Why DACA Trailblazer Cristina Jiménez Is Stepping Away

Cristina Jiménez knows how to agitate for change. The co-founder and Executive Director of United We Dream convinced President Obama to act on DACA. Now, as she prepares to step away from an organization she helped build, Cristina's sharing what she's learned: everything from her work on "decolonizing my understanding of myself" to warning against the perils of putting your ego ahead of the cause. She tells Alicia about her private conversations with the president and about the criticism she and her fellow organizers faced as they rallied millions to their cause by "defying all conventional wisdom."

Alicia Menendez:

Lots of people say that their work is their life, but few mean it quite like Cristina Jimenez. She's a dreamer. She came to the US as a teen, and as the co-founder and executive director of United We Dream, she had a hand in President Obama signing DACA. In fact, her organizing around the issue earned her a Genius Grant from the MacArthur Foundation. And now she's getting ready to move beyond that calling. She's here, and I'm eager to hear about drawing a line between the personal and the professional when your work is fighting for your life.

Cristina, so good to see you.

Cristina Jimenez:

Oh, great to be here with you. Thanks so much.

Menendez: 13 years old, you immigrated to Queens with your family from Ecuador, later found out you were undocumented. So much of your work has relied on telling your own story. What aspects of the story have you been holding back on?

Jimenez: I really appreciate that question, because in the work that I have been doing in immigrant rights, so much of the work, it's my story, it's my experience, and reliving the experience of growing up undocumented, and as I've done more storytelling, which I have learned to love, I am tapping into aspects of who I am in my lived experience that it's not the typical, perhaps, story that the media has created around what an immigrant young person is, or a Dreamer. For example, one of the things that I am talking about more now, it's my own journey of self-love. For us, as people of color, as Latinas, as immigrants, I think there's so much in the countries where we're born, and then when we come to the US, like so much that tells us that we don't quite fit, that we're not enough.

You know, you're not pretty enough, and I had all kinds of complicated feelings and shame about the color of my skin, and my indigenous features, and I remember this one moment, I was in college, and I signed up for this women's in literature class, and my professor, Anamara Flores, who still teaches in the CUNY system, in the City University of New York, starts walking us through the syllabus. And she mentions how we're gonna read literature from black women, and Latinas, and indigenous women, and she looks at me and she

says, “Oh, you have such a beautiful indigenous face.” And that moment was so impactful for me, because I actually took it as, like, offensive. You know, I’m a 19 year old, and exploring my freshman year in college, and I had grown up in a country, in Ecuador, and in a family where the whiter that you looked, the better looking you were, and comments about, “Oh, we have to better the race.” “Hay que mejorar la raza” were things that I grew up hearing, and so you develop this sense of shame about my skin, and I’m tan, and brown, and so when she says this to me, I wait until the end of the class and say to her, “Why did you say that to me? This is an offensive comment to me.”

And she looked at me a little bit, like, surprised, and then said, “Oh, let’s have coffee.” My conversation with her, and the books that I read in her class, which included books like *Borderlands*, and Chicana writers, and also many other writers, like Toni Morrison. I enter into this journey of decolonizing my understanding of myself, and recognizing that we come from such a rich, painful, and complicated history of colonization, and of believing and valuing whiteness. So much so that I had so much shame, and I’m proud to say now that that journey has led me to love who I am, be proud of who I am, how I look, and with such just ownership and pride of my history and where I come from.

So, those are some of the things that I am actually really excited to talk about more in our community, because I think that we need to have more of those conversations.

Menendez: Did you, when you came to the US, know you were coming undocumented? Or did you learn that later?

Jimenez: We came with my family in 1998, and the context for how things happened I think are so important. Ecuador is going through this political social turmoil. The president is kicked out of office. There’s huelgas every day. Schools are shut down. My parents lose their jobs, and for months they keep looking for jobs, and there are just no jobs. That leads to over 3 million people leaving the country in the late 1990s, and my family was one of those fleeing poverty.

And so, we come here with big dreams. What I knew was that we were coming to work, because family was already here. I have an aunt that had already settled in Queens, in New York, and she says there are jobs here. And so that’s one thing that my parents are looking forward to, right? Like eager to work, to support their family. We came here with a visa. You know, we were very blessed to even have at that time gone through a process of getting a tourist visa approved. The tourist visa is given to us for six months, and we come in July. I remember because it was like a few days away from my birthday, from my 14th birthday.

And they find jobs, and we decide to stay. At the moment that we decided to stay, which was closer to the moment where the visa will expire, I knew that the day in October when the visa will expire, that will be the beginning of being undocumented in this country. So, I knew, but what I will say, Alicia, is that I... When you are a 13 year old, you know some things in context. Like, “Okay, yes. We’re gonna be undocumented.” But what does that really mean in terms of how that’s gonna impact my life?

