



Social Impact Strategist Elsa Collins Wants You to Understand the Power of Your Influence

The serial co-founder (This is About Humanity, Poderistas, I Am a Voter) knows how to harness the power of celebrities for everything from political campaigns to direct service for migrant families, but she still believes that you are the most influential person in your own circle. Elsa shares how this ethos applies to everything from civic engagement to raising multiracial kids.

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- Alicia Menendez: Elsa Collins calls herself a doer, but she is also a builder. Among the things she has built, The Ideateur, a social impact and civic consultancy. This Is About Humanity, which raises awareness about separated and reunified families, work that is shaped by Elsa's own experience of growing up on both sides of the US-Mexico border. Poderistas, a digital lifestyle community to help Latinas leverage their power. And I Am A Voter, which is creating a cultural shift around voting. Elsa has probably built something new in the time that I have recorded this intro.
- Menendez: And that is because she is one of those people who sees a problem and immediately connects the dots between what it will take to solve it and the people she knows who have the tools and resources necessary to get it done. So today we're talking about how we can each do that in our own lives. How even as someone who understands and leverages the power of celebrity, Elsa still believes that you are the most influential person in your universe and your capacity to influence those around you is second to none. Elsa, my friend, I know so much about you, but I have so many holes that I want to fill in. You say you grew up on both sides of the border. What was home like and where do you consider home?
- Elsa Collins: My gosh, what does growing up on both sides of the border mean? I think it means to me that there really was no border. It meant waking up in Tijuana, crossing the border every day, going to school in San Diego, coming back home to eat dinner, going to the mall in San Diego on the weekends, or going further south to Ensenada for a meal. So to me, growing up on both sides of the border was just this amazing experience that I genuinely feel so blessed I ever had. And for me home is... That's a really hard question. I think for me, I always tell people, I feel as Mexican as I do American. So to me, it can be really anywhere, as long as I'm with my family, we're speaking Spanish or we're doing whatever we want to do, but yeah, I genuinely feel like when I go to the Tijuana, it's such a nostalgia for my life, for my childhood. And when I'm here in the States and I look for those sensory points to feel a little bit that way.
- Menendez: But was the expectation growing up that you were going to build your life in the United States or build your life in Mexico?
- Collins: Both my parents are Mexican. They had a very specific desire for their children to not just be bilingual, but to be bi cultural and bi literate. And so they made a very intentional

decision after we were all born in the United States to move to Mexico so that we could really be in our culture. So I lived in the States till I was four and then we moved to Tijuana. And so for them, it was really to understand who we were. And we all had to do our, as I like to call it our tour in school, in Tijuana, so we all at different points in our education. I did junior high there. And so I think that in my mind, my expectation was wherever I was spending the majority of my time. So when I was in junior high in Mexico, I very much felt like I was going to be living in Tijuana for the rest of my life. I would find somebody. We would get married. And I even still, when I was thinking about going to college, I always thought I would go back to Tijuana.

Menendez: Instead you go to Stanford, you go to Columbia for law school. Then there's a gap in the way you tell the story, which is there are 10 years after law school, then you sort of pop up again. What were you doing during those 10 years?

Collins: When I was graduating Stanford, I didn't have a very clear path. At the time I was with my now husband, but we weren't engaged. I loved being in school. And so I knew I wanted to continue studying, but I wasn't a hundred percent convinced of what. And so I sort of did, I think what a lot of people do, which is look around them. I have an older sister who was an attorney who actually also went to Stanford Law School. And so I said, oh, I should go to law school and I'm not going to call it a place filler because some of my most amazing growing and sort of learning experiences were going to New York City and going to Columbia. And then shortly thereafter getting married, but I never was dying to be a lawyer. It wasn't like, man, I can't wait to make partner.

Collins: I started to have kids, as you said. I was in the parenting space for a little bit. I think a lot of moms who sort of take a step back, end up there because that's very familiar and it's what we're going through at the time. But I was always sort of mine to politics and elections and people who were running for things. And so that was something that I would dab into and pull back and dab into and pull back. But I think the most important thing that this question leads to is that basically at 35 or 36, I was like, what is the rest of my life going to look like?

Menendez: And that is exactly what I want to dive into because we have a lot of listeners who are changing careers, who maybe had taken some time away from the professional workplace in order to parent, or to take care of someone in their life. What were the steps you took then to jump back in?

