

How Mildred Otero Learned to Negotiate



From Capitol Hill to the State Department to Leadership for Educational Equity, this education policy advocate offers wisdom on the art of compromise and the necessity of standing your ground.

Alicia Menendez:

My friend, Mildred Otero has spent most of her career dedicated to improving education. As a staffer on Capitol Hill, at the State Department, and now as the senior vice president of National Impact Leadership for Education Equity, Mildred has cultivated incredible insights about how you advance causes you believe in, stand firm, even when it means standing in opposition to your friends and the key to productive negotiations.

I want to start with you as a kid. I'm going to go out on a limb and guess. You are a very good student and that you love school. Is that right?

Mildred Otero:

Love. I don't know if love, I would say...

Menendez: I'm okay being wrong.

Otero: No, no. I would say, I talk about this a lot because of the work I currently do. I am a survivor of the New York city public school system.

Menendez: Tell me more.

Otero: And I didn't even realize it until I got to college. I'll give you one example. There's a recent podcast called Dear White Parents. That middle school was my middle school in Brooklyn. So I literally cried through most of that podcast because I understood, I literally had to walk through two public housing complexes before I would get to my middle school every morning. And every afternoon. It was juxtaposed in this really wealthy area, surrounded by a lot of poverty. And it's just so indicative of New York city and the way lines are drawn and where kids end up.

I was a survivor because I was actually living educational inequity, and I didn't even know it. And then I went to high school and in high school, I literally met a teacher who is a mentor and a friend to this day who really like just supported me in a way that I know that

Latina to Latina: How Mildred Otero Learned to Negotiate

she's why I went to college. I know that she is why I stayed in college. She helped me navigate a world I didn't even know I needed help navigating. My story's not unique, but I went to college and then found out, oh, wait, I'm now going to pay college tuition for the math I should have gotten in high school because I didn't know that I wasn't getting the math I needed to be able to compete in college. Oh, that's what it means to go to an underperforming high school.

Menendez: Is there then a moment that you can point to where you realize that educational equity was going to be centered to your theory of change.

Otero: Yeah. Honestly not until my thirties, because again, part of what happens when you're low income is you're just trying to get out. You're trying to, how do I set myself up for a good future? I knew education was important because my mom had a seventh grade education and her father pulled her out of school in the seventh grade because she was a woman. All my uncles got to finish school. She did not, we were three girls. My mom just really instilled in the like, you will finish high school. That's all she understood. She didn't understand college or what it meant. But in her mind coming to America was her children would know English and they would graduate from high school because they would have opportunities. And then I went and became a social worker. I was a social worker for six years and my focus was children who have been physically and sexually abused.

And that was my world for a long time. I really was very much focused on how do I fix the child welfare system in our country for those kids who have the least, and those kids who have no voice and being a voice. And I was really proud of the work that I did in the Brooklyn DA's office with those children. And then I got to the space where I was like, oh wait, there are laws and policies that undergird the experience these children are having. That I actually need to play a role in trying to shape into make better. And then I went to DC and I went to work for Senator Clinton through the congressional Hispanic Caucus Fellowship. And it was in that experience when you go to Capitol Hill, this happens to me now, when I talk to a lot of younger people who want to come to Capitol Hill and I was like, I just want to work on the child abuse prevention and treatment act capita. This is the one law I want to touch. That's right. That does not happen on Capitol Hill, you are given a portfolio of issues. And when I was given that portfolio, the issue that I wanted to work on sits inside of a committee that also works on education issues. And it was through that journey that I realized, oh, my life experience was preparing me for this opportunity.

Menendez: We've spoken with at least one former Hill staff, or I'm thinking of Amanda Renteria. We've also spoken with Senator Catherine Cortez Masto about her efforts to diversify staffing on the Hill, which as you know, sort of starts at the beginning and those entry-level jobs and who has access to them and who can even afford to live in Washington DC. What were the finer points of working on Capitol Hill that were not apparent to you being first gen, not having people in your life who were in politics? What surprised you in those first few weeks and days?

Otero: It's interesting because it's so connected to the work I do now. And for me, one of the things that I have been able to isolate here in the time I've been at Lee was what I didn't understand at the time. Because I can put it on a couple of buckets. One, I will call navigating halls of power. How do you navigate halls of power?