Menendez: So, when was the first time you realized what it was gonna mean for your life?

Jimenez: There’s this moment where I remember my dad giving me a call out of my room, like, “I need to talk to you. I need your help.” As the only English proficient person in my home, my dad is having problems with his employer. He was working at a carwash on Queens Boulevard, in Queens, and the employer doesn’t want to pay wages to him and other

undocumented workers, and he tells me, “Can you please come with me and talk to him so that he can pay us?”

I’m 14, and I don’t know where I had to just find the courage. You know, and when I think about that, this probably resonates with many immigrants, is that you end up having to become an adult real quick.

Menendez: Yep.

Jimenez: I could only think about, “Look at how much sacrifice my parents are making.” And that they left their entire lives and their families behind for me, and for my brother, Jonathan. The least that I could do is to find the courage within me, and use the fact that I know how to speak English now a little bit better than they do, and do this for them although I was terrified. I was terrified about showing up to this white guy, who was Italian, who owned the carwash, and ask him to pay the workers. But I had to. I did it. Because I think for me, it was like, “This is the least of things that I can do for my parents and their sacrifices.”

And when I spoke to him, he said he will not do it, and that if they didn’t like it, they could leave.

Menendez: What ultimately emboldened you to tell your story?

Jimenez: I meet other undocumented young people, and some of them are courageously sharing their stories, and then I’m feeling like, “Oh my God, if they’re doing it and I’m not doing it, I’m like being such a coward.” And I thought about it a lot, but when I started to see the young people like me who had grown up in this country were also getting deported, especially after 9/11. You know, 9/11 happens when I am in my senior year in high school, and immediately after, my parents can’t have a driver’s license anymore, because the policy changes. There is Muslim kids in my school that are being targeted. NYPD police officers are in subway stations. You could be searched and asked for questions at any moment, and so I just remember going through this point of being terrified, and also folks were getting caught up in what they called the special registration program for Muslim men.

And one of the early cases of deportation that I joined a campaign for was Kamal, who had signed up for special registration for Muslim men after 9/11, and he’s like two years older than me, right? So, at the time he’s probably in his early twenties, and he’s in deportation proceedings. And we joined this campaign. The name of it was We Are Kamal. So, I see situations like that around me, and I am thinking I have to have the courage to share my story, and it is when I start seeing these deportation stories around me, which is the greatest fear for an immigrant, to face deportation, that I say, “I have to do it for me, for my family, and for the people that I know who are impacted now.”

Menendez: 2008, you co-found United We Dream. What did you feel was missing from the immigration space at that time?

Jimenez: You know, so the vision of United We Dream borns in the basement of Walter, who was a friend at the time, and now is my partner, and I remember those conversations because it came from a place of many of us were organizing and doing advocacy in state-based organizations, in many of our states, so Florida, and Texas, and New York, but I remember in that basement having a conversation about like, “But we need to lead. We’re living the experience of being undocumented every day and our stories need to be told. Not like how a lawyer who has all great intentions will say it, or not how reporters may want to

write about it, but it needs to be us, and it needs to be us who create a space for other young people like ourselves to not feel alone, and to feel supported."

Menendez: What have you learned about how real change happens?

Jimenez: It's nothing new, so it's like no breaking news here, but the biggest lesson and what's the clearest for me is that when people are directly impacted, and they are the strategists and the leaders, that's when the innovation and the victories are gonna come. And when I look at other social movements, whether it's like ACT UP and the AIDS movement, which I really learned a lot from, and the Civil Rights Movement, and even when you look at movements like mass incarceration, with folks that are formerly incarcerated are coming to say like, "We need to have our right to vote restored." And you know, that was a huge victory in Florida last year.

That's the biggest lesson, that the most important ingredient to bring change is for us, for our lived experience, our pain, the good and the bad, to be the one that is leading, and driving our strategy, driving how we develop vision. So, you know, you don't have to have the most painful story. All of us have a story, and all of us, as Latinas, I think have lived experience that is so important to bring to the front and to the center in this country. And if we do that, you're gonna see change multiplying.

Menendez: Why did the Obama Administration fail to pass the DREAM Act through legislation?

Jimenez: I think that this is such an important lesson, even as we think about the future of this country and the election this year, because it ultimately came down to two things. One, is this a priority for the administration who is in the White House, and two, what is the power that we really have to move this through Congress? And you know, Obama ran in a very pro-immigrant agenda, promising the DREAM Act, immigration reform. I remember knocking on doors for Obama in Pennsylvania when I was in... We were so inspired by him, and when the phase of governing came up, immediately you see a shift in that even though he talked a lot about immigration and his intention to work on it, he deprioritized the issue, and you hear things like Rahm Emanuel, at the time chief staff, saying, "Oh, that's ethereal. Do not even work on that right now and let's prioritize health care."

