



How Philanthropic CEO Carmen Rojas Learned to Lead As Her Full Self

Raised by Nicaraguan and Venezuelan parents who immigrated to the U.S. in the middle of the Civil Rights and labor movements, she grew up determined to uphold the ideals of justice and equality. After being the first in her family to go to college, she set to work improving the lives of working people. In this expansive and intimate conversation with Alicia, Carmen, now the CEO of the Marguerite Casey Foundation, opens up about her modest upbringing, how to strengthen philanthropy, and why she does not hide any part of herself in her new role.

Alicia Menendez:

What would you do if you had millions of dollars at your fingertips? Let me clarify. What would you do if your job was to take that money and spend it in ways that would make the world a better place? That's the question that Carmen Rojas is confronted with every day. Carmen is the president and CEO of the Marguerite Casey Foundation. She stepped into the role just as COVID-19 hit and this moment is inspiring big questions about generosity, giving, and the future of philanthropy. Carmen, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Carmen Rojas: Oh, thank you so much. I'm such a fan of you, of your show, and so I'm so glad to be here.

Menendez: I love when interviews start that way. Carmen, much of your career has focused on improving the life of working people across the country. What about your own upbringing drew you to this work?

Rojas: Yeah. My mom immigrated from Nicaragua and my dad immigrated from Venezuela. They landed in San Francisco and they immigrated at this really weird moment in time in U.S. history, where it was the peak of the civil rights movement, the peak of the labor movement, the peak of the feminist movement, and so my parents, with middle school educations, both from very rural places, came to San Francisco and were able to make lives for themselves and for us, for their kids, that were so far beyond the things that they could imagine. So, my parents graduated from middle school and I got a PhD from Berkeley. I think a lot about how that time that my parents immigrated so shaped the opportunities that were available to me, and how from that moment to today, we've seen that window of opportunity shut for the vast majority of people, both immigrants, people of color, Native folks, Black people, that this moment in time, we were expected to squeeze the juice out of a grain of sand.

And I looked around me and one, it was exhausting to be one of the only women, one of the very few women of color, one of a dot of Latinas in rooms, and just made a very sort of clear decision to really focus all of my energy on making sure that I'm not going to be the only one, that I won't be the last generation of people that gets to benefit and enjoy from these moments in time, and to try to figure out ways to create more moments in time for more of us to be better off.

Menendez: Growing up, how was generosity displayed in your home?

Rojas: My mom is one of 17 and my dad is one of 10.

Menendez: 17 all birthed by the same woman?

Rojas: All birthed by the same woman. My mom was the first one of her siblings to migrate to the United States, and my dad as well, and so my mom tells these really amazing stories. Her siblings, her sisters especially, wanted to come to the United States. She would work all day, work most of the night, spend the nights filling out immigration paperwork, taking them in, for 17 siblings, and our house really became sort of a beacon. I can't remember a time in my childhood where we didn't have other people living in our house. My mom worked cleaning office buildings, she worked sewing clothes and worked at the last Levi's factory in San Francisco. Our house, I feel like, was what I think is true philanthropy. This desire to give, this desire to open up. Some might think of yours, but others think of ours, so that so many more people can enjoy the ability to live lives of dignity.

Menendez: When did you first learn about philanthropy as a formal concept for disseminating help?

Rojas: Yeah. I was an undergrad. I had this really interesting fellowship at this organization in San Francisco called The Greenlining Institute. My summer project was to try to figure out in the state of California, of all of these institutional donors, how much of their money went to organizations led by people of color and immigrants? And it turned out, these numbers haven't changed much, but it's like less than 5%. And so, my job was to call all of these institutions and to do the tally board and be like, "Okay, less than 1%." And it was really striking to me, because philanthropy is one of those things that is benevolent and powerful, like we think about it as inherently something good to give. But we don't ever tell the backstory, like philanthropic institutions, again, like my own, are often built on twice stolen wealth. Wealth that's extracted from our economy on the one side, and on the other side, wealth that people aren't paying taxes into our social safety net, into our government to actually try to resolve some of the issues that foundations are trying to solve.

