



Elisa Villanueva Beard's Aha Moment as Teach for America's CEO

She started in a Teach for America classroom and today leads the organization as it sends a small army of new teachers into schools that need them most. Elisa opens up about her path to TFA: realizing how unprepared she was for college (but excelling anyway), recognizing the strength of her experiences as she tackled educational inequity, and stepping into the role of CEO.

Alicia Menendez:

Growing up in McAllen, Texas, Elisa Villanueva Beard was a stellar student. But in college, she struggled, big time. She just wasn't as academically prepared as many of her peers. That experience seeded her lifelong mission for educational equity, and inspired her to join Teach for America to become a teacher. Today, Elisa is its CEO. We talk about what she learned in the classroom, how she became a champion for students, and what it will take for all our kids to have a world class education.

All right, Elisa, we're gonna try to get through this without my children and your children interrupting us, but if they interrupt us, so be it. Take me back to 1998. You're a TFA corps member, teaching first-second grade bilingual education in Phoenix. Tell me about your very first day in the classroom.

Elisa Villanueva Beard:

Wow. Okay. My very first day in the classroom, I had been anticipating having 28 kids, so that's what I had prepared for. I went out to get my kids and I in fact had... 36 kids had sort of joined my line.

Menendez: Whoa!

Villanueva Beard:

By the time I made it to my classroom. And what was a little bit nerve wracking about that, as I was walking to the class I was thinking, "Oh my gosh. I was expecting 28 kids. I prepared stuff for 30 kids, and I don't have enough desks. And I don't have enough materials." Anyway, we walk into the classroom. I had half the class sit on the floor, half the class in desks, and I had no books, Alicia, at this time in 1998. There were no books, no curriculum, and so we got through the first day, and at the end of it I just cried, and I was like, "What am I doing? What am I gonna do?"

The stakes of the moment I deeply felt because I knew my kids had to read. I realized that first day most of them didn't know their letters, and it was first grade. And so, I just had to re-gear, and sort of got really grounded, really quickly on sort of what was gonna be needed of me and of my kids, and of their families, and sort of every mentor I could go grab to help me figure out how we're gonna do this.

Menendez: What was the big lesson of that first year?

Villanueva Beard:

I think the most important lesson that sort of keeps me going over 20 years later is our kids can do anything, and so I sort of believed that in my heart when I started to teach, and thought I really believe kids have just boundless potential, and we gotta approach them and teach them that way. And my parents had very high expectations of me, and so that sort of was my orientation. But you did sort of realize when you expect everything of kids, and then you wrap your arms around them and you love them, and you provide all the additional supports, because there are so many supports that our kids need beyond just the teaching and what's expected of a teacher, given all of the challenges that they come in with. You realize our kids can do anything.

And that's what keeps me grounded, but it's also what keeps me really outraged about it all, because you start to see, when you take classroom by classroom, and then now how schools, and even whole systems, you're able to see kids can actually do this. It's not that they don't have the potential, that they're not as smart as the next kid. It's like literally, they don't have access to the opportunities and the resources, and that is just completely unjust. That's the thing where you're like, "That's just not fair." And we all have to care deeply about that fact in our country, and then be on a mission to do something about it.

Menendez: Did that experience teaching in Phoenix track with your own experience as a student growing up in McAllen, Texas?

Villanueva Beard:

So, I grew up in schools that were under resourced, and I didn't realize that I went to Title 1 schools growing up. I didn't understand that as my experience until after I got out of it. I grew up in environments where my teachers were so caring, really grounded in our culture, which in retrospect, after going to college, realized how rich my culture is, and the family ties, and my family's, we're very rooted in our faith, and it's very powerful. And so, I felt very supported. I grew up in very structured environments, and so the things that I didn't quite get, although I had an incredible teacher my junior year that I feel like really pushed on the critical thinking skills, communication skills that are needed, that I felt like I had to catch up on. There was just a lot of exposure that I didn't have, that my peers did when I went to school in Indiana.

