



Why Aida Rodriguez Believes in Giving Grace

The beloved comedian shares the pain of growing up without her father, the decision to reunite with him decades later, and the healing power of giving grace. It's all part of her new memoir, *Legitimate Kid*.

Alicia Menendez: Last time we spoke with comedian Aida Rodriguez she was teeing up her HBO Max comedy special, *Fighting Words*, where in addition to making us laugh so hard it hurt, she gave us a window into her pain, allowing us to bear witness to her reunion with her estranged father. Now Aida is giving us even more context with her new memoir, *legitimate Kid*. We have done the career conversation. Definitely take a listen to our first episode because today we're going to get into the pain of a parent's absence, what happens when their presence isn't what you imagined and the healing power of giving grace. Aida, welcome back.

Aida Rodriguez: Thank you for having me back. You know I love you.

Menendez: Aida, I loved the book. I think the title '*Legitimate Kid*' kind of says it all. Take me back to the first time that you were teased for not having your dad's last name.

Rodriguez: Oh, yeah. I was third grade. This girl in my class made fun of me and called me a bastard. And she was like, "Your daddy didn't sign your birth certificate." And when I asked my mom what a bastard was, she said, "That's a kid who doesn't have their father's last name." But it was just very casual. She didn't say, "You are a bastard." I deduced that because I had her last name and my mother wasn't married. And that's when it started, it started when I was eight years old.

Menendez: It's so deep that quest for legitimacy, right? Not just legitimacy inside your own family, but the need for external validation, the need to be legitimate in the eyes of men. You end up with so many men about whom there are red flags that you detail from beginning to end. The need for validation as a performer, as a model. I mean, you were drawn to both men and to fields where external validation is the whole game. What does it take? What has it taken for you to begin the process of undoing that need for finding that outside of yourself?

Rodriguez: It didn't start with me, it started with my kids. Because I loved my kids more than I loved myself. And so when my daughter started questioning things about her name and my son having issues about not having his dad, that is when I was like, "I have to start working on this because I'm projecting this onto my kids and I want my kids to be whole and happy because they're not going to be made feel like they're less than because their dad is not in the house.

They are whole human beings. They're capable, they are exceptional." And then through that work, I started working backwards onto myself. My kids have been my greatest

teachers in life. They fight for my esteem, they fight for my respect, they fight for my validation on a daily basis. They were the first ones to tell me, "You are somebody." And from me, for it to actually resonate and actually land with me, it was those two.

Menendez: To the point about how important your kids are to you, you have your first son, you're very young, and there's sort of this entire back and forth about will you stay with his dad, will you not stay with his dad. And finally he proposes to you, he wants to get married and everything in your gut is screaming, "No." You knew it was not for you. You knew it was not the right choice.

And it really is just sort of the look on your son's face that seals the deal for you in that moment. And I wonder when you have times in your life when your gut tells you what to do, you ignore your gut and then you end up finding out that you were right. If that builds the muscle memory of being like, "No, now when I feel it in my gut, I got to listen."

Rodriguez: Yes and no. I have so many more instances when I just remember. I think the problem with me was that I was programmed at such a young age to think about other people before myself.

Menendez: Which I just want to say is a quintessentially Latina experience.

Rodriguez: Yeah. The oldest kid. I was programmed to take care of other people first. So even when my gut is like, "Don't do this, don't do this," that immediate sensor to survey what's around me and what needs to be taken care of around me kind of takes priority over me.

And unpacking that and saying no is something that didn't start for me until I was able to remove myself completely from my family and my environment in Miami, when I had to go. Because people in Miami, I joke about it, people will say, "Oh, the Cubans and the Puerto Ricans and the Dominicans." But reality of it is that collectively our cultures are really similar. We're broken up by dialects and the way we cook our bananas, but the truth is-

Menendez: And beans.

Rodriguez: And beans. But the truth is that we're essentially the same people. The way we were colonized and socialized, the things that happen to all of us, all of us, not just the dark skinned ones, not just the indigenous ones, all of us has had this effect on us. And so a lot of those things that were taught were taught across the board for all of us. And so for me, I was like, "This is a cultural thing.

Oh, I have to take care of my grandmother. Oh, I got to go translate. Oh, I can't go because my mom has to work and I can't leave my grandmother alone" or "I have to take care of my siblings." I had to get away from everybody. And it was only when I was able to get away from my family and that culture of guilt and shame that was driving everything was I then able to start unpacking and listening to my own gut.

Menendez: When you grow up without someone important in your life, I think there's a really natural tendency to lionize and mythologize that person.

Rodriguez: Yeah.

Menendez: Both who they are and what your life would be if they were in it. What were the stories you were telling yourself about who your dad was and what did you think your life was going to look like if you were reunited?