Once it became visible to me that these institutions existed, that these people were giving money, and that they weren't only giving money to sort of social service programs or to help people from the space of generosity, but these dollars were actually shaping our political and economic experience. We can tie the rise of charter schools to philanthropy. We can tie the rise of privatizing public goods to philanthropy. Once it became visible to me, it was something that I couldn't unsee, and I now am in a really interesting position, because in this moment, the moment that... The COVID moment, the economic crisis moment, the social unrest moment, has really invited me to think about philanthropy as this intermediary step.

Right now, a lot of really amazing social justice foundations are supporting the leaders on the front lines of the movement for Black lives, for example. Like we have doubled down in our commitment to organizations and leaders like Color of Change and Rashad Robinson, like Marisa Franco and Mijente, really to try to create a more equal footing. That's the gift that we have is to create a more equal footing in this moment when there's a real contest for power.

Menendez: You earned a bachelor's degree in politics from University of California Santa Cruz, then you began working on a doctorate at Berkeley. What was the plan as you were pursuing those degrees?

Rojas: Yeah. Ni idea. Ni idea. So, as the first kid in my family to go to college, I went to community college, and UC Santa Cruz had this really amazing program with my community college

where you could come with your transcripts and your letters of recommendation and they would admit you on the spot. So, I was like, “Oh, well it’s right here, let me go.” I got my little paper, my little folder, and I took it and I was admitted. And I was like, “Oh well, then this is where I’m gonna go.” And I had a couple of really amazing experiences at UC Santa Cruz. I really quickly was able to get research jobs with people like Manuel Pastor, or Sonia Alvarez, like people at the forefront of thinking about social change in Latin America, social change in the United States. It just opened up a universe of possibility I’d never considered. When I graduated from high school, my dad gave me this talk, which was, “Your mom went from cleaning office buildings to now she’s a secretary, so you may want to consider going to an ITT Tech, because it’s really changed our life.”

The edge of what was possible for my parents, that was the edge. And so, I was like, “Well, I don’t know. Maybe there’s something out there.” I kept on you know, *tocando con la punta del pie*, you know. Being like, “Okay, like how much farther can I go?” And I graduated from UC Santa Cruz, and got this fellowship at Greenlining Institute, and started to work at nonprofits, and I had somebody who now runs the San Francisco Foundation, Fred Blackwell, sat me down and was like, “So, what do you... What’s the plan? What are you gonna do?” And I was like, “Well, I don’t...” At that point, as whatever, a 21-year-old, was making more money than my parents could ever imagine making. Had greater job security than my parents could ever imagine having.

And so, I was like, “I feel like I’m winning.” *Y te digo*, like I was making \$35,000 a year, and I was like, “Victory!” I’m like winning, taking names, you couldn’t tell me that I wasn’t a victorious person.

Ad: *Is there something that’s getting in the way of your happiness or that’s preventing you from achieving your goals? I have found in my own life that talking with someone can make a big difference, but sometimes the logistics, finding the right person, the time to connect makes things complicated. BetterHelp Online Counseling connects you with a professional counselor in a safe and private online environment. You can get help on your own time and at your own pace. You can schedule secure video or phone sessions, plus chat and text with your therapist. BetterHelp’s licensed professional counselors specialize in everything from depression, to relationships, to self-esteem.*

In fact, so many people have been using BetterHelp that they’re recruiting additional counselors in all 50 states. Best of all, it’s an affordable option. Latina to Latina listeners get 10% off your first month with the discount code Latina. So, why not join one million people who are taking charge of their mental health? Go to [BetterHelp.com/Latina](https://www.betterhelp.com/Latina). That’s BetterHelp, H-E-L-P, .com/Latina.

Menendez: How has being Latina informed your life’s work?