And so, really was behind, and compared to the educations that my other friends had had, and everyone was doing their best in the context, but it's one of those like you sort of don't know what you don't know. I sort of didn't realize what I wasn't getting until I got put in a context where that became evident.

Menendez: It's interesting though what you say about your teachers, and being rooted in culture, and it is I think the benefit of growing up Mexican American in McAllen, or growing up Cuban American in Union City, New Jersey, which is I had a lot of Latina teachers. Like I actually was very associated with my teachers in that way, and there was that cultural fluency, and I didn't understand until later how that makes a huge difference in the life of a student and the life of a child.

Villanueva Beard:

Yeah, and you know, there's more research today that shows how important that is, actually, for kids to be able to see themselves in their teachers and be validated and

humanized in a way that's just... You sort of don't understand unless you can associate that way, which is why it's a big focus for us at Teach For America, is we bring new teachers into classrooms. We know the importance of that, and of course it's important for our kids to see all sorts of backgrounds. I grew up with mostly Mexican American teachers, and I also should have exposure to teachers that are all sorts of colors, and shapes, and backgrounds, and have really come to realize the importance of just diversity of experiences. Backgrounds that all kids really need exposure to.

Ad: *Is there something that's getting in the way of you living the life you want? Of you being happy? In my own life, I have found that talking with a professional can make a big difference, but sometimes the logistics, finding the right person, the time to connect, gets in the way. BetterHelp Online Counseling assesses your needs and matches you with a professional counselor in a safe and private online environment. You can get help on your own time, in your own space. In fact, you can start communicating in under 24 hours. You can schedule secure weekly video or phone sessions, plus chat and text with your therapist anytime.*

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Menendez: I want to make sure I have this right. Your mom never graduated from high school, taught herself English. Your dad, first in his family to go to college?

Villanueva Beard:

That's right.

Menendez: Is that all right?

Villanueva Beard:

That's exactly right. Yeah.

Menendez: How did their experiences shape your education?

Villanueva Beard:

Yeah, so my mom, I mean both my parents are extraordinary, and people are like, "Who are your heroes?" It's my parents, just very simply, because their stories are really extraordinary, and so my mom came to the US at the age of 17, and as you said, with a formal eighth grade education. And she quickly realized, like education is the pathway to opportunity, and so beyond her teaching herself English, and she became a florist, and a manager of a florist, and has become an entrepreneur. They own real estate now. I mean, their story's extraordinary.

Her first move was, "If I'm gonna get married, I need to marry a man with a college degree." Which is quite literally how she chose my father. I mean, that was her number one criteria. She said looks will come and go, that's like not even at the top of the list. And my dad is handsome, by the way. But you know, she said, "I'm gonna marry a man with a college degree because I know my kids' life options will be different." So, my parents met

while he was still in college. He was a firefighter by night and then would go to school during the day, and was supporting his mom, and he wanted to get married before he graduated from college, and my mom said no. Until you graduate from college. I will marry you. So, they did, and that did make it-

Menendez: She wanted the papers.

Villanueva Beard:

She did. That was what she did. She's so clear. How that ended up shaping me and my siblings is education was front and center. My mom always told... We're three girls and one boy and she always told us girls, like, "I don't want you to have to depend on anyone for anything, so you're gonna get your education, you're going to go to college. These are not options." And she was a huge advocate for us. My older sister, I remember in fifth grade her fifth grade teacher contacted my mom and said, "Your daughter's gonna get retained because she's not reading well enough. She's not ready." This was January. So, my mom showed up and said, "I want to let you know," with the principal, Mr. Garcia. "My daughter's not getting retained, and I need you to tell me what I need to do for my daughter, and I will do it, because that's not an option."