But when that moment happens, it's no longer a priority for the administration, and then when you look at Congress, for one of Obama's terms you had both houses that were led by Democrats, and sometimes people don't believe me, Alicia. They could have passed legislation at that point. They didn't, because it wasn't a political priority. So, that's one answer to your question.

The other one is that for the second term, not only that it wasn't a priority, but at that point the leverage that Democrats had had changed, because then you had a Republican Senate, and when you look at 2010, with the vote on the DREAM Act, the House of Representatives, under the leadership of Nancy Pelosi, passes the bill. And then in the Senate, the bill falls short of five votes, and those votes were from Democrats. If we had had moderate Democrats voting with us, quite frankly many undocumented young people would be citizens right now, including myself, and my brother, and many others that are part of United We Dream.

So, but what I'm trying to say here is that it is in the Senate where we have to have a real talk about our power, and moderate Democrats are not with us on this issue.

Menendez: So, let's talk about the success you have had convincing the Obama Administration to issue an executive order, bypassing Congress. How did you do it?

Jimenez: Going against all conventional wisdom. So, at that moment we said, especially after the lesson of the DREAM Act vote in 2010, when we were like, "Okay, you know, we may not have enough power yet to pass legislation, but we have power to hold this president accountable." And that's when we made this shift in the strategy to look at the president as a key decision maker that could give us what we want, and we decided to ask the administration to stop the deportations of young people. And many people within the establishment of the Democratic Party, and even the advocacy sector of immigrant rights were saying to us like, "You're crazy."

Menendez: Part of the pushback was that Dreamers were the most sympathetic group. That you did have all of this public support, and so that without you as part of the equation, it became harder to do everything else.

Jimenez: That's definitely one of the arguments that were made. You know, there were other arguments that we should not put pressure on a friend, that it was not strategic, it's not sophisticated enough. And I remember hearing many people say to us like, "They're young people. They don't know what they're doing. Their strategy's not as sophisticated." To counter the argument that you raised, what we were saying was, "If we are able to have one win and protect some segment of our community, we are increasingly building power to continue to win for more."

And as an organizer, we need victories to continue to organize and build movements. There were multiple strategies. There was a legal strategy, where we worked with lawyers to make the argument to the White House that this was within executive authority. The White House legal counsel will say to us like, "No. It's not possible." And we would say, "Yes, it is possible, and here's all of the legal experts on immigration who are telling you so." And then we had the people power pressure. We showed up at Obama events, and where he was speaking all over the country. I actually had this conversation with the president, himself. I was in a meeting with him, and this was after DACA, and I said to him, "You know, DACA was a huge victory for our community. My brother, Jonathan, was protected under DACA, and so many young people were living now with less fear."

But I remember saying to him, "But, you know, deportations are still happening, so we need you to stop this." And he got a bit exacerbated by me.

Menendez: Cristina! I just gave you what you wanted!

Jimenez: Exactly, and I said, "No, but we don't stop there. We need more!" And you know, deportations were still happening, and I was saying like, "Mr. President, we have so many people that are still getting deported." And what he said to me is, "What I need you to do is organize your movement, and your people, to bring Republicans to the table, because if I say that I'm not gonna do deportations any more, they are not gonna come to the table. So, I need you to do your organizing to bring Republicans, and I need to continue to drive an agenda where I am seen and felt as tough on immigration enforcement."

And I will never forget that moment, because his administration ends with no immigration reform, and so it was a miscalculation also from his part and the part of the Democratic Party who believed that that could be a winning strategy.

Menendez: Tell me about the moment you learned that President Obama would sign the executive order. Where were you?

Jimenez: I was in LA, and we were actually getting ready to lead our next phase of escalation on this campaign, which included a direct action in downtown LA, and right before the evening in LA, I get a call from my friend, Gaby Pacheco, who was working with United We Dream at the time, and representing us, and leading the advocacy work in DC, and she tells me, "It's gonna happen tomorrow. I just got confirmation." And I cannot believe it, Alicia. I just remember feeling in my own body, just like shaking, and like my hands were sweaty, and I was crying. I couldn't believe that we had pushed the most powerful man in office in this country and the world to give us what our community needed.

Her and I cried on the phone, and then the immediate thing that I said is, "We need to keep the plan, and instead of turning it into a demand, we will turn it into a victory, and also that we're gonna hold the administration accountable to make sure that we implement this right." At the same time, I think of my friend, Julieta Garibay, who's also a co-founder of United We Dream, who did not meet the criteria that the Obama Administration had ultimately decided on. We were pushing for the most expansive, but in negotiations-

Menendez: Right, because there was an age cutoff, there was a year of entry.

