



How Estefanía Rebellón's Own Experience Seeking Asylum Informed Her Mission to Help Migrant Children

Forced to flee her native Colombia as a child, Estefanía Rebellón knows the pain of being displaced. Now, she's helping migrant children at the US-Mexico border by providing a mobile school program that offers full-time bilingual education. Estefanía dives into the complexity of her personal experience and how the challenges of building a non-profit shaped her "Yes We Can" ethos.

Alicia Menendez:

As a child, Estefanía Rebellón was forced to flee her home in Colombia and was granted political asylum here in the United States. As you can imagine, that experience cause Estefania lasting pain and trauma. And so when she saw migrant children arriving at the US-Mexico border, she knew she needed to do something to help. The result, the Yes We Can World Foundation, a non-profit that created and operates the Yes We Can Mobile Schools program, the first full-time bilingual education program for migrant children at the US-Mexico border.

Menendez: Estefanía, thank you for being here.

Estefanía Rebellón:

Hi, Alicia. Thank you so much for having me.

Menendez: Estefanía, I want to talk about all the work you're doing, but I feel like we can't talk about the work that you were doing without talking about the personal experiences you've had that have really led you to this theory of change. So I want you to take me back. What is it you remember about growing up in Colombia?

Rebellón: I moved here when I was 10. So for me, it was a very hard experience to have to leave my home and be forced out, because that's essentially what happened. My dad, his life was threatened unfortunately. And within two weeks our lives completely changed.

Rebellón: I remember being in school, I used to go to an-all girls Catholic school, and it was really small. So it was literally my family, I grew up with those girls since I was five. And when this happened, my world got destroyed. I remember being there the last day of school, getting called to the office, it was a weekday, and I was like, "What's going on?" And my dad was standing next to the principal and they said, "We have to go." And I was like, "What do you mean we have to go? I have a test. I can't go."

Rebellón: And the next day, my family and my dad and my little brother and I went into hiding. We went into a family's house in the country for about two weeks. And while we were there, my sister and my mom actually sold all of our belongings. And when we came back, we literally went to my grandma's house. There were five duffle bags with our clothes in there and we were gone. The next day we were at the airport. And I literally remember seeing, like in the movies when you say a goodbye, my whole, entire extended family, my

grandparents, my aunts, my cousins, everyone saying goodbye. And that was the last time I saw them.

Rebellón: And now it's been 20 years. This year is our 20th year anniversary of my family leaving Colombia.

Menendez: What did your dad do that you were subject to those threats? Did you have a sense before that moment that there was potentially danger? And to what extent did your parents share with you what was happening in real time? And then, to what degree did you really learn about it later?

Rebellón: My dad was a lawyer, both of my parents are lawyers. My dad was also a university professor. He taught international law, and he is also ... His first dream was to be an astronaut, so he was very involved with astronomy in Cali. Founded an astronomy team and represented Colombia in different NASA conventions around the world. So he was kind of a public figure. He was well known, and a community leader I would say.

Rebellón: I don't personally know why my dad was targeted. The story is that at that time ... This is the early 2000s, after the fall of the cartels from the '90s, the Cali Cartel especially, and the FARC, sort of their main source of income and business which were the cartels, was falling. So then they opted to kidnap people for ransom, whether it was a wealthy family or a political figure or anyone in the community that stood out, they were targeting those people to then kidnap them and ask for ransom.

Rebellón: That's sort of the common knowledge that I have of the situation. I'm not sure if it's the full story. In my family, we are one of those families that don't really talk about problems. And we know they're there but we quickly move on, because it's painful to confront those feelings. And to this date, I haven't really spoken to my parents about what happened.

Rebellón: So there's a lot to unpack within our family and our story. And I think to this date it's still affecting me, because it's a lot of confusion, a lot of unanswered questions. And having to experience this as a child, and then a teenager, and now an adult, being able to process all of that trauma, which is what it is, is still something that I'm trying to go through.

Menendez: I appreciate you sharing all of that. And we will talk about how that trauma and that pain has really informed your sense of empathy for other young people who find themselves displaced, for whatever reason. What then was it like, 10-years-old, landing in Miami, Florida?

Rebellón: Oh my gosh. I always feel that it was an alien experience. For me, coming from an-all girls private Catholic school, just even the clash of being in a school with boys was a big issue, because I came to sixth grade. So you know, girls here are starting to develop and get into boyfriends and middle school and all of this concepts.