My sister became an avid reader, because my mom would just sit with her and make her read for an hour a day and she did what needed to be done. But I mean my mom was a fierce advocate for us, and so all of that really shaped all of us. I sort of was the kid that did everything right going to high school. I was student body president. I was top kid in my high school academically. I was a basketball player. I was pretty good, too. And so, I was really set up and had done everything right before I got to college.

Menendez: It is such a hard transition and it's a story we hear again and again. Top of your class, big fish in what you don't realize is a small pond. You went all the way to Indiana for college. You continued to play basketball. You show up at campus by yourself. I mean, you must have felt so overwhelmed, like a fish out of water? I mean, I can't even imagine being that far from home and sorting through all of that.

Villanueva Beard:

Yeah. It was pretty extraordinary when I looked back and thought, "What gave me the guts to do that? To show up to college by myself?"

Menendez: Being 18. That's it. Right?

Villanueva Beard:

Maybe that's it.

Menendez: Never braver than when I was 18.

Villanueva Beard:

That's probably true. An important part of that story is, though, Mr. Joe Disque, who was an incredible mentor and has since passed away, but he and his wife are truly, she was my biology two teacher, Miss Karen Disque. They're why I ended up at DePaul University. She went there, and he sort of just took this interest in me, and he's from Indiana originally. He went to Purdue and IU Law, and got to know my family starting my junior year, and just... He just kept saying, "Elisa, you're extraordinary. You can do anything. I want you to get out of your comfort zone." And that's how I ended up at DePaul. He did show up that first day

of school with me. I mean, I didn't know he was gonna be there, but as I pulled up in a van that had picked me up from the airport, he was there waiting for me, and so he was my parent that day.

And it was pretty extraordinary. I felt like I was in a different country altogether. What was most stunning about it, I will say, is that I thought, "Wow." Getting used to just community that was predominantly white, middle, upper-middle-class white, and 3% Latino, 5% black at the time, I was a bit intimidated by that and thought, "This is gonna be really hard." And just, it felt really hard to relate to each other's lives culturally in every way. But I quickly realized that that was quite energizing for me. I learned that I'm a very adaptable person, and I can sort of connect with different groups of people, which has become I think a strength and has served me well in my career.

But what I didn't expect was that I would be underprepared for the rigors of college, because of all you just heard me say. And that was the most traumatizing thing, and even when I reflect on it, I sort of get emotional, because it was so hard, Alicia, to be like, "I'm ready." I checked every box. Everyone told me I was ready. I worked really hard. And then you feel completely lied to. You're like, "Oh my God, did everyone know this was gonna happen to me?" And what was the toughest part about it was because I was "a minority" on campus, and you're not doing well, and I'm the kid that works... I work really hard. That's what I learned from my parents, like dedication and hard work, you don't quit. That's me.

So, I'm like getting up at 4:00 AM to study on Saturdays and Sundays like for 14 hours, and I'm still getting Cs and C-minuses, and so you're like, "Oh my gosh. I'm not smart enough. I can't hang with these people. Maybe it's true. Maybe white people are smarter than me." And when you start to internalize that it's so dangerous, and so traumatizing, so I called my mom three months in and said, "Mom, I'm not gonna make it. Truly, there's nothing more I can do. I've never been more focused. I've never been more doing everything right, and I'm not pulling it off." And my mom listened, and then she said, "Mijita, I'm so sorry that it's so hard for you." But I said, "I think I'm gonna have to come home." And she said, "You're not welcome home until you complete your degree at DePaul University. That's where you said you're going, that's where you are, and that's where you're gonna do it. You can do this. So, I can't help you with that, but you should maybe get off the phone and go back to studying."

Menendez: So, how did you turn that corner?

Villanueva Beard:

There was something about the fact that I just knew there was no other option. So, even the energy when, you know at night, you're laying there and you're like, "Maybe I should just go home. Maybe I just can't do it." That was now out of my head, because I'm like, "There's no going home." I just have to just keep doing it. I think some of the moves I started to make is I started to ask for help, which was another good leadership lesson I learned early on. I just went to my professor and finally said, "I am doing everything I know to do. Can you help me? Who should I ask? Here's what I'm doing. What am I doing wrong?"