Jimenez: So, there were criteria, right? Like the time of entry to the US, how old the person, and there was also a cutoff date. If you were 30 or over, you will not be able to benefit. And I was heartbroken by that. I remember joining a conference call with Julieta, and all of us crying, because we knew that she was not gonna qualify, and she had fought so hard with many of us to make this day a reality, and I remember she's saying to us, "This is our victory, and we need to celebrate, and I'm gonna be there, and I will speak to this victory even if it doesn't impact me. But we won."

And you know, I get the goosebumps ahorita en mi cuerpo as I'm telling this story, because that's what movement building is about. This is what happens. This is the kind of transformation that happens when people who are impacted are making these choices and leading the fight. What a huge joy, to see your work, and your organizing, and your sharing of stories, and losing many times, and then after 10 years, winning. And it was a big change for how our own members at United We Dream thought of themselves, because now all of a sudden you give people a taste of power. And you give them a taste of what it's like when we organize and then we win. Change does not happen if we don't act.

For many years, I was not able to vote, and now this will be my first presidential election.

Menendez: Oh, my!

Jimenez: But I did not stop there because I couldn't vote. Our movement, led by undocumented young people, changed the course of this country without having the power to vote. And the way that that happened is because we engaged in organizing. We share our stories. We really confronted this country with this moral question of who we are, who's an American, what are our values, and what are we gonna do about the fact that people like us are in this country?

Menendez: This work is so personal. How have you managed to take care of yourself and to draw a line between who you are and the work you do, when they are so intertwined?

Jimenez: Many younger organizers in our network ask me this question a lot, and what I offer is that I wish someone had shared with me some perspective earlier on. Now that I can share something that can be of help for people, it's three things. One, it's not all on you, and if you think that it's all on you, that's your ego. You're not that powerful. Sorry. And actually, in organizing, we believe that power comes from community and collective action, so when there's a community, you can share the load, and you can share power, and you can share responsibility. And that's when it becomes easier to carry.

Number two, if you're committed to a vision of justice and a vision for this country to be truly a multiracial democracy that works for all of us, we need you alive, and we need you healthy, and well, and joyful, to bring your contribution, your granito de arena to this work. And if we work ourselves to the detriment of ourselves and our own health, we're not gonna be here, and this is a longer-term fight, and longer-term work, and so we need you alive and we need you well.

And then the last thing is you need your group of amigas, chismosas, your crew. You need your crew. You need a crew to be with you along the way, and along that way, I'm really grateful for all of the beautiful and amazing women of color, particularly black women and Latinas that have been around me, taking care of me, sharing wisdom with me, giving me support, advising me, rooting for me, and you know, dandome fuerza. And I don't feel like I would have been able to build United We Dream and be part of this movement work, and the good, and the bad, and the beautiful, and the complicated that comes in movement work without having that support.

So, not forgetting about cultivating those amigas, and those relationships, is so key.

Menendez: So, why step away now?

Jimenez: I feel not that it's a stepping away of the work of building power for our gente, our community. I see it as a transformation of role. I wanted to... As an organizer, it's always so important to always think about the people that you're developing to take your role, and I hold the integrity of the practice of organizing very, very to my heart, and also we're an organization led by young people.

Menendez: And you and I aren't young anymore.

Jimenez: Hello? I mean, look. I'm young at heart. Will always be young. When you are-

Menendez: I mean, it's 12 years since you started this.

Jimenez: I'm 35, and have no shame of talking age, and so to me it was really important that we live up to those values of being an organization led by a younger generation of people that we have been developing through our leadership pipeline in the organization, so this plan of leaving United We Dream didn't come out of the blue. It's really been a multi-year plan that I've been working on, and training, and coaching many of our leaders to be able to be ready to take this organization that is much bigger today, right? Like we started with seven affiliates, and now we are a network of 700,000 members, with over 100 local groups across 28 states, and so it's a much bigger vehicle for change.

But I feel so confident that we have the leadership to lead it and take it to the next level. I'm stepping aside to create space for the younger folks to continue to lead this organization. And to me, I am now thinking with everything that I've learned, and the relationships I've developed, and the awareness that I've developed, how can I be of service? Of greater service to our community? To bring change? Because honestly, Alicia,

my dream is for our present and our future generations to live without fear and to thrive in this country. And through United We Dream, that became my purpose in life, and you know, that will continue to be my purpose. I'll just have a different role.

And now I'm getting a little bit emotional about it, because-

Menendez: It's your baby, Cristina.

Jimenez: Yes, and you know, it's all the feelings, right? When you're stepping aside of something that you are part of creating, but also who has shaped me into who I am, who was the magical place where I found my voice, and my purpose, and I would not have it any other way. And so, it's hard. It's sad. And it's also the excitement. You know, and I hold both of those feelings as truth for me.

Menendez: Cristina, I am so excited to watch what you do next.

Jimenez: Thank you, Alicia, and I look forward to get some wisdom from you on that.

Menendez: Yes. When we wrap.

Jimenez: Yes.

Menendez: Thank you.

Jimenez: Thank you.

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