Rebellón: And here I was, coming in with my skirt up to my knees, my two finger distance from my socks, my rolling backpack, which was not cool at the school I was going to, and arriving at a school. And my teacher, Ms. Robinson, was this beautiful African American teacher who was so funny and she had a huge laugh. And I remember being in her classroom, and it was the first time my name was pronounced wrong. My name is pronounced Estefanía, but in America people usually say Estefania because it's spelled with an F. And I didn't get it, and I was like ... Then they told me, "No, she's talking to you." And these are all who would become my friends, who were Cuban Americans, who knew that I didn't understand English. So they were like, "No, no, it's you. You need to go right now."

Rebellón: There was a special bell that rang for ESOL students, which are immigrant students that go to a separate classroom. So that rang, and then I left and I was like, "Okay, where do I go now?" It was a complete loss. And I remember coming home that day, crying. And I was like, "Mom, I can't go back to school. I need to have the backpack everybody has. I can't wear this long socks, I need to have the tiny socks that go to your ankles." And it was chaos for me.

Rebellón: It took me a long time even to ... I remember in my teenage years, always denouncing I think is the word, saying like, "Oh, you're American." And I used to be really angry about it and I would say, "No, I'm Colombian. I'm just here for a while." And I even had the thought, I'm only going to date Colombian boys. It was this whole identity crisis I was having very young, until I got older, and now I understand and I appreciate the journey my parents took. And I can now say I'm equally American and equally Colombian because of my life experience.

Menendez: I want you to take me back to the original seed of the idea for Yes We Can World Foundation. You now describe it as believing that every child has the right to education and safe spaces, regardless of their location. Is that how it started? How did you chisel down to that idea?

Rebellón: Initially, Yes We Can started with a volunteer trip. I went down to the border. I now live in Los Angeles, so I'm only two hours away from the US-Mexico border that borders San Diego and Tijuana. This was in 2018, when a lot of the news of separating families, and also the caravans were coming to the US. And I was like, "This is not true. There can not be thousands of people and families at the border needing help, and I'm only two hours away."

Rebellón: I went down with a group of volunteers, we took down donations, and then immediately I saw the camp that I arrived to. I had never experienced a refugee migrant population camp, so I saw the children really not being helped. A lot of kids were walking around without shoes, were being unattended. Also, there was no space for them to go to that they could just hang out. Even color at that point was ... Coloring was an activity that I thought would help. And then it developed into a full-time curriculum, which is what we do now.

Rebellón: But that was the seed, knowing that those kids were me when I was 10. I immediately connected with the kids and I thought, "Oh my gosh, I had the privilege and the blessing to get to Miami, to going into a full school system and be welcomed and have someone to help us." These kids have nobody to help them. So we came back to LA and my boyfriend, Kyle, I told him, "We have to go back. Having seen this, I can't not do anything." And that's how it started.

Rebellón: We did a pilot program and then decided to do a foundation. But for us, becoming a nonprofit, which is what we do now, was a complete accident, because we had people that wanted to donate and wanted to know where this was going, even though we didn't know where it was going. And the concept of Yes We Can as the name of our nonprofit is because when we started developing this project, obviously we started running into obstacles. And I was like, "Okay, but we have to do it. It's not that we're not going to do it, we have to do it."

Rebellón: So that's why we named it Yes We Can, because we started receiving no's as far ... Not receiving no's, but facing the challenge of fundraising. We just took on that motto of "yes we can" and being positive. And that's what's gotten us here today, three years later.

Menendez: It's interesting, when you talk about displaced children and education, I think it's really easy to process that as what it means for that child, what it means for that family, which is critical and important. And I believe in that, on its face. I also think though, you layer in this question of what happens to a society when you have an entire generation of young people who don't have a third, a fourth, a fifth grade education, or have experienced a big gap in education.

Menendez: A few years ago I did a project where we traveled to Rwanda. We traveled to Jordan, to one of the Syrian refugee camps, and to El Salvador. Because some of these migrants will come and they will stay and they will be folded into the fabric of American society, and it's critical then that they have not experienced gaps in their education. But if we're also talking about rebuilding Honduras, rebuilding El Salvador, then you need to have a generation of young people who are able to bring those skills to that place, if you ever want that place to have a chance at becoming stable. And where you no longer have the push factors that lead so many of these migrant families to come to the United States in the first place. There is a macro argument for the work that you are doing.