And so, I started to get different kinds of help. My professors became invested in me. I did find one Latina professor who was not even my teacher, but I'd met her at a thing, and so I went and made an appointment with her, and was able to tell her this, like what I was really going through, and she leaned in and helped me, which was extraordinary and was really

helpful for me and mattered a lot in that trajectory. And so, that's what I did. I did terribly my first semester. I did better my second semester. And then I was flying. Then I was on the dean's list. You know, then I was like, "Oh, I can do this better than a lot of the kids I'm with, actually." That was what ended up starting to fuel my deep passion and outrage for educational inequity. Because I started to understand like, "Oh, where did I grow up?"

You know, we place corps members where I went to school. I had no idea, and I realized like, "Wow, my dad was the only college graduate in my whole neighborhood where we lived." I didn't understand the context in which I was growing up. I grew up in a very rich community in so many ways that had kept me grounded, and I think it's why I am who I am today, but hadn't realized the lack of access and opportunities, and so that's what set me on the path to Teach For America, and here we are.

Menendez: More than 20 years later.

Villanueva Beard:

More than 20 years later .

Ad: *Hey, today I want to tell you about a new podcast I am loving. It's called Dear Young Rocker. Remember the 14-year-old version of you? Awkward, insecure, the weirdo in you fiercely independent, but longing to connect? In this narrative podcast, join host Chelsea Ursin as she relives her teen years, struggling to feel cool enough to exist and finding a home in music. Each episode dives deep into teen Chelsea's journal entries as she navigates school, family, relationships, and joining her first band. And occasionally, adult Chelsea chimes in with advice for her younger self.*

At the same time that it offers a poignant, funny look at what being a teenager is like, Dear Young Rocker also creates honest dialogue around the issues of body image, gender power dynamics, and mental health, and it shines a spotlight on the way those are magnified during our teen years.

Menendez: After three years in the classroom, you became the leader of the organization's Rio Grande Valley region. Why leave the classroom?

Villanueva Beard:

Yeah, I mean I loved being a teacher I will say, and that third year was awesome. It was so fun, and I feel like I was really finding my groove, but there were two things going on. One is I did really want to get back to Texas, and wanted to get back to my community, and that was a sort of a dream and a thing I really wanted. Secondly, I taught first grade, as you said, for two years, and then I looped up with my kids in my third year and taught second grade, and that was incredible, so I had the set of kids for two years and they were... It was awesome.

What was really bothersome to me was that at my school we had a 60% attrition rate every year at my school. But the reason I ended up leaving is, beyond wanting to get back to Texas, is I'm like, "The system isn't working for the kids, and so how do you start to solve that we need a great third grade teacher? And then a great fourth grade teacher and fifth grade teacher, and what's gonna happen to my kids once they're there?" And so, I thought I was gonna be a school principal. I was gonna go run the organization in the Rio Grande Valley first, where I grew up, and bring in those teachers, ensure that they're doing a great job in my community, and then after I get that sort of experience, which is more

administrative, I'm gonna then go become a principal, like that's sort of gonna be what I do, because I was watching what principals could do.

Menendez: 2015, you become the solo CEO and again, it's a tumultuous time for TFA. Applications are down at that time. You have alums who are publicly criticizing the organization. What steps did you take to right that ship?

Villanueva Beard:

Yeah. There were two decisions I made. The first was that I really believed I was the right person to lead us forward in that moment, where I had sort of turned a page and said, "I need to just be me. I need to take the wisdom of my experiences, the wisdom of just who I am and how I show up, and that's what's needed." And so, that sounds so simple, and so sort of maybe strange, but it was so freeing to just say, "I am who this organization needs right now, and I can do this." And secondly, I wasn't afraid. So, it's not that I was reckless and like, "Oh, I'm fearless." I wouldn't describe me as that way.

