



Why Gianna Nino-Tapias Embodies Labor Rights, and Why Her Tweet from a Blueberry Field Hit a Nerve

The Stanford medical student has worked in fields alongside her mother since she was 14. And has become increasingly worried about working conditions for seasonal workers who pick our food, especially after COVID hit. She talks about how being an indigenous, Mixteca fieldworker born in the U.S. illustrates the economic distance between the farm and our dining tables, and why she's so determined to become a doctor to help her people heal.

Alicia Menendez:

Gianna Nino-Tapias planned to spend the summer before her first year at Stanford Medical School doing contact tracing or working retail. But when her job search hit a dead end, she went back to seasonal fruit picking, work she's been doing since she was 14. At the end of one long day, she tweeted about farmworkers like her being paid \$7 for two gallons of blueberries. She then asked, "How much do you pay for your blueberries?" I had to talk to her, I did, and learned so much about her path to medicine as a first gen college student, Indigenous rights, farmworkers' rights, and what consumers need to know about the people who make their food possible.

Gianna, where are you right now?

Gianna Nino-Tapias:

I'm at Stanford, California, or Palo Alto, California.

Menendez: So, you're back at school.

Nino-Tapias: I'm back at school now. Yeah.

Menendez: I always remember those summers during college, going home, and it's so strange, because you have all this independence when you're at school, and then you come home, and your parents treat you like you were still in high school.

Nino-Tapias: Right. Right. And every time I go home it's just there's just a large expectation. Not necessarily from my mom. I think it's just like my own expectation that I should be like helping my mom, and doing some chores, and lightening her load, that at school it's like you're right, like complete freedom, and like I do whatever I want whenever I want.

Menendez: Do you perceive your mom to have a heavy load?

Nino-Tapias: Yeah. Absolutely. I think she's our only parent, and I think that we go to work, and she has to come home and make some meals for everyone, and there's five of us, and she's kind of like a clean freak, like neat freak, and so she loves the house being clean, so I help her out with all those things whenever I can.

Menendez: It's a lot.

Nino-Tapias: Yeah.

Menendez: You're born in Eastern Oregon. You grew up in Eastern Washington state. Tell me about where you grew up.

Nino-Tapias: So, Eastern Washington is very different from Seattle. I think that's one common misconception that I get, is that they think it's just like Seattle, and super rainy, and it's actually not. So, Eastern Washington and Eastern Oregon are both deserts, in the range shadow of a mountain range out there. So, we get very little rain. It's very conservative. There's very little diversity out there. I think the main communities of color that live out there are migrant farmworker communities and the Native American communities. I think it was a great place to grow up. I think you grow up, because it is so rural, there's so much nature around, there's so much... The outdoor activities to do, so I grew up around that a lot and I really enjoyed it. Around a lot of fields, so I grew up working in the fields.

I love Eastern Oregon and Eastern Washington and I would love to go back someday.

Menendez: Is that the plan? To go back?

Nino-Tapias: Yeah. Absolutely.

Menendez: How old were you when you started working in the fields?

Nino-Tapias: I was 14 years old.

Menendez: What was your first day of work like?

Nino-Tapias: I think I was super excited for my first day of work. It was like 10 years ago. I think I was super excited because I would get to contribute to my household. I think the thought process for me was like, "Okay, I can use this money to give it to my mom, to make her life easier." And then she would let me keep some of it, so that I could spend it on whatever I wanted, and I chose to take my siblings and I on a shopping spree for school. So, we went to buy our school supplies and we were all super excited, like we bought new backpacks, and brand name markers, and stuff like that, so I have three younger siblings, so they were all little and they were excited, because we had never done that. I think all growing up, it was like getting the bare minimum that we needed for school, and now I was able to get them whatever they wanted.

Menendez: Is there a story from childhood that captures who you were as a kid?

Nino-Tapias: I think one story that we were recently remembering, like me and my mom and my sister, was... So, our school used to do this activity called Battle of the Books, where there's a selection of like eight books that kids read. It's kind of like a Quiz Bowl style, where you just recall parts of the book. And I had always loved reading, and so we were remembering that I read all the books, and my sister was on my team even though she was two years younger than me in the elementary school, and she was like, "Yeah, you just carried the team, and you just remembered everything."