Collins: I mean, I think what I really assessed was what did I feel were my strengths and what were my goals? And so once I had identified those in my mind, my strengths were my network and my desire to make a difference. And my goals were to make the world better that my kids were going to be growing up into. And so thinking okay, what is the way that I make that impact? And so I started to look to my network and reach out to people and set up some meetings and just sort of say this is a deal. I want to be making social impact. I want to be moving the needle. I want to be making a difference and I want to get back into it.

Collins: But I think the other thing was also that I had to believe that I could do it because I think a lot of women, Latinas, there is no harsher critic in this world than yourself. And so I had to kind of flip that script and say, well, there's only you that can pump yourself up that much. And that can believe that you can do it. And why not? Allowing myself to believe it and to say it and then to just go do it and not have any personal feelings about if someone said no. The hardest thing is just to ask. That's really it. And if you allow it to be okay for

sometimes people to say yes, and sometimes people say no, you're going to get so much further.

Menendez: You are a master asker. It is the thing that if I could learn from you or emulate about you, it would be that because it can make all the difference, the ability to ask. The other thing that can make a big difference is your network. And a big part of your network is celebrities. Now I think there are people hear celebrities and social change work, and they kind of roll their eyes. For you, having done this work, what is the value of celebrity?

Collins: I think the most important thing to realize a lot of times is that the most influential people in this world are the people that inhabit a local network, right? So a celebrity can come to a certain state and can advocate for registering to vote or vote earlier or anything that they might be advocating for. And they may be less successful than the woman who does drop off at school or who people know from the community center or whatnot. Right. So I always say that is very important to recognize. Now the other important thing to recognize is that a celebrity is an amplifier in a way that it's kind of the echo. Okay. So they're providing the echo and the ripple effect for anything that might be happening locally.

Collins: I also genuinely believe that a lot of times we have sort of allowed a narrative to exist that if you are a celebrity, you are also not a regular person. You are also not someone who has their trash picked up, has to drop off their kids at school, has to pay their taxes, has to do all the things that we all do, and therefore are not allowed to have a voice in this civic discourse that exists. And I absolutely refute that in every sense of the word. And if they are in a position to have that voice and that echo that goes further to reach those people who we cannot reach or have not been reached, or have not been asked, then I am all for that.

Menendez: Can you tell me about a time in your political work, in your civic engagement work, of a celebrity being properly deployed to reach people that would not have otherwise been reached?

Collins: In the 2020 election there was a runoff election in Georgia and what a lot of people didn't really realize was how large the Latino population is in Georgia. It is one of the states with the most Latinos in this country of eligible voting age. And so there was a really deep desire to make sure that our community was going to show up. And so at the time in 2020, December 2020, that was one of our spikes in COVID. There was a big discussion about whether or not America and Eva and Kate Del Castillo should go to Atlanta to do some voter outreach effort. And we decided it was worth it because the one thing that we know about our community is we know the value of face to face interaction. And we also wanted to show people in Georgia, Latinos in Georgia especially that we know that they're there and they matter. And they're worth that trip. And being there, I think really showed that.

Menendez: Elsa, you're very intentional about this idea that the generation one comes from really impacts their approach to change and to change work. Can you tell me more about that?

Collins: This comes up a little bit sometimes where people say how did you get this idea that you wanted to give back? Is this something that you grew up with? Is this something that was instilled in you? And yes, it was. Yes, of course my mother was somebody who would take me with her to different opportunities to give back. It would be super late. I'd want to go to sleep and she'd be pinching me. No you can't. I think for me though, and what you were saying, how do you take something that is so important that in my mind to me feels very cultural and sort of say okay, this is part of who I am. And it's so important. And I want my

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kids to have it, but I also want it to sort of progress with where we are as a society and where we live right now. Right?

Collins: And so I think to me, it's important to recognize that the change has to be forward thinking. It has to be impactful. And it also has to be... It's a door into this conversation with my kids. It's a door into them being that much closer to what's happening in this world that may not affect them directly every day, but that I want them to start thinking about those kinds of things, because I want them to be the kind of leaders and individuals who are also seeking ways to make change and are also, they may take that one step further as they get older. But I want them to know that one person can do that. That one person might be their mom who drops them off and picks them up and tapes their ankle and does whatever is needed to be done. But it's also going to be the person who's consistently thinking about what are the kinds of things that we can and should be doing to help other people.

Menendez: Forgive me because I know this is a sensitive question and I've seen you allude to it, but never really talk much about it. How old were you when you lost your dad, Elsa?

Collins: I was eight. But he had been sick for two years. So really he'd been sick since I was six.

Menendez: Do you have any memories of him before he was sick?

