



How Amanda Fernandez's Own Educational Challenges Inspired Latinos for Education

The non-profit leader shares how her corporate experience prepared her to found and run her own organization, her insights on the occasional necessity of mission creep, and how advocating for her own son reshaped her understanding of what the future of education will require.

Alicia Menendez:

Amanda Fernandez found her own educational experience lukewarm and challenging. Would it have been different if she had been surrounded by Latino educators who were invested in her success, who really saw her? That question is at the heart of Latinos for Education, an organization Amanda co-founded and now leads creating leadership pathways for emerging Latino leaders in education. We talk about why mission creep is sometimes necessary and what being a parent and advocating for her own children has taught her about the future of education.

Menendez: Amanda, thank you so much for being here.

Amanda Fernandez:

Alicia, it's such a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much for having me.

Menendez: I am so excited about this interview for a number of reasons. One of which is you now join a long list of Midwest Latinas that we have had on this show. So I want to know how the Cubans ended up in farmland?

Fernandez: Wow. I didn't know I was in such good company of so many Latinas.

Menendez: There are more of you than people realize.

Fernandez: I wish I had known that 45 years ago. Don't mean to date myself, but that's around the time of my upbringing in west-central Illinois, a small farming community that had a small university.

Fernandez: When my parents came to the United States from Cuba, they were there for a little while working any kind of job that they could. And then my father found out about a resettlement program of sorts that was resettling Cubans to the Midwest.

Fernandez: My parents first landed in Iowa on the day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated. The first time they had seen snow in their lives and it was a cold bitter November day and that was their sort of welcome to the Midwest.

Menendez: There's a familiar element to your family story, at least familiar to me. My family came from Cuba in the 1950s, my Tía Cacha, I think everyone acknowledges, is the smartest sibling on that side of the family. My dad got to go to college, she did not. And there's just an incredible splitting of the road from that moment in their lives. The same thing plays out in your family.

- Fernandez: It sure does. So my father had been educated in Cuba. My mother had a high school-level education. And when they got here through this resettlement program, while it was really difficult and a long road, my father was able to get a degree in the United States and went as far as getting his PhD to teach Spanish at Western Illinois University, which is why we landed there.
- Fernandez: What the juxtaposition in that fork was that my mother with limited English language ability and high school education worked in the kitchens of the dorm buildings on the same campus that my father taught at. So my mother talks about how she chop led us in those kitchens for 25 plus years. And boy, she could make a beautiful salad, but she had dreams and aspirations herself that weren't realized. Very different paths were carved out because of educational opportunity. And when I reflect back on why I'm doing what I do now, I really think that's foundational.
- Menendez: You describe your own educational experience as lukewarm and challenging. Can you tell me about a time that illustrates what you mean when you say it was lukewarm or it was challenging?
- Fernandez: It's a little bit of a difficult question to answer because it has a lot of emotion attached to it. When I think back on what my educational experience was, I think especially in high school, is where things changed a lot for me. I ended up being what I would characterize as a disaffected student in high school. I had a lot of challenges with subjects like math and science. And I didn't know where to go. I think I had shame that I couldn't just do it and understand it. And I didn't know how to advocate for myself. I didn't know how to even talk to my parents about it. I wanted to be seen. And I really didn't feel like I was in the ways that really mattered for my having a trajectory that would allow me to have access to a great education.
- Menendez: This is not where you start your career. You spend seven years at Deloitte before you even start to get that inkling that it is time to shift. And it's not the only pivot you have, right? You go from Deloitte to Bridgespan?
- Fernandez: Bridgespan was one of the places, and I worked at a couple of other companies in between.
- Menendez: And then 911 happens. What is it about September 11th that changes you?
- Fernandez: So as you might imagine, my parents were like, "Get a job at a company. That's what you need to go do, go be a secretary in "La Proctor and Gamble." And that's what, like what it was. And so guess what? I tried to get a job as a secretary at Proctor & Gamble. It didn't work. I didn't get the job. But I went into the corporate world and I'd been working a lot. I really sacrificed a lot of my life for the job and sort of the expectations of being visible, of always being available, of working on weekends. And that's what I was doing in New York City in my role at the time when 911 happened. And as I think probably for a lot of people, it was a crucible moment to really reflect on how you were living your life at that time.
- Fernandez: It was just a reminder that I needed to do something different because my passion was not coming through in the current work that I was doing. What I really had cared about was parts of my work that had been about equity, opportunity, meritocracy, and leveling the playing field for primarily Black and Latino employees of a corporation. That's where I got my energy. And I wanted to figure out how I got back into that space because that's what mattered to me.
- Menendez: How did you though assess the void that there was when it came to work in the educational nonprofit sector with Latinos for Education? What was the problem you were

solving for and how did you arrive at your theory of change about what it was going to take to meet that need?

Fernandez: I was able to spend about five years working at Teach For America, with the focus on the Latino community. And first off I saw for myself and experienced for myself what the problem was. The problem was, was that we were seeing a tremendously growing Latino population. We have, in just a couple years, one in three school children will identify as Latino. And that was happening years and years ago, we all know this, but I was not seeing the representation of educators increase relative to that population growth.

Fernandez: And so through my own eyes and experiences I saw the impact that a Latino teacher can make on their Latino students. And I would say the experience that really crystallized that the most for me was when I was able to spearhead an effort to recruit more documented young people into the teaching profession and the ability for undocumented American young people in front of classrooms that were telling the children in their classrooms, that you can be me made a real difference.