I think that that was super emblematic of just who I was, of my love for reading, my over competitive nature. Just like real enjoyment for school and what the promise was. My mom always wanted to go to school, didn't get the chance to, and so she was always telling me and my siblings like, "Oh, you go to school. You do well in school. It's gonna take you to a lot of places." And so, I guess those attitudes just carried me through life.

Menendez: When she was putting that emphasis on education, where was the emphasis placed?

Nino-Tapias: I think the emphasis was really on a love for learning. I don't... When I got into Stanford, she didn't really know what Stanford was. She didn't understand really why I had to go so far away. And so, I think for her it was really just like cultivating a love for learning, and a love for being able to build a career for myself, not having to depend on anyone else, like really being my own person rather than, "You're gonna go to Harvard," or, "You're gonna go to Stanford," or anything like that.

Menendez: So, if it wasn't her that put that idea into your head, how did you come to understand that there was something significant about going to an institution like Stanford?

Nino-Tapias: I think those sentiments started forming in high school when I moved a lot. So, I moved during my sophomore year of high school into a new high school. That was a town over. Or it was like half an hour away from where we lived. And this new high school was predominantly white. Eastern Washington also has the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, and the Hanford Nuclear Power Plant. Sorry, can't say that right. And that county actually has some of the highest rates of PhDs per capita in the nation, and so I started realizing in this highly-educated community that these names had a lot of power and prestige behind them, and I started becoming familiar with them. So, what does a Harvard, Yale, Princeton mean, versus our state schools? Which are amazing, and I appreciated them, but that's kind of where those sentiments started coming in.

And then my junior year, I got this flyer in the mail for a program called QuestBridge, and it partners with a lot of elite colleges and universities across the nation, and they were like, "We have a conference for juniors. You're invited to come, but you have to fund yourself." And so, I talked to my principal and he was like so excited. His name was Mr. Biehn, and he was like the first person that ever told me like, "You need to go." And I was like, "I can't afford it. I don't know how to get there." At that point, my parents had recently separated, and my mom didn't know how to drive. So, I remember like, "I don't know how I'm gonna get there."

And so, he helped me out by fundraising within the teachers and gave me money to come to Stanford to learn about, because I'm the first one in my family to apply to college, to apply to graduate school, to get through college, all those things, and when it came to this conference, they kind of explained like, "Oh, you have to take your SATs your junior year and then apply fall." This is something that I would have had no idea about if I hadn't attended that college, had it not been for Mr. Biehn encouraging me to go.

I think I've just been super blessed with these people along my journey that just believed in me without any limitations, just really put all of their time and investment in me, and I'm super grateful for them.

Menendez: You have an experience that is gonna be so familiar to so many of our listeners, which is that you, as the oldest fluent English speaker in your family, would go with your mom to medical appointments. You would be the translator for her. You'd be the translator for some of her friends. Sometimes the medical caregiver. How did that shape your thinking about what you wanted to do?

Nino-Tapias: I really appreciate those experiences. I think that they were so formative and my idea of what a good healthcare setting looks like. There were multiple times when I would go with my mom to these, and be in these interpreter interactions, and like really see the doctors be dismissive of my mom, be dismissive of her pain, or like the things that she was going through, or like my youngest brother was also very sick, and be dismissive of her concerns

for him. And I think that that frustrated me. One very visceral example for me was when I accompanied one of my mom's friend's daughters to her birth, like she was giving birth and I went with her, and the nurse explained something to her, and she just nodded, and then she turned to me and she's like, "What did she say?" She had understood none of that. This is like she's giving birth, she's stressed out, and she had no idea what was going on. And I think that that was just so frustrating for me.

So, after that, I kind of turned that frustration into hope of what a good healthcare provider could look like in Eastern Washington, where a lot of patients don't speak English, where a lot of providers are also not familiar with the cultural things that come with giving birth, or with taking care of your children. And so, I really dreamed that I could go back there and be that provider, and be that provider that parents feel comfortable disclosing not only all the medicines that they've given them, but also all the traditional medicines that they've used on the kids. I think once I got into medical school, I was wondering why can't my community have top trained doctors? And so, that's really my hope, is that I'll be able to go back and serve them with all of this knowledge and all of these resources that I've gained at Stanford, and really make that accessible to my community.