I would describe me as unafraid. Calculated, understanding the stakes of the moment, but also saying, "I'm going all-in. I'm not gonna be afraid to not do well. I'm not gonna be afraid that I don't know what to do. I'm not gonna be afraid. I'm just gonna go do. I'm gonna figure out how do I stay centered. Be very clear on what matters most, which is impact on students and what we are all about, and be able to cut through that and then make any decisions around that." It was a very hard time. I had to move fast to make big moves, put people in the right roles, in order to drive us forward. And we did start to see results a year... I mean, we pretty quickly, once we got momentum and started to see the moves we were making really did matter and were the right ones.

Menendez: You have said, "We're a controversial organization and I've come to accept that." What do you mean by that?

Villanueva Beard:

I think what we do isn't always intuitive for some folks, right? We're taking... We're focused on first of all outcomes for kids, and that's ultimately the thing that anchors us, and it's impact in classrooms, but it's also like systems impact, like what are we contributing to actually change the conditions for children so that they have the opportunities they deserve? The idea that you're taking mostly 22-year-olds, right out of college, who have not intended to go into education, who have not studied education, and I have deep respect for the education, for teachers. My sisters are teachers and didn't come through Teach For America. I deeply respect that, and we're taking folks though that haven't studied it, and our model is just different.

And our model begins with selection and who we select, so we accept about 10 to 12% of applications. Last year we had near 60,000 applications, and then we provide a training program. We never say that our teachers are gonna be excellent on day one. That's not possible. But what we do, we prepare them to be able to step into classrooms, and then we support them. And what I've also come to learn is every first-year teacher, no matter how you come into the classroom, has a very hard time. It is a very steep learning curve, and we all just have to be committed to learning together.

And so, it's not about TFA. I mean, for me, the way I orient, it's like we can't do this alone. We need to be in deep partnership with others, and that's what we're committed to, and we don't have the answers at TFA. We don't have all the answers. We have incredible leadership that will go through walls for children, and that's what we do offer. We have

folks who are smart, are high achievers, really care about kids and want to work with others to get things done. And it takes, I think, a combination of talent from all over to come into communities. More and more, I will say, our corps members are from the communities that they grew up in. 50% of them are people of color, which is pretty extraordinary. A third are first-generation college graduates.

On average in America, 80% of teachers are white, about 20% are people of color, so it's a really important contribution that we're making, but I think our model and how we bring people in has sometimes... just is not intuitive, but I stay grounded in it because our teachers have shown great results, and the most important thing is we gotta do this alongside others, and that's the only way to make real progress as a community.

Menendez: After quarantine, I think all parents who are homeschooling now want to pay teachers like a million dollars, but those memes aside, there's a radical awareness of the hard work teachers do, and how under resourced and underpaid most of them are. Do you have a sense of how you'll use that awareness to form policy proposals, or revise how TFA operates? Does this change your approach at all?

Villanueva Beard:

Yes. Everyone is somehow connected and a teacher some way these days, and is coming to realize, "Wow." How hard this actually is. And I will admit, even in my household, I have my husband and I are former teachers, and we have four sons, 12, 10, 8 and 5, and it's been so hard, and half chaotic as we also try to work full-time. I described to someone the other day like, "It feels like we're in a never-ending slumber party in my house these days."

Menendez: I told my husband I was gonna go take the trash out and he said, "Enjoy those two minutes to yourself."

Villanueva Beard:

Exactly.

Menendez: That's what it's come to.

Villanueva Beard:

Exactly. I think what is pretty stunning about it and what I'm most thinking about, Alicia, is just how hard teachers, and school leaders, and district officials are really working to make this pivot into the virtual learning. I mean, we all know what the data says, like actually virtual learning, it's really not effective. It's very, very, very difficult to do and it's very difficult to do well, and we're just not prepared for it.