Rebellón: Exactly. And for us also, once we started working with the kids we quickly realized that as soon as around 10, 11, 12-years-old, there are conversations of stopping school because you need to work, because you need to help. You need to provide help, provide for the family. And if you're 10, 11, or 12, you don't have that option to have a different type of life, because now you're going into the cycle that your parents and your grandparents have been under because of the circumstances.

Rebellón: And in regards to the macro level, 100%. I mean, the investments that need to be done in this countries are massive, but they need to be done with local partners. To some extent, the government officials, it's very difficult because it's going to take a long time. And it's also not going to be, I think ... The funds are not going to be used as they would if it was with a local partner. And I really do think that investing in local organizations and partners are what's going to make a difference in these countries to be able to go one by one.

Rebellón: And even our teachers, sometimes when our kids don't show up because they might be sick or they might be having an issue at home, our teachers literally go knock on their doors. We work in a shelter where there's little houses, and sometimes a kid won't show up and we'll go see why they're not coming. And then we find out, okay, maybe they were sick, or maybe ... We had another experience where there were a little boy, didn't want to come to class because there were holes on his shoes and he was embarrassed. And we were like, "Okay. Well, immediately, go get a new pair of shoes." That cannot be the obstacle for a kid not coming into our classrooms.

Rebellón: And that work is done because we're so close to these families and we're so local and on the ground. I think we are all working towards a big picture in different ways. It can all coexist, but definitely working locally is the most effective.

Menendez: Given the journey that you have been on, I wonder then what it meant to you when you were recognized with the Outstanding American by Choice award. That's an award that the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. You're the first Colombian woman

to receive that award. What did it mean to you become a citizen, what did it mean to you then to be recognized with that award?

Rebellón: Oh my gosh. I think becoming a citizen, especially for my dad who's a lawyer, who always does things right, I mean, I think he's gotten one ticket in his life, in this country, because he's so by the book. So that was a very exciting journey for our whole family, because it meant for us that we were finally officially part of America and this was going to be our second home. When you're a resident, you're still wondering, "Is this it? Should I go back?" But when you become a citizen it's like, the country has really taken you in and you have all this other possibilities now. And you're really starting to think about the time that's coming, such as starting a family and all of those things.

Rebellón: But I think for me personally, this award, this recognition, really validated my family's journey, really validated my parents' sacrifice. I think as a kid and as a teenager I didn't really understand why this had happened to our life, and I was very angry about it. It felt really unfair that it had happened to us, because I had a great life. And I think this award really validated the experience for us. And to be able to show that this country and the possibility to seek asylum and be granted asylum, is a huge blessing. It's literally for us saved our lives and allowed us to have a different type of life in this country. Yeah, it was very surreal to receive this recognition.

Menendez: I like to think of you, Estefanía, as this being your act one. And I love that you are so young, that even as I'm saying it's your act two, your act two is beginning very early in your life, which is you want to actually, you want to host, you want to do this whole different universe of work. What is that going to look like? What is drawing you to this new calling?

Rebellón: Oh my gosh. I actually started pursuing an acting career in Miami and moved to LA to pursue this acting career and hosting. I think that my life, even though these are turns that I haven't really been like looking for, have happened for a major reason. And now I'm able to be able share with you and with anyone I meet, that there is this grand need for help. And that once I have those opportunities, that I'm going to be able to provide that perspective. I love what our Latina community is doing, what America Ferrera is doing, what Eva Longoria is doing, Gloria Calderón, this whole community of really empowering Latinas who are knocking on doors every single time, and trying out projects, and supporting different stories. I hope to one day have that opportunity to be part of that circle of Latinas who are changing the storyline for us.

Menendez: What did I miss?

Rebellón: I think something that I would love to share with anyone listening is that we can all make a difference, and that it just really takes one step to take action. That we shouldn't focus on all the how's, because that will come. As long as you, I guess, have the will to do something, you should really pursue it. Because it's just like your instinct, if something is calling your name, then it's definitely something you should be doing.

Menendez: Estefanía, I am so impressed by you. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Rebellón: Of course, thank you so much. I love what you're doing. I love that you're uplifting the Latina community and that it's really personal. Every story comes across in a very personal way that we can all learn from, so thank you so much.

Menendez: Thank you as always for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this

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CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "How Estefanía Rebellón's Own Experience Seeking Asylum Informed Her Mission to Help Migrant Children." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. October 10, 2022. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by:

