If you do not have the trust of the people that you're serving, what do you have? To me, there's a huge responsibility when it comes to informing an audience, especially a Hispanic audience. I have always said, and I imagine that some people in mainstream media don't understand what I'm saying and they probably think that because of it, what we're doing is practicing advocacy journalism, but I do think that it's different. You have a different audience that has different needs and additional needs. Additional needs because yes, just like everyone else, they want to know what's going on in their community, in their city, in their state, in their country, in their country of origin. But also there's little nuances about our country that maybe they don't understand. To me, I think it was important because I was part of that community that I was reporting to.

Salinas: I'm also the daughter of Mexican immigrants. First generation. Like me, there are millions that were born here, that their parents are immigrants. In your case, your father's an immigrant and you were born in this country.

Menendez: My dad's the only one born here.

Salinas: Oh, he was born here? Okay.

Menendez: My dad's the baby of three. Both of his siblings were born in Cuba, so he's the first. But yeah, no, but I was born in a community of immigrants. I know.

Salinas: It's part of your blood, whether you're first generation or second generation. We live it very intensely. I know that in my household, I grew up bilingual and bicultural. Thanksgiving, which is is a Mexican holiday, was very important in my house. But then so were some of the Mexican holidays that my parents used to embrace. They taught me to embrace those two cultures. To me, that's important. So I knew that there was something about us that was different. Even though we're Americans, it was important to me to take that responsibility very, very seriously. That I need to get the story right and I need to get the facts right, and then I need to make it relevant. So it's challenging.

Menendez: You have interviewed heads of state, dictators. How do you not lose your nerve when you walk into an interview with a powerful person?

Salinas: Well, you need to understand that you're just as important as they are to your job. They're doing their job, you're doing your job. It's interesting, because you know I'm a shy person. Personally, I'm a shy person.

Menendez: Meaning what?

Salinas: Professionally, I'm not.

Menendez: If you walk into a room, it's hard for you to introduce yourself to people?

Salinas: Yes. Yeah. But if you tell me the pope is sitting at that table there and he's having dinner; go interrupt him and ask him for an interview, I will do that. I will do whatever it takes. There's no reason why you should be intimidated in any way, shape, or form by someone that has power. Because when you think about it, they're doing their job running a country, and you're doing your job reporting on what they're doing. You're depending on them for the answers, but they're depending on you to get their message out to the people that they want to reach.

Menendez: Do you have a theory of the interview? Some people like to stack the interview with the hardest question up top. Some people like to bury it way at the bottom so that get the person warmed up and then you go in for the kill. Do you have a way you structure your interviews?

Salinas: Yeah. First of all, I have to prepare myself very well for the interviews. I research quite a bit for interviews, because I want to know what they're going to answer ahead of time. Once you know what they're going to answer, you prepare your follow-ups. You don't want to just give them open ended questions. I structured always going in easy. I think you want people to feel comfortable with you. I believe in asking hard questions, and I believe that you can ask hard questions in a very respectful manner when you have the facts. Your power is in the facts and holding people accountable, not in your words and attacking them. If that's all you do and you don't get answers from them, then the only thing you're accomplishing is making yourself look good for being a tough interviewer. But you're not really accomplishing getting the information that you needed from that person that you interviewed for the people that are watching you.

Menendez: What's the biggest mistake you've ever made on air?

Salinas: Oh, god. I remember in the beginning of my career, early, early, early on in 1984, I was covering the Olympics in Los Angeles. I was covering swimming and boxing. We would do these live segments, and I would always say ... In Spanish it sounds better. "La medalla de cobre" instead of "bronze." They kept saying, "Oh my god, you keep demoting that metal. It's not copper, it's bronze." Of course, it's easy. It's gold, silver, and bronze. Of course I know that. But when you're saying it is Spanish, you see all of them the same. They go, "Stop diminishing this wonderful prize that this person had. It's not copper, it's bronze."

Menendez: What's the biggest mistake you've ever made in life?

Salinas: Yikes. That's a tough one.

Menendez: As she sips her tea.

Salinas: I think I started really looking into and trying to analyze mistakes after I became a mother, because then you're thinking about everything so much more. Everything comes into play. Maybe I made mistakes of deciding to cover a story when I shouldn't have; when I should've stayed with my daughters. Like when my daughter graduated from kindergarten, I wasn't there. I was covering Antonio Villaraigosa's election in Los Angeles because I thought it was so important.

Because I grew up in, in my career, without Hispanic representation and I thought, I cannot believe that in Los Angeles, a city that is so important to Latinos, finally we have someone that might be mayor. I covered it, and I shouldn't have. I should've stayed. Not because he lost. I don't regret it because he lost that one time. But I should have stayed home and gone to my daughter's kindergarten graduation.

Menendez: But in the moment, it feels like a hard choice, especially because they are 10 hard choices leading up to it and there are 10 hard choices that follow it. I loved in your book, and I'm grateful to you in your book, that you talk about how important it was to you to be a mom and the lengths you went to to become a mom. It wasn't easy for you to get pregnant with those two girls, which we don't talk about in general, and we certainly don't talk about as Latinas. But you knew that you wanted those daughters.

Salinas: Oh, yeah.

Menendez: It was important to you. There are a lot of women I think also in our business who put that off and off and off if they want it for a long time. What would you say to someone who's like, "But you're laying out the problem. How will I be at the anchor desk and having a baby?" How do you just at one point say, "Okay, that's it. I'm going to do it."

Salinas: It can be done. You just have to respect your own priorities. You have to understand that - and this is gonna sound like family first, and it is family first - family should be. That doesn't mean that you have to leave your job. That doesn't mean that sometimes you might have to miss an important event from your family to cover a story that's important to your career or for yourself. You can't win them all. You can't win all your battles. You have to learn how to pick the battles that are important to you.