Menendez: Which by the way, if you have ever been in any of those buildings is both literally how do you make your way to the bathroom? Because those buildings are so confusing on the way they are laid out. And then when I think you're driving out, which is the actual macro question of how you navigate halls of power.

Otero: But so many things like people really believe like I'm going to go get an MPP and that's going to help me figure this out. And that's not it.

Menendez: Just a Masters of public policy.

Otero: Correct. How does a congressional office work? Who do you talk to? Who do you not to? Who are the important layers? All of those things are so experiential there it's like you have to experience them and learn them. You have to manage up, manage across, managed below, and you also then have constituents. And what is your role there? There are a lot of different stakeholders in a congressional setting. I worked in the Senate, so that's one bucket. And then another bucket that we've shared that we actually have a lot of what we call PSMs for our members around, which is your brand, your network and your skills.

Menendez: Which a lot of those words make people cringe. Especially if you come from a background where you were raised to believe that if you just put your head down and did hard work, that that was the key to success.

Otero: Those are the words made me cringe. And now I literally had to distill it into those three buckets. And I was like, Ooh, but it's true. I didn't even know that it was true. I was very fortunate because I came to Capitol Hill through the CHCI program. I had a built-in network. I had a built-in 20 people that were going through this experience with me. I didn't even realize at the time how truly unique that is. Because normally you come to the Hill as a staffer. You don't come in with a whole bunch of other people that can support you through it. So, especially as a fellow on a bad day, on a tough day, you had 19 other people that were experiencing a similar experience. I can't say how important that is. The second is really understanding your brand.

And it's a new term because when I came to Capitol Hill, that was not a term that people were using or even. But I knew then because I came to the Hill at like I turned 30, 2 weeks after I arrived. I already knew because I'd been in the workforce for a while, who you are, your name, you don't get those things back. You don't get a second chance to make a first impression. How do you do that? And how do you do that authentically? I will tell you, Alicia, I spent a lot of years on the Hill helping a lot of black and brown women. It almost

Latina to Latina: How Mildred Otero Learned to Negotiate

became my job. The best compliment I ever got was from a former staffer that when I started working at LEE, as a leadership development organization said to me, wait, they're going to pay you for what you've been doing for free for years? And I said, yes, this is important work. Because when you put someone of color who comes from a low-income background in halls of power and say to them, go do good work, lead with equity, take tough calls and you provide no support around them. It doesn't happen. And two things happen. They acquiesced to the environment that they're in. And sometimes they become perpetrators of some of the inequity over time or they leave. They're like this terrible place that up here.

Menendez: Which is interesting to me because we've watched with multiple administrations that when something happens, when a decision is made inside of an administration that doesn't lead with equity, there's often this call for staffers, from a number of communities to leave, to say, clearly this is in line, make a show of leaving. And I think that the reality when you're on the inside is just always way more complicated.

Otero: Oh yes. And I have to say there is a balance that we don't always talk about. Listen, I navigated some really hard moments. I don't think we acknowledge that enough as a Democrat, when you are pushing against the democratic administration, it doesn't feel good. I can speak to specific moments where I had to stand in a moment of, this is what is right and if I don't fight with you, then I'm not doing my job. I'm not serving in the role that I should serve here. Total side note, we have this, I think a challenge sometimes that people will say like, well, you're just not understanding me. Let me explain it again. So I would get a lot of that. Like, you must just not understand what we're trying to accomplish. Let me explain it again. And I would sit there and say, oh no, I understand you perfectly. And I disagree, but this pressure to agree and it was like, if you don't agree with me, you just must not understand as opposed to no, I fully, fully understand and I fully am in a different place and have a different perspective.

Menendez: You said you can speak to some of those experiences. Tell me about one of them.

Otero: We had a really tough moment. It's probably was one of the hardest moments I was working on the committee at the time of the Education Committee in the Senate. The administration at the time was the Obama administration. And they had a particular policy that they wanted to push on the higher ed side. And they aligned themselves with Republicans on our committee. So Democrats were left flat-footed on a policy that we know has long term difficult effects for low-income kids. And in that moment, you could do what you need to do optically, or you hold onto your values and you say some really tough stuff. And I think the hardest part of that was saying some tough stuff to our friends in the administration. And we ended up in a good compromised position, but it would have been very easy for us to just go along and done this big show of bipartisanship. So those are the hard moments. When you know that behind the scenes, this was much worse and you fought to make it palatable and you get no credit.