Rojas: Oh, in absolutely every way. In every way. I think it’s... There’s something very unique for me about being half Nicaraguense, half Venezolana, growing up in California in a majority Mexican context, where I had to, with the same language, navigate different relationships even in my household. You know, like there are things that Venezolanos say that Nicaraguenses think are like... are bad words. Like needing to navigate the multiplicity of what it means to be Latina is something that I feel like has created a level of nimbleness in my being, like an openness to doing things differently. I feel truly tricultural, even quadra cultural, like growing up in the United States, Venezolana, Nicaraguense, in a mostly Mexican context, needing to see that there isn’t one true story of us, right? That even in my story, there are... I have Afro Latinos in my family, I have Asian Latinos in my family. I

was able to understand things that I think it takes white Americans so much longer to understand about the complexity and the nuance of race and ethnicity. It's given me a lot of passion, because I think that there's a way in which that's gendered and racialized, but I'm gonna give to myself, like take that back.

Menendez: How do you then see your Latinidad showing up in your leadership?

Rojas: Oh, in every which way. Here especially, because I'm clear about the positional power and authority that I have at Marguerite Casey Foundation. I push to highlight it. Es un resalto, you know? Like I will go in between speaking Spanish and English in a meeting full of white people, because I'm like, "You should. Hello? We're like 30% of the population. What's happening here? Let's figure it out. We can't only be props for you or caricatures for you. You have to engage with us the way we engage with us." I think running an organization, what's been interesting, and having, again, Jonathan Jayes-Green as a partner in this moment, to have such a brilliant, and powerful, and frankly like a visionary for us, to have a Latina who looks like me, and an Afro Latino that looks like them in these position, I think helps create greater texture for who we are when we are whole as a community. It helps make visible so many Latinos who are invisible to Latinos and moreover, to non-Latinos in the United States, and being really clear and explicit about that, I just try to bring it to the core of the conversation as often as I possibly can.

Menendez: So then, what was the road that led you to The Workers Lab?

Rojas: Yeah. I'd worked at a number of foundations and started to realize that how we had thought about working people building power was a bit outdated, right? Like the only thing that was really available was collective bargaining and the labor union, and hundreds of thousands of workers were left out of that original contract, right? Tipped workers, so if you worked at a restaurant, domestic workers and care workers broadly were left out, contract and gig workers, agricultural workers were left out. Black, Indigenous, Latinx workers specifically were intentionally left out of the original bargain between workers, government, and employers. And so, I really saw the need to create an institution that could do two things. One, that could take back the language of innovation and experimentation, you know? Our folks are like, "Oh no, hold on. We can't really innovate. Experimentation is for those people over there." And I wanted to take back that language and say, "We actually not only need to dream, imagine, try, fail, in the same way that tech bros are allowed to do it, but it actually should be a prerequisite for the type of change that we want to see in the world."

And then on the other side, I saw that, like this ability to innovate and experiment, as a way to solve problems of these people that have been left behind. To create a new set of rules, to solve the ways that government leaders and corporate leaders intentionally left a whole swath of working people behind, and so wanted to create an institute and built an institution that at its best is a laboratory. Creating room for folks to dream, and try, and to in an uncontested, in a not performative way, to really say, "I believe this can change the lives of working people." And to give people money and say, "Here's not like \$5, but our people up to \$250,000 for a year."

Menendez: Among the things you are credit for during your time there is building a team that was majority first-gen queer people of color.

Rojas: Yeah. That was the job. In undergrad, I learned a lot about quilombos, so quilombos were these self-organized communities in Brazil of people who have been enslaved. And so,

they were like free territories, where Black people could govern, where they could build lives, where they can do the things that they wanted to do. When I had the opportunity to build The Workers Lab, I kept on thinking about all of the slights, every microaggression, every time I had to hide a different part of myself when I was working either in a majority white institution or in an institution that abided by a set of white supremacist norms.