The thing that's most on my mind about it is how it's impacting kids in low-income communities, because it's hard for everybody, but it is pretty unimaginable what is happening for our own kids that are worried about the basics and have always worried about the basics. It's always been challenging, but now it becomes like impossible situations, where a lot of our kids' parents are essential workers, so A, they're putting their lives in danger, so no, they don't have time to sit with their kid to do online learning, and that's assuming they have a computer, that's assuming they have access to broadband, that's assuming they know how to navigate the technology. It's really, really difficult.

So, our kids who are traditionally, on average, already behind because of just all these systemic things. Not because they can't do it. I mean, this is devastating for our children, and what we do about that is what's most on my mind, and how we're going to address

how it's disproportionately impacting our kids. So, what's on my mind is how do we prepare ourselves to be out of school through the summer, and I know there's gonna be lots of pushes for summer school. I'm really worried about how that'll actually come to life, and then how do we prepare ourselves for this to happen again in the fall? And to start to pivot and ask ourselves, we're in crisis mode now, and we're... TFA, we're trying to focus on like what's the next horizon that we need to be preparing for?

Menendez: As Latinas, so many of us are raised to believe in the importance and power of education. I was listening to your story and it could very well be my own, or pretty much any girlfriend that I have. How do you square that just fundamental belief in education with the gaps that exist in the education Latinos are offered?

Villanueva Beard:

Our families tend to really trust that schools are preparing their kids, and a lot of them are super grateful, right? Immigrant parents are like, "Gosh, I'm just so grateful my kids have access to a school. It has resources. Teachers are kind." And you know, everyone's doing their best. But what is not revealed in that, often the high expectations or the rigorous curriculum, it just all hasn't caught up to the intentions that I believe every educator has. It's not about educators, it's like a system that isn't built for that, and it's beyond the school, Alicia, that I just think is so important.

It's like when you don't have access to dental care. I had kids in my class that first year, and then every year, but I didn't understand this fully. They had headaches, like I remember Jasmine. Headaches. And I'm like, "Jasmine, are you bored? Why do you have your head down every day?" I'm really doing everything to be entertaining, here. And she's like, "Maestra, I just have a headache." So, I finally sent her to the nurse and after a few times we realized her teeth are rotten. She had never seen a dentist. They didn't brush her teeth. They didn't know to brush their teeth, and so I finally asked my kids. "Wait, does everyone brush their teeth?" No. So, then I wrote a grant to get a program for the school to teach our kids about dental hygiene, and you don't share toothbrushes, and you brush your teeth twice a day.

These are basics that a lot of us take for granted. Kids sharing beds. The basics. So, we have to start seeing this as an interconnected systems problem, and it's not like, "Oh, well, if only schools would get their act together. If only those teachers, or the principals, or the district." No, it's a community problem, and we need, and understanding how interconnected all these things are, health care, with schools, and the justice systems, and schools, and how it all plays out is so important, and I think we need to just really elevate sort of that conversation and say, "What as a community are we all gonna do to lean in to educate kids?" And I think this moment is showing us that.

Schools can't possibly do this alone, and we need to support each other, and more importantly, we all need to see every kid as our kid. The language of, "Those kids," no, no, no. They're your kids. They're part of your community. And you don't think this is gonna impact your economy or your social... It is. And so, I think we all have to just figure out how do we take responsibility for every child in our community and figure out what do we need to be doing to meet their needs, and ensure that we take care of our kids, which I think is our most important job as adults.

Menendez: Listen, we made it through. Our children did not interrupt this, so thank you so much. Please thank all of them for me, especially the five-year-old.

Villanueva Beard:

Thank you.

Menendez: It's incredible restraint.

Villanueva Beard:

That's hysterical.

Menendez: I'm being smart.

Menendez: Thank you as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Cedric Wilson is our sound designer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. Manuela Bedoya is our intern. 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're listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the quickest and easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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