Menendez: What did you observe in those interactions about the way that farm work affects a person's health?

Nino-Tapias: I think starting off with my own personal experience, I think the first thing that was just very difficult for me to start to come to terms with was the availability of bathrooms in the fields. So, there's no plumbing out there, so they bring out porta potties, and your drinking water comes from a cooler that they have to move closer to you every time you move lines or move blocks of farmland. They have to move the bathrooms and water closer to you. Because we're working at a per-piece rate, so we're paid per unit of blueberry gallons that we pick, per unit of apple boxes. And every moment that you spend out there is used towards your salary.

And so, leaving to the bathroom isn't really an option, because you spend like what, five minutes walking out, a couple minutes in the bathroom, and then five minutes walking back, and it's just like not feasible when you're seasonal migrant farmworkers and you have to make that income last for the rest of the year. And so, a lot of people would hold their pee in, or not use the restroom, or not drink water, because they don't want to leave to go to the restroom. I would hear of people getting kidney stones all the time. Or like menstruating while you're in the fields is so difficult, because you're having to change in a porta potty and it's super unhygienic. I hated going in the porta potties. There would be flies everywhere. It's just not like an enjoyable experience.

And so, I think that was the first place where I noticed that people were having issues with their health, and then secondly, joint pain is a huge problem when we're out there. There's back pain. Knee pain. Elbow pain. Back pain. All sorts of pain that you just kind of have to learn to deal with. Kind of just occupational hazard and having to learn to live with daily pain was also something that just struck me when thinking about the health issues that migrant farmworkers' communities deal with.

I think that to put it most bluntly that our lives are disposable and not worth it, so I think most... A couple of weeks ago at the end of July, some farmworkers were accidentally sprayed with pesticides back home. And that was so frustrating for me to see. When you're breathing in pesticides, obviously that's gonna impact your lungs, and if you have inflamed lungs, sick lungs, the virus can get to you and have greater impact. It just showed

me that even though we're seen as essential, that our lives are probably not worth protecting, and that is so devastating for me to hear, because that's my family. That's my community. Those are people that I've known my whole life.

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Menendez: Talk about the social part of college. How did you find your people?

Nino-Tapias: It was hard. That was a really difficult part. I think coming into Stanford, I was part of the Leland Scholars Program. That was a program for first gen students, so I found some of my closest friends there. And then being at the community centers, so I spent a lot of time at the El Centro Chicano y Latino, but also, so my family is Mixteco from Oaxaca, so also a lot of time at the Native American Cultural Center, engaging with Indigenous people, engaging Indigenous advocacy, and I became president of the Natives in Medicine student group.

And so, finding those two communities and really being grounded around people who had similar upbringings, who had similar experiences, that is kind of how I found the people that supported me in the most trying times while I was at Stanford.

Menendez: You graduated with a BA in human biology with a concentration in public health, then you earn a master's in epidemiology at Stanford. Now you're heading to medical school there. On paper, it feels like the trajectory of someone who has just always been crystal clear about what they wanted to do. You're shaking your head no.

Nino-Tapias: Like no, absolutely not.

Menendez: So, how did you figure it out?

Nino-Tapias: I think it was such a hard path for me and I was not pre-med for like half of my Stanford career.

Menendez: Which means what, then? How did you catch up?

Nino-Tapias: During my junior and senior year, it meant like taking 20 units and really buckling down and doing all of my chemistry, all of my physics.

Menendez: Oh my God, Gianna!

Nino-Tapias: I know. It was crazy. But you know-

Menendez: So, what snapped that you said, “Wait a second. I want to go back, and I want... I know that I put this dream on the back burner, but this is actually a thing I want to do.”

Nino-Tapias: It was one, doing that public health internship where I was visiting babies in Boston, in their homes, and measuring them. And during those visits I was like, “This is great, but all of my summer can be summarized by like 18 data points in this huge study.” And I was like, “That doesn’t... That’s just not the impact that I necessarily wanted.” And so, I was like, “Okay.” And then right after that internship, I went to a program called Community Health in Oaxaca with Dr. Gabe Garcia here, who is an amazing person as well, and another person who believed in me, but during the Community Health in Oaxaca program, you visit clinics and you work with Spanish-speaking people, the Indigenous people of Oaxaca, and really work with them to see what health looks like in their communities.