Collins: I mean few. I was also the youngest of five. He was a businessman. He traveled a lot. That's why I say I actually have more empathy for my older siblings who had a lot more time and travel with him and memories with him. So to me it's more almost something I never had, if that makes any sense.

Menendez: Elsa, the reason I bring it up is because losing your dad at eight, watching your mom raise five kids by herself, how did that shape your idea of what being a mom looked like?

Collins: I mean, I think it prepared me well for my current situation. Fortunately, my husband is alive and I love him so much. But we do not live in the same city and we have not lived in the same city for a long time. But I think about it.

Menendez: He's a professional basketball coach for those who don't know.

Collins: There's a lot of things that we don't realize until you're a parent or you don't realize until you're at that stage. A couple things. A, when I was young and I would meet someone in their forties, I would think they were ancient. Now I'm 42. And I'm wow Elsa, that was a really harsh assessment. B, I'm also the age that my mom was when my dad died and had five kids. Okay. I only have three. So I don't even, I can't even, and I would never even want to imagine what that was like for her. And I don't think I had an appreciation at eight years old or even-

Menendez: She was a young woman.

Collins: Yeah. I mean, she was me basically. And so of course, now I can look into having three kids and how busy it is and having a husband who lives out of state and all these things and think man, I don't know how she did it. But I do know that she showed me that she could do it.

Menendez: When we talk about the generation you come from impacting your theory of change, you are raising kids and thinking about their future. But to be more specific, you're raising multiracial kids and thinking about their future. How does that impact then the way you think about the world and the way you want that world to be?

Collins: Yeah. I mean, listen, when I went to Stanford against my mother's wishes and promptly fell in love, and fortunately now married a Black man. I know because my mom told me, that was not exactly how she envisioned my journey to Stanford. And I bring it up to show that

she has evolved as a human in a way that I hope we all can evolve and we all can have hope that other people can do so as well, because as a Mexican woman, she was the type of mom who never wanted me to be in the sun. I'm dark skinned, I'm [inaudible 00:15:20] over here. Because in her mind, and I know that it was coming from a loving place although we know how it sort of comes outward, it was, it's always better if you're lighter. Right?

Collins: And so she was always stay out of the sun, put sunblock on. [foreign language 00:15:36]. I would always be sort of hearing that kind of rhetoric. So I think it was hard for her at the beginning. Our kids are half Black, half Mexican and my husband's also Native American. Last year was the first time that my mom said, "Help me explain Black Lives Matter to my circle of friends. And how can I be better at sort of being an advocate for my grandkids?" And so that to me is also something that I think is very important to recognize that I've been able to be that bridge for her to have those kinds of thoughts and conversations and to have her sort of be a 76 year old woman who's still growing and progressing and making changes.

Menendez: When your mom asked you what she could do to be a better advocate for Black Lives Matter, what did you tell her?

Collins: Well, first I just said, "Thank you for asking the question." It's hard to express, unless you really know my mom, how far that shows she has come. I mean, it took me a minute to even think about how to respond to that question. And I just said, "Mom, sometimes in your circle of friends, you might be the only woman of color. You might be the only woman of color who has grandkids who are Black. And so I think the way to express it is to say that this is part of your family. And so any friend of yours should value the people in your life like you value the people in their life." And so just trying to encourage her to keep on asking questions and to say that even saying Black Lives Matter is important. Even saying those words is important.

Menendez: It's also true for you that you are often in rooms in places where you are the only, or one of few women of color. I imagine you are also having this conversation.

Collins: All the time. And I also have them all the time with my kids, right? Where I tell them, you might be that friend, the only friend that is Black and Mexican, I mean either or both. And so how you represent yourself and how you speak and the things that you stand for are going to be so important, because you might be the only one standing up for them. Or you might be the only one speaking out and saying what's right or what's wrong.

Collins: And so kind of building that fortitude in them is so, so important. Like I said, I feel like the hardest part of the being in a world around social impact or civic engagement, or even working with amplifiers or influencers, is that you can never put yourself first. Right? Everything else is first. The cause, the issue, the campaign, the goals, the change that you want to make. So anytime you feel awkward or you don't know if someone's going to say yes or no, that means you're already too far into it. You can't let yourself be held back by the fear of what people might think or by the fear of rejection or disagreement, right. You just have to sort of feel very strongly and advocate very strongly and then people know where you stand. And it's very easy to have a conversation from that point.

Menendez: Elsa, thank you so much.

Collins: I love it. That was amazing.

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. Manuel 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 Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, Latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember please subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple podcasts, Google podcasts, 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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