Menendez: And you get no gold star for that.

Otero: You get zero credit for that. And you also jeopardize relationships within the administration because you pushed them to where they didn't want to be. Those are the difficult moments. And I regret none of it, because I think ultimately who you hold yourself accountable to and who I hold myself accountable to are the low-income kids who have to deal with that policy in the future.

Menendez: I love that. That's a good gut check to remember who it is that you're there to serve. I do want to talk about your time as chief education counsel for the Senate committee on health, education, labor, and pensions, which to your point, just the name of that committee shows you that you do not get to work on any one specific program or issue. You're always dealing in a larger portfolio. I think something that those of us who have not worked on Capitol Hill, you hear congressional negotiations and there's a natural instinct to imagine a bunch of members of Congress sitting around a table, but that's not actually how things get done. It is 30 year old staffers like yourself who are sitting there. Can you pull back the curtain and give me a sense of what those talks, what those negotiations on any number of issues, what they look like?

Otero: There was a time, especially on the education committee, where there was deep bipartisanship and the staffers were in relationship with each other deep, deep relationship.

Menendez: Which means what you're like texting or you're getting lunch or you?

Otero: Yeah, the happy hours, dinner, you are in a relationship. The reason why that's important is, and then I see it happening in our politics overall that the other political party is not your enemy. The other political party is your conduit to getting a law passed. We're never going to be a one party system in our country. But I remember even advising some staff who had real difficulties, it's your job to go have lunch with this person, go find out who they are. What did they believe? Where did they grow up? Are they married? Do they have children? What makes them tick? What wakes them up in the morning? Once you understand someone, then you can negotiate with them on a very different level than like, well, you just don't know what you're talking about. That doesn't get you very far.

So those were the ways in which we were in deep relationship. Then you could really say, okay, here is the goal of our policy. Tell me the goal of what you want to see done in this law. And once you've established goals, then you work your way back about what you can negotiate. Laws are like thousands of pages. And as you're going through them, you have to ground them in data, research. So there's a lot of back and forth, but it should always be grounded in the facts as opposed to the sort of perception of things.

Menendez: I think you just give a masterclass in negotiations that I will be bringing to something as inconsequential as what we're going to have for dinner tonight. But all the same, I appreciate it.

I'm serious because these things do impact our lives. They impact the schools that we send our children to. They impact the taxes we pay. They impact the healthcare we have access to. And it's all living in thousand page documents with Hill staffers who are trying to get things done.. So how did you ultimately pull yourself up?

Otero: Tom Harkin, who was the chair of the committee at the time announced that he was retiring in January of 2013. And when he announced his retirement, I remember walking back to my office, getting on the phone with my older sister, who'd been here in Florida since 2004. To your point, I went to do a fellowship and I thought I'm going to do this for nine months and then I'm going to go do something else. And then I was in DC for 12 years and I remember calling her and being like, my boss is retiring. And so am I, I'm finally moving to Florida.

And I think I could have easily been sucked back in, if not for the fact that 10 months later I met the man who's now my husband who was splitting his time between DC and Miami. And then it made that future even more real. It was like, oh, I put something into the universe and now the universe is aligning things to make that happen. As I was leaving, everyone was like, wait, you're not going into the administration after Tom Harkin retires, wait, wait, you're not going to be going where you're going to move to Florida? But I knew for me that my next phase was about teaching others to fish. I just knew that I felt that instinctually, like I've done it. I feel good about the things that I've done. I've touched some laws. I know I've made good impact, but one person is not enough. And we need every leader thinking in equitable ways, we need more leaders of color. We need more leaders that are rooted in educational and equity and rooted in community solutions and not policy happening to them, but happening with them. And so how do I bring those values and that sort of leadership model to more people?

Menendez: Am I remembering correctly that you were part of a black sorority?

Otero: I am, yes. I am a member of Zeta Phi Beta sorority, which just made up a hundred years last year.