Fernandez: And then I needed data and facts, right? So part of that professional life really informed this ability to create a theory of change, which was, we believe that when Latino children have an educator and system leaders that reflect their experiences and backgrounds that we will be able to see closing gaps in educational access and opportunity because we know that representation matters. And through the research that I did, I wrote a business plan. I verified that indeed there was a gap. There was no other organization in the country that's doing quite the work that we're doing at the national level.

Fernandez: We know Latinos want to lead and succeed as educators. We need to start eliminating those barriers for our educators to access those opportunities, and not quite so simple, but that's how Latinos for Education was born.

Menendez: There's a part of that story that I want to underline. And that is this idea that you're writing a business plan for a nonprofit entity because I think that people who haven't spent time in the nonprofit space. Sometimes aren't aware, you're talking multimillion-dollar budgets, you're talking big fundraising. So talk me through that plan and the amount of money and funding it takes to get an organization like Latinos for Education off the ground.

Fernandez: First, there was a great deal of pressure to get off the ground. And that was my husband telling me that you have six months to write your business plan and to get this thing off the ground, because we've got a mortgage to pay. He was like, "Okay, I'm supportive of your dreams, but we have children, we've got a house we've got to pay off," And so there you have it. My background in strategic planning and change management and human resources consulting has been foundational to, I think, the building of the organization.

Fernandez: That work and that experience really helped me to build a business plan that would be credible to funders, because guess what, less than 2% of philanthropic dollars go to Latino-founded and led nonprofit organizations across the country. And we have hundreds of thousands of nonprofits across the country.

Fernandez: So I felt like I had sort of a double whammy of like people don't have a clear understanding of the Latino community and it was several years before equity was such a big word in the philanthropic world.

Menendez: In the early part of my career, I did nonprofit work and there was a pattern that emerged again and again, which was this idea of mission creep where an organization that does A, but all of a sudden there's \$250,000 available and funding available to do B. So all of a sudden you're doing B and then there is \$100,000 that shows up for item C. And then all

of a sudden you have sort of lost your way and you're no longer clear about the problem you're solving for or how you believe you're going to solve it. How do you avoid that happening inside your organization?

Fernandez: It's really hard to avoid mission creep when there are so many issues that get in the way of Latino students accessing a good education.

Fernandez: So when I started Latinos for Education, it was just whatever funding I can get to get us started. I first got \$5,000. Then I got \$100,000 dollars. And then about a year after my business plan had been written, I got sort of that first big check of about half a million dollars. And I do think it takes about a million dollars in funding to get an organization off the ground and that funding has to be non-discretionary funding. And so that is super important. And I think that lesson has helped us in terms of how we think about growth and what conditions need to be in place before we will grow and expand.

Fernandez: I will tell you Alicia though that during the pandemic, we've had to have some mission creep because it's been absolutely necessary. Absolutely necessary that we get involved in different ways that might not be all about educator leadership development.

Fernandez: We had to do some translation for some school districts in Spanish because we saw that Latino families were getting very limited information and not getting nearly the same amount of information that would've been written in English. Right? So English speaking families here in Massachusetts, where I'm at, I helped support a group of non-profit leaders in Boston who wanted to start learning pods to make sure that Latino and Black kids had a place to go during the day. Were getting three meals a day and getting an education. We just, I just jumped right in because it had to be done.

Menendez: In addition to the work you do to advocate for the community at large, you also have two kids of your own. And I wonder, as a mom, what counsel would you give other parents, other caretakers, when it comes to being a good advocate for a child's education?

Fernandez: It's another really emotional place for me. So here I am with a college education, I'm running my own organization. I've learned how to navigate the world. But when I had the experience with my own son who had different needs in school, I didn't know how to advocate for him. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. And I spent many years trying to figure it out, because guess what, I'm supposed to be humble. In school, I'm supposed to leave the school to know the answer. And I didn't know how to get into that space to advocate for the needs of my child until I did know.

Fernandez: And then, y entonces, preparate. Because then I became that fierce advocate that would not relent. And that is what I advise to families. Because guess what? The last couple of years, we got the most eye-opening experience into the educational system. We as families, we as parents, we as caregivers, need to insert ourselves and be the advocates that we know our children need. And it's a hard first step and you make missteps and there's a lot, you don't know, but you have to take those first steps.

Fernandez: And then you start to build your knowledge base. You start to build what it means to truly advocate for your child. And I will forever feel guilt that I didn't figure it out fast enough. And yet I feel like I've learned how things get done in the system, right, and that's sort of a core understanding that anyone who's trying to navigate this country at large, it's something you've got to learn to get anything done. And that's what I learned. It was hard though, really hard..

Menendez: When I was writing my book, *The Likeability Trap*, one of the Latinas I interview said that, "Latinas are raised with a PhD in graciousness," and sometimes being a fierce advocate requires you to be ungracious.

Fernandez: Yeah. And you know, we've heard it speak up even when your voice trembles, right? My voice has trembled a lot in the last five, six, or seven years, but it's time now. It's time for us as Latinas to have that voice. When I first started *Latinas for Education*, agitate when necessary is one of our core values. And so I urge the Latinas listening to this, take that on, because it's our time now to do that.

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

Fernandez: You're very welcome.

Menendez: Thank you as always for listening, *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at Hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMS on Instagram. Tweet us at [#LatinatoLatina](https://twitter.com/LatinatoLatina). Check out our merchandise that is on our website, latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember please subscribe or follow us on Apple podcast, Google podcast, Good pods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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