And it was that moment when I... You got to shadow in clinics, and so I saw like some births, I saw some surgeries, and I was like, “I think this is more like it. That this is what I want for myself.” And so, then I came back, and I was like, “Okay, now it’s time to figure out what I need to do.” And again, it was just like that thing of being the first one in my family to do it. I had no idea the things that I needed to do to get to medical school.

Menendez: When you left for college, did you think you would ever return to farm work?

Nino-Tapias: Yes. I think so. Because I was going home in the summers. Sometimes my mom would say jokingly like, “Oh, let’s go to the apple harvest.” And I think that the first year that I was back I was like, “Okay, let’s go.” And so, I went with her. But it was like two weeks, so it was like nothing for me after spending 14, 16 weeks in the previous summers, like two weeks was super easy. I would go with my mom to the fields.

After I got my master’s, though, that was when I was like... When I graduated college I was like, “Oh yeah, probably never going back. I have my degree now and I’ll always be able to get a job.” Was not the case this summer, so I went back, but-

Menendez: Wait, was not the case this summer because the pandemic came.

Nino-Tapias: Yes. That, too.

Menendez: And what did that mean for the work that you had lined up?

Nino-Tapias: I was just finishing my epi degree, and so I thought, “You know, I can probably get a contact tracing job. I can get some public health job working in our county.” I applied to both and never heard back. But I’m sure all of those people were overwhelmed with the pandemic, so that’s understandable. And then I applied to retail jobs, because I also have retail experience. Never heard back from them. And thought in the worst-case scenario, I’ll go with my mom to the fields. It ended up being the worst-case scenario because of the pandemic and I spent six weeks with my mom in the fields. Yeah.

Menendez: Did you notice things coming back with your college degree, with your master’s, that you had not noticed previously about the work and the nature of the work?

Nino-Tapias: Other than the measures that they were taking to prevent outbreaks in the fields, not really. I think that my whole college experience I had been thinking about the fields and thinking about the kinds of experiences that we had out there, so whenever I was doing public health work, I would relate it back to my personal experiences. But I did notice a lot of... One, improvements, I think, and steps in the right direction for the ranch of like keeping the bathrooms closer, keeping bathrooms cleaner, having more drinking water

and adding additional handwashing stations, because that was something that in the past we were washing our hands with our drinking water, but the ranch was doing a better job, but also not enough to prevent huge outbreaks.

Menendez: So, let's talk about the tweet that went viral. In it, you show two huge buckets of blueberries and you wrote, "I'm about to finish up my time in the fields and wanted everyone to know that we, farmworkers, are paid \$7 for two gallons of blueberries. How much do you pay for your blueberries?" Tell me about the decision to write and then to send that tweet.

Nino-Tapias: On Med Twitter, which is a community on Twitter that is predominantly of medical professionals, medical students, during this moment that I chose to tweet this, I had seen one of my peers also tweeting about their personal experience, and I was like, "You know what? I also have important perspective. Let me tweet about what's going on in my life." And I really thought, and I thought, and I was like, "Okay, I don't have much going on in my life other than working in the field, so let me just tweet about that." And that picture, I had not even thought about taking it. I sent it to my partner because he was like, "Oh, what are you doing?" And I was like, "In the field." So, it wasn't even taken consciously, it was just like a snap that I sent him.

And so, I was like, "Oh, I still have this picture from earlier. Let me just include this, like throw it on there."

Menendez: What did you hope that people would glean from that tweet?

Nino-Tapias: I think greater consciousness for our food. I think it's so easy to eat your food without thinking about all the hands that touched it along the way to your table. And more so that there's still so much injustice behind that system of food from farm to table that where that injustice falls on communities of color.

Menendez: It was interesting to me though, in part, was the question at the end, which is, "How much do you pay for your blueberries?" Often the focus is on the employer and how much the employer chooses to pay their worker. But you're playing with it a step further and saying, "How much do you value this product that you consume?" What did you want the message to be to someone as they went to the grocery store or the farmer's market and picked up a carton of blueberries?