And so, in building Workers Lab, I really wanted to create a quilombo. I wanted to create evidence that it's not only the Ivy League kid, but we were and are still a very racially diverse, sexually diverse team, but we all went to community college, we all went to state schools, we are the best expression of what happens when the government invests in our institutions, and so I wanted to create room for the people who joined our team to stretch out, like to practice, to mess up and not feel like it was an indictment of who they were, or of our community, but it was like, "Oh, you know, people make mistakes, and let's find a way to fix these things." So, the stretching out was one thing, but one of the reasons I made a decision to leave Workers Lab, and it was something that even to this day I think about, was this intentional commitment to making sure that I wasn't the only one. That I knew Adrian Haro, who is currently the CEO of Workers Lab, is perfect for that job, was well positioned to lead, and if I stayed in that job any longer, he, se iba acostumbrar. We're really great number twos.

Folks of color are really amazing at being great number twos, but I wanted to-

Menendez: Or as I say, great worker bees, not queen bees.

Rojas: That's exactly right. I wanted to create evidence that this team not only was possible, but was excellent and exceptional compared to the rest of the teams in our field, but that I could step away and everything would stay intact. But even better, things are better. Adrian's raised more money. They're doing more interesting things than I could have imagined. And the team is really a team that is growing from the ground up a set of leaders that I think need to have a platform in this moment. These positions become the goal, like stepping into these roles are so powerful, being able to give out resources, and giving out money is such a powerful thing, but that for me is like third in terms of the important things of this job.

And first is really making sure that my team at Marguerite Casey Foundation feels safe that we are invested in their leadership and growth, that we can create an example of what a just organization looks like, so that when we're talking with private sector leaders, we're talking with other philanthropic leaders, we can say it's not only the grantmaking that's important. It's like that your team sees themselves in this work. That's important, that they feel safe and taken care of. That's equally as important.

Menendez: Where is this money coming from? Because not all foundations have the same type of funding. But also, like who's applying for this money? How are they applying? Just give us a very cursory look inside of a foundation.

Rojas: I'll talk about this institution. Jim Casey is the founder of UPS and Jim Casey is a really amazing person, like his story is really fantastic, like he went from him hand delivering mail to building this company. Marguerite Casey is named after his sister and we exist because when UPS went from being a privately-owned company, so like the only people on the board were family members and known to then being traded on the stock exchange, to being like a publicly-owned company, where anybody with money can buy stock in UPS,

there was an incident that helped endow the Marguerite Casey Foundation, and so at that point, I want to say we started with maybe like a \$300 million endowment.

And essentially-

Menendez: I just, I can't say... Like to me, that's like Scrooge McDuck, just like doing back laps in his coins.

Rojas: Yeah. Yeah. Yes. That's-

Menendez: It's just like an unimaginable amount of money to me.

Rojas: Well, yeah. And we are one of the smaller endowed foundations, so just for the Ford Foundation is in the billions of dollars, right? We're now almost \$800 million. But so, the way that the government thinks about foundations, the things that I think are important to know is that our money is not taxed, right? So, it's our job to actually give out these resources to nonprofit organizations and that's the way we keep our tax status.

Secondly, that we are only required to give out 5% of that endowment, and for most institutions like my own, it's like we want these things to live forever, and ever, and ever, and so are really committed to this 5.5% of giving that we have to give out. What that means, though, is that 95% of our resources are tied up in a market to help continue the growth of our institutions. That sometimes is working at counter purposes to the 5% of our grantmaking. But I think that behind the curtain, the big thing for me is that we don't give out enough money, and it's because we're not required to. There's a push now by organizations like the Patriotic Millionaires to move that 5% to 10%. We're preparing for that. We have to be ready for that.

But also, that when we only have to give out 5, and 95 is actually working at counter purposes to that 5, we have to look at ourselves in the mirror, ask ourself the very serious question of like, "Are we doing more harm than good at this moment?"

Ad: *Miss Juleyka, nice to have you on. Must be a special reason.*

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Yeah, yeah. You know it's a special reason, since I like to be behind the scenes. All right, so when Cantu Beauty decided to come on board, I rushed.