Rodriguez: It's funny, it would always look like what I was seeing around me when I saw friends. My friend Norma in the book, she grew up with her dad in her house. Every day they would have dinner every day. He would say, "Hey, how was your day?" To the kids. I would sit at the table and he would ask me and I would be like, "Really?"

He would pick his daughter up and he was her protector. And for me, it was a lot about protection. And I use that word a lot because I ended up learning how to protect myself. And that always felt like something your father should do because that's what I was told, "You're the princess, your dad protects you."

So in my mind, my life would've been a lot easier and a lot of the bad things... I mean, when you don't have that person and you romanticize who they are, they get to be the rescuer in your life because they're there to counter the villain. And so in my mind, it was none of the things that would've happened to me, I know I remember being 14 years old and saying, "None of this stuff would've happened to me if he would've been here."

Menendez: For your HBO Max special, *Fighting Words*, I thought it was a real act of bravery and generosity that you choose to allow us as viewers watch you meet your dad for the first time. I felt watching it that I could sense your disappointment that this just wasn't who you had imagined. And so did then read in *Legitimate Kid* about the fact that you were really disappointed. One, because no one could live up to the hype of what you just laid out. And two, you were meeting an older, less vibrant version of your dad.

Rodriguez: Yeah. It was disappointing. It was a moment of growth for me. It was a moment where I actually had to reconnect with the little girl in me and give her a hug. Because the truth of it is that whether my father would've been 27, 47, 57 or whatever his current age is, he lived in a place where the privilege wasn't accessible to him. He didn't have a lot of opportunities in life, and the male privilege that he had was what allowed him to navigate in the spaces that he did.

But he was still living in a poverty-stricken country, struggling with the ills of the toxic masculinity. He had a lot of trauma as well. But yeah, you go there and you think, especially if you've built this thing up in your head, and no matter how old you are, the little you lives, and we live our whole lives trying to heal little us.

So that whole thing built up in my head, and then you get there and you realize this is a real human being that has real struggles in life and may very well not be as evolved as you would like for him to be, but hasn't had the opportunities or conditions for that to happen. And it was a hard thing to do.

I wanted to document it. I wanted to show it to other people. I wanted to show people the reality of what being a comedian was and being able to say, "Hey, listen, it's not all peaches and cream and it's a struggle for all of us. This is where my jokes come from. I'm showing you this, I'm giving it to you." I was going to confront it, and so that was me confronting my life.

Menendez: I appreciate the empathy with which you speak about your father's challenges and the circumstances that shaped him. And I think part of the tension of that moment is both being able to say, "This is a person who maybe did the best they could with what they had." And at the same time, it pulls you back into that dynamic of being the one who has to save everyone, who has to take care of everyone. That is the tension a lot of us find ourselves in where it's like, "How can I both have empathy for this person I love, but not allow that empathy to cross over into undue self-sacrifice?"

Rodriguez: Yeah. And that's a battle that a lot of us struggle with. Especially now I have to be very careful with social media because social media is the playground of judgment. I saw this thread with this young woman who was going in on her parents and she was really going in hard saying they were terrible parents and that you should hold your parents accountable.

And I saw all that pain being expressed and I started reading the comments and there were so many people that were younger that were like, "That's right. You hold your parents accountable. You tell them this and you tell them that." I will tell you this, I don't ever want to be operate from that level of pain. Right? I don't want to be that angry with anybody that it will consume me to the point where it's what they say that revenge is drinking poison every day and expecting your enemy to die, whatever it is.

But when I sat down and did my mother's timeline and I sat down and I did her story, then I did my own story and I was like, "My story was an evolved version of that." Because it wasn't quite as bad as her story was, but I was like, "What my daughter is going to do one day I hope is be able to look at her story and look at mine and see that hers was better because of me."

It's so easy to say all of that stuff and then you become a parent and you think you're going to do it all the right way, and then one day your kids will be like, "But you didn't." You have no clue. You got a blind spot because you're only human. And so for me it was just like, is this going to be an indictment?

Is it going to be a conviction of somebody or is this going to be part of your healing journey? And for me, that was the decision that I made. I don't want to hate my father. I want to understand why he is the way that he is so that I can employ empathy for him and give him some grace because obviously he didn't get it as a child. But it's taken a lot of work to be able to do that.

Menendez: There's a beautiful corollary in Legitimate Kid where you talk about your daughter and the name that she wanted to write.

Rodriguez: Yeah.

Menendez: Can you tell me that story?

Rodriguez: My daughter used to write my last name instead of her dad's last name, and she has her dad's last name. And her teacher just thought that it was, she was like, "That's what Latinos do. The kids will come in there." Right? She was like, "They'll have all these long names because some of the kids in Latin America, you had both of your parents' last names." And I was like, "I don't know that anybody who was born in the nineties, in the two thousands is doing that."

Sure, some of the kids who have embraced the way the old customs are. But anyway, she was signing her name and she was so proud to have my name. She was like, "I don't want his name, I want your name." She was like, "I want to be like you because you're the one that's here." And it was the complete opposite of me. And it made me feel like, "Damn, I wish I would've been like that with my mom."