Menendez: Congratulations. Talk to me about the role that that has played in your life.

Otero: It's interesting given the present conversation around latinidad and anti-blackness in the Latino community and so many other topics and conversations and Black lives matter. And so many things that have happened over the last year, it does go back to sort of how I grew up. And I grew up in a house where my mom is Dominicana. My mom is pretty fair. She is your complexion. My father is a Black Puerto Rican and looks like Richard Pryor. So I

grew up in a house, literally my dad looks like Richard Pryor and I just, I grew up in a house where this was true and it was all under like, we're Latinos, we're Puerto Rican and Dominican. What are you talking about? So when I looked around at sororities in college, that is what I gravitated to both from the historical perspective, the members that were there were people that spoke to me, a lot of Dominicans and Puertorriquenas were members of my sorority.

But also because I knew at 19, my minor in college was African-American studies, Latin American, Caribbean, I studied myself enough to know we are a mixture of all of this and all of this is a part of me and I am not going to sort of compartmentalize myself. But what it did for me at 19 was it deeply grounded me in discipline, a deep, deep respect for the historical context of the black community in the United States and what that community is, who they are, amazing leaders, Zora Neale Hurston is a Zeta, just such amazing contributors to America that has come from the black community and the privilege that it is to be a part of that history through the sorority.

Menendez: In the world do you get coded as black?

Otero: No, interestingly enough, I have literally been told to my face, what are you? You're culturally ambiguous. People have said this to my face. It depends on where I am in the country and whether or not it's winter or summer, I wear my hair curly in the heat. And I blow my hair out in the winter. Not for any other reason than the practicality of being a New Yorker, like in the snow you're not walking outside with your hair wet. So when my hair is blown out, I might get, oh, are you half black, half white? I'll get some of that. Or are you black? I'll get some of that. When my hair is curly people are like, ah, what are you? I have made a choice to always say, I am Latina. And it is so grounded in, I will not concede the word Latina to be centered in whiteness.

So then I them and othering myself by hyphenating the word Latina to say afro, I am centering the word Latina in a mixed race people. I am super proud to be black. I'm super proud of the blackness in me. The word Latina is a mixed race people. And when I walk into a room and I say, I'm Latina, people look at me. They're like, oh, she's black. Yes. And that's who is Latina. We can't let ourselves as a community get defined before we even walk into a room. And there were somehow treated differently because we don't look like what people think we should look like on both sides of that spectrum, by the way, because I also have Latina friends who are like blue eyed and blonde, and get the same treatment from other Latinos who are like, oh, really? You're Latina? So we, we do that to each other, which is really unfortunate.

Identity is a deeply personal experience. And we have to not project our stuff onto other people. And how do we make space for whose someone's lived experience allows them to show up as, that's the work. If you don't do that, then you are negating their experience to your benefit. I think I moved this back to my social work training, whenever you're with a client, you start with where a client is, you don't start where you want them to be. You start where they are, what is their lived experience, what do you know. And then you find

strength in that. And then you build on that strength to where you can help that person to be in a healthier place.

Menendez: Mildred, thank you so much.

Otero: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Menendez: I took so much away from this conversation as I do every conversation I have with Mildred. But if I had to pick one part that I have thought about most it's Mildred's reflections on the art of compromise while we will not all be congressional negotiators, we all do negotiate every day over different visions, different ways of approaching a problem. And I'm struck by Mildred's insight that you cannot do that effectively, unless you understand what is motivating the person on the other side of that negotiation. Who are they? Where did they come from? What is it that is shaping their thinking? Yes there are of course bigger questions. When does it make sense to hold firm? And when do you make concessions in the name of getting something done? But even that is easier to assess when you know what is motivating the other side.

Hey, thank you so much for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantugua and me, Alicia Menendez. Sarah McClure is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Stephen Colón mixed this episode. Jimmy Gutierrez is our managing editor. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you email us at hola at Latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at Latina to Latina. Remember to subscribe or follow us on radio public, Apple podcast, Google podcast, good pods, wherever you're listening right now. And remember, every time you share the podcast or you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "How Mildred Otero Learned to Negotiate" *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. October, 22 2021. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by:



Latina to Latina: How Mildred Otero Learned to Negotiate