Menendez: *You rushed to volunteer to try the products.*

Lantigua-Williams:

Yes, I know. I did. And it's the first time, I know. But I've already been using their Coconut Curling Cream for years, so I figured I wasn't gonna miss a chance to try out sister products.

Menendez: *I like the photo you sent me the other day. Your hair looked really good.*

Lantigua-Williams:

And that was just after one shampoo and conditioner. My curls were shiny and smooth, man, and my comb was not full of my own hair after I detangled it in the shower.

Menendez: *Even in pictures, it's coming through, like your hair looks shiny, and hydrated, and just so healthy.*

Lantigua-Williams:

Thanks. I really appreciate that you let me send you those, because I'm really excited about the change.

Menendez: *So, how many products are you using all told?*

Lantigua-Williams:

Right now, I've got like four, so I'm using the shampoo, the conditioner, the leave-in cream, and then can I just tell you what my favorite is?

Menendez: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Lantigua-Williams:

The Wave Whip. First of all, that name is everything, but I love how my waves and my curls just are fuller, they're more touchable, they're less frizzy. I mean, I know, I sound like an ad, but let me tell you.

Menendez: *Well, you can enjoy the benefits of the Cantu Beauty haircare line, picking up your favorites or ordering them from Target.com.*

Menendez: People who are critical of foundations sometimes accuse them of creating what they call an intellectual class of professional helpers, people who sort of act as gatekeepers, but aren't as in touch with the issues on the ground. What is your response to that type of critique?

Rojas: Yes. True. True dat. Yeah. I think about this when it comes to my past jobs and our relationships to things like think tanks, right? We've created a whole universe of thinkers that are not accountable to anybody at all. I think philanthropy is invested in a set of non-accountable institutions. I'll be really honest, this is whatever, day 37 with me at this job, but we're really looking at both our own practices, but the practices of our partners, of our grant recipients, and acting as gatekeepers, and frankly, like how they model our behavior.

For us, we asked ourselves a set of questions, like, "What's actually a more meaningful way to get... If we want to learn how people are doing their work, what's a meaningful way to get that so that it's actually helping us not become consumers of advocacy," which I think a lot of foundations are. They're like, "Show me the thing. Perform for me." But instead, to help us be able to tell the story of advocacy and organizing that's happening so that we can help organizations, our grant recipients, raise more resources. It's not only creating this weird intellectual class of people that act as gatekeepers, it's normalizing a set of processes and practices that actually undermine our ability to let leaders be free.

Going back to Rashad and Marisa, I will only achieve this goal of a liberatory and a free and representative democracy and economy if Marisa and Rashad are free to do absolutely everything they want to do. To try things, to imagine, to contest for power. Who am I to be like, "Oh no, you should use this money on this report as opposed to on benefits for your workers at your organization?" Que locura. To create this weird tie. And

so, we are working as an institution to disentangle these things, realizing that it's gonna be hard for all of us.

I feel like my heart is very full from this.

Menendez: I'm cribbing so much of your language. There were so many things that were resonant to me that I'm like, "Yes, that is what I've been trying to express." I'm taking passionate back. I'm not letting other people have it.

Rojas: Yeah. Yeah.

Menendez: I may even try being angry now and then.

Rojas: Yeah, totally. Let's do it. No, I'm for it. I'm for the anger. I think that there's this weird thing where certain people are allowed to be celebrated because they're loving, and passionate, and those same people often also are celebrated because they're powerful and rageful, and that makes it I think so we have to hide parts of ourselves, y ¡qué agotador! Like that's so tiring. I am my best when I am holding both a deep love and a deep rage. That my love is motivated by a desire to address the things that are bringing me rage, that's my best. I know it. That's where I'm the most clear and I want to create room for more of us to do it. Yeah! I know it. I know it. Yeah, take it all.

This is really... I have to say, this is... When I got the email about this, I'm such a huge fan, and every time I see you on TV, I feel so proud. So proud.

Menendez: I've already cried two times, Carmen. You can't make me cry the third time. Thank you.

Rojas: No, thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you are listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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