Because I was walking around just like, "You did it wrong. You did it the wrong way." And my daughter, who I thought I did it the right way because I was married, was like, "Ah, that doesn't matter. What matters is the name that I'm proud of is this name. You're the one that's here. You're the one that's doing the work." And I just was like, "I wish I could have had that. I wish I was fueled by that when I was little, because it made me feel good and I just left her alone.

Because I was ashamed. I was like, "Stop telling people that you don't have your father's last name. I was married. You were born out of a marriage." I was like, "Stop doing it." It feels like the Game of Thrones, like, "You are your father's. You have your father's name, Slayer of Dragons." I was like, "You have the name. What's wrong with you?" And she was

just like, "That doesn't matter." It doesn't matter to her. She was just like, "I want your name. I'm proud of my mommy."

Menendez: One of the things I've always been drawn to about you, Aida, is your darkness. That is the part that I personally as this fellow dark person hook into. And so I thought it was funny that the beginning of Legitimate Kid, you say, "I know you come to me for laughs, but that is not why you should be coming for this book. There will be some laughs in here, but this is the truth, unvarnished and difficult and messy." And what I want to ask you about is I am curious for you as someone who makes your living, at least part of your living, as a comedian, how you decided to take the risk and tell a story that wasn't being told for the purpose of being funny.

Rodriguez: I'm only a comedian on stage, and I think that that's been one of the things I've had to accept and the people who follow me have to accept. I'm not the court jester. It is not my job to make you laugh at every turn. I am a comedian on stage, and if you want to see me tell jokes, you have to come watch me perform because that's where I am a comedian. Writing my book, I was an author and I wanted to sit down and respect it in that way. For me, sometimes it doesn't resonate when I read books that are written by people who are funny, who trivialize their trauma because they have to feel like they got to stay consistent with what a comedian is. And they're like, "Oh, look, this happened to me. Ha. Ha. Ha." It makes me feel bad for the people who are telling their story that they can't fully just bask in the moment because they are relegated to this being funny. I wanted to tell my story and without the pressure of a punchline.

Menendez: I also identify with that a lot because I think that is part of the reason that I, as a television host, personality journalist, don't give great meeting. Because people want that person who's out on set professionally lit to show up in a meeting and I show up much more like a producer in energy where it's like, "I'm not a show pony."

Rodriguez: Yes.

Menendez: And the problem is people want a show pony very often, when you get a lot more out of a workhorse.

Rodriguez: Absolutely, they will dehumanize you and they will reduce you to their entertainment. I'm an entertainer and what I do is your entertainment, but I'm not your entertainment. And there's a difference. Especially people who are not of the ruling class, right? When you have a last name like Rodriguez, there are people who expect you to have... people will say to me, "I thought you would be a little more feisty or spicy." And I'm like, "Spicy makes me feel weird when I hear those words in those terms." But yeah, you have to fight for your agency and you got to fight for your humanity because at the end of the day, that is dehumanization. You would never walk up to George Carlin and be like, "Do the eyebrow, George." No, you wouldn't. You'd be like, "Oh." They're like, "Oh, you resonate with me so much. I think you're brilliant. Thank you for saying it." So I refuse to be that, and that's been my journey and my plight in comedy. It's been a struggle for me. I don't have millions of followers. I don't get the big thing sometimes because I don't want to be that. For me, what I leave behind is going to be real instead of a caricature of myself that my grandchildren will be embarrassed of.

Menendez: Aida, I want everyone to buy this book. I want everyone to read this book. What did I miss?

Rodriguez: I just thought about other people who struggled with legitimacy, who are out there seeking validation. But the other part of this book that is very important to me is my mother. We kind of raised each other. I was part of such a painful journey, and I was born into trauma

because my mom was really struggling with the things that were happening to her. I always felt that my mother was worthy of understanding.

Not to excuse some of her bad decisions or to promote her not being able to do the best and sometimes, but I always wanted to give my mother grace, and I really wanted to understand her. So this book was not just about me, but learning to understand my mother and doing research and learning things about my mother that I didn't know. And I wanted to just share my journey with other people because a lot of times we grow angry, and illness is born of a lot of anger, resentment, and pain, and walking around being mad at your parents for the rest of your life.

But if we don't ever take charge of our own lives and from one point say, "Now I'm in charge," we will always be the victims, and I don't want to be a victim for the rest of my life. I wanted to be a victor. We can intellectualize this all we want. People's hearts are not healed, and if they are hurt, they are not going to give healing. And so I gave them grace and I got free, and I feel so good because of it.

Menendez: Whew. It's a perfect note to end on, Aida. As always, thank you so much.

Rodriguez: Oh, thank you. I appreciate you having me always and I'm always here to show up for 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 at Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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