Nino-Tapias: I think that was another thing that I've always thought about, is that when me and my mom go to the grocery store, like if we look at the blueberries, we probably can't afford them with our budget, and we pick them. So, I think when I tweeted that I really wanted for people to see the disparity between the amount that they're paying for these blueberries, because it's usually like a pint, and they're usually several dollars. We're paid several dollars for a whole gallon of those same blueberries. Really making people conscious of the economic injustice that is like, "You're paying so much as a consumer. We're working so hard for them and picking so many blueberries for a couple of dollars." So, where does that difference come from?

Menendez: We've sort of talked around it, but we haven't talked specifically about the way that your Indigenous culture showed up in your home life.

Nino-Tapias: Yeah. I think that was another thing is that I felt throughout this whole experience, was that that narrative was never really acknowledged.

Menendez: Well, because it complicates the narrative.

Nino-Tapias: Right. Right. So, growing up, like I said, we used a lot of traditional medicine. I think my attachment to our pueblo, our village, was always super strong. I remember when we got our first computer, it was one that my aunt loaned us, and the first thing my mom asked was like, “Oh, show me the pueblo on Googler.” And that’s when I really realized our attachment to home and our desire to be there is so, so, so much bigger than a lot of... I think a lot of immigrants also have like the American dream, the American aspiration, and like really to build their life here in America, but like our desire is back home, and how can we go back home and make it better? It’s probably a little bit more complicated than that, but being from an Indigenous background, I think there was a lot of discrimination in the fields, as well. A lot of people would use the term like Oaxaquita as a slur towards us, or like don’t be... They say matado, which means like over working, like kill yourself over some dollars, like the Oaxacans. Growing up with those perceptions, I think that was when I was growing up, a lot of the time I would just say, “Oh, I’m just Mexican.” Never really go into it more than that.

But during college is when, when I did the Community Health in Oaxaca Program, when I joined the Native Center, that was when I really started appreciating our village as like a pueblo originario, like an original pueblo. But it was just not something of conversation whenever I was doing interviews, or whenever I was talking to reporters. That never came up. It never felt natural to bring it up to them.

Menendez: Why don’t you think it came up?

Nino-Tapias: I think because it’s a lot easier to homogenize the experience of farmworkers as just like immigrants, without realizing that there’s Guatemalan farmworkers, there’s Mexican farmworkers, that there’s farmworkers from all sorts of backgrounds, and I think it was just a lot easier to say like, “Immigrant farmworker girl,” versus, “This Oaxacan Indigenous Mixteco farmworker girl...” It was just easier I think for the discourse.

Menendez: So, what about you comes from those cultures?

Nino-Tapias: This is kind of strange to say, but like my humility. I think that whenever I was growing up, like when I got into Stanford and my mom didn’t want me to tell anyone. And I was like, “Well, I have to tell people so that they’re happy for me.” And she was like, “No, you don’t have to tell anyone. Just be proud of yourself, and that’s it, and move on.” And so, I think humility was something that I learned through my mom. I think my drive and my perseverance, I think people back in our village, in our pueblo, have really difficult lives and my mom tells me that when she was growing up, they ate one meal a day, and food was really hard to come by. And so, I think that our drive and perseverance to live, and survive, and thrive is another thing that I value so much, and that I see day to day now in my life.

But also, like rich cultural traditions, like our foods. I embroider, which is another cultural path that my community practices, that my mom does, that I learned from her. I embroider whenever I’m feeling stressed or overwhelmed. And so, all of those things contribute to my perception of myself.

Menendez: As you look ahead at medical school and the career you’re pursuing, what are you most looking forward to?

Nino-Tapias: I think I'm most looking forward to those interactions when I will come into a patient room and like immediately see an identification between me and the patient, to see that identification when I'm able to speak fluent Spanish with them, when I'm able to talk to their kids, talk to their parents, to not have to use like their daughter as an interpreter or their son as an interpreter. We read a study where it's like parents will ask a lot more questions and really be more driven to understand their care when they're speaking the same language as their provider. And when they're using an interpreter, the number of questions that they ask per visit decreases.

So, I'm really excited to be able to open that door for fully engaging, fully understanding, like fully empathetic care with my patients, and I'm so, so looking forward to that.

Menendez: Gianna, thank you so much.

Nino-Tapias: 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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