\ In the book that you mentioned, I write a letter to my daughters. I do say how there are some women, professional women, who decide to leave motherhood for later while they build up their careers. But to me, working was something I was doing while I waited for them to come.

Menendez: What would you say? Because I have-

Salinas: There's some people that do plan their lives out, and it comes out exactly the way that they planned them.

Menendez: I haven't met that person yet, but that must be lovely for them.

: What do you say to someone who is having trouble getting pregnant? Because I think that that is ... It's a real truth. It's a truth for us as we get older, and I think it's particularly a choice for professional women because we do put that choice off. And the longer you put it off, the harder it becomes.

Salinas: It does. I had my first daughter a month before I turned 40 and my second daughter at 42. I had lost two. I had two miscarriages before the first one, and one in between my two daughters. Of course, the first miscarriage I had, I said, "Oh my god, that's it. I will never be a mother." I was 37, so being pregnant at 37 for the

first time, of course you think, "My biological clock has run out its course and it's not going to be able to happen." Especially because I had my first two miscarriages during a work trip.

Menendez: Where were you?

Salinas: One of them, I was in Mexico, and the other one I was in Chicago at an NHJ conference. Yup. I remember that. So it can be done, especially now with the advance of ... There's so many medical advances that there's so many ways that you can have treatment for fertility.

Menendez: Can we just talk, can we talk? Because I think there's this thing we don't talk about, which is ... This is the crazy thing about how we talk about pregnancy, which is you were working. Did people around you even know that you were pregnant when you had those two miscarriages?

Salinas: Very few.

Menendez: It reminds me that you never know what someone's going through. You never know. Because that was then a happy secret that then all of a sudden become a very sad secret. I think as women we carry these secrets around and we go to work and we show up in spite of it.

Menendez: How did you, after having the two first miscarriages, keep going so that you would eventually get pregnant and have your girls?

Salinas: I really focused on, I really wanted to have a child. I really wanted to get pregnant, and I did go to a specialist, a fertility specialist to do all the analysis possible to make sure that I could get pregnant again and that I would not lose the child. I remember when there was a trip, it was 1994. there was a mini revolution in Mexico in Chiapas. The Zapatista Revolution. The story had just broke and their--su--comandante Marcos was coming down to to the city and for the first time we were going to see him. Mask and all, but we were going to see him for the first time.

Salinas: The day before my trip, I went to the doctor and he told me, "You're pregnant. You can't travel." I said, "I have a trip tomorrow. It's an important trip. It's a very important trip." "If you're going to do this trip, you have to be careful. We have to inject progesterone every day." He gave me the syringes, and I said, "Well, what am I going to do?" I had to tell the producer that I was with. She was petrified, says, "What do you mean I'm going to have to inject you? What are you talking about?"

Menendez: This was not in the job description.

Salinas: When we got to Mexico, I remember we had to call in a nurse into the room. Because we were going to be on the road, she taught her how to inject me. One of the most important things, she said, "Make sure that you get the air out of the syringe, otherwise you'll kill her." And she was like, "No pressure." So she practiced. She wasted a lot of syringes because she would practice on an orange, injecting the orange to make sure that she was doing it correctly. The

photographer, they carried my purse, they carried everything for me. They treated me like a queen. I said, "I kind of like this."

Salinas: But thank god Julia came out of it. We survived the trip. There was a lot of support at the time. But it's information that's hard to share, because you have that doubt on I need to show that as a woman that can do the job just as well as a man can do it. But there are certain things in a woman's life, like motherhood, like pregnancy that you have to deal with. Sometimes taking care of your parents, of elderly parents. Men usually don't do that. Women do that. But I think that it's a family affair. You need a support group. You can't do it on your own. Some people might not like me to say this, but husbands and boyfriends come and go, but your children are your children and there'll be there forever. Forever. Your parents and your children are the one thing that will never go away. They will always, always be there.

Menendez: How do you become an icon without getting reputation for being a diva?

Salinas: God.

Menendez: Because when recognition is given, then you don't need to ask for it.

Salinas: Well, yeah. But, you know, I think ... First of all, I don't consider myself an icon. I do realize that a lot of people know me.

Menendez: That's an understatement. Yeah, sure.

Salinas: I'm very grateful. Sometimes it surprises me. I'm very grateful that they still trust me and they still believe in me and that they still respect me. But it's because I was there a long, long time. Sometimes they say it's not just climbing the ladder; it's staying there. I mean, how did 37 years go by with me doing the same thing without me ever being able to stop and put the brake on and look back? When I did look back, and when I did decide to look around me, and when I saw my daughter's already in college, when I began to feel that there were things in my life that I missed out on, when I became exhausted. Honestly, when I just became exhausted of a constant, constant, constant, constant battle. Because as women, it's not only balancing your personal life with your professional life. It's also constantly having to fight for equality; to be treated as an equal and recognized as an equal and compensated as an equal. It's just a constant, constant, constant battle. But you have to focus on what's important. Every day when you're there at work, what's important is to make sure you get the story and you get it right. Then when you come home, the most important thing is what you have in front of you. Your children, your husband, your home.

Salinas: By the way, I think that Latinas have a super power, and that super power comes from our mothers and grandmothers because we know their struggles. That makes us feel that if they were able to do what they did and raise their family this way, I can do it too. I think all those qualities, all those values that we were raised with that sometimes can be conflicting, they provide that superpower, where we know that we can face anything. If we did as we were growing up and we were able to to make it as we were growing up, if we were able to make it through high school and make it through college and get those jobs, we can do anything.

Menendez: Thank you so much.

Salinas: Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us today. Latina to Latina was originally co-created with Bustle. Now, the podcast is executive produced by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me. Sound edited by Oluwakemi Aladesuyi. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com.

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