



Why Gladis Molina Alt Wants Our Immigration System to Redefine What is in the Best Interest of Children

The new Executive Director of The Young Center reflects on her own childhood experience of fleeing El Salvador during its civil war, the unique challenges children face in deportation proceedings, and why she believes big policy change must be coupled with direct service.

Alicia Menendez: Gladis Molina Alt was born in El Salvador during its civil war in the 1980s and was brought to the U.S. as a child. That experience informed her decision to become a lawyer and advocate for migrant children. Work that has included representing kids in immigration court, juvenile court and at the highest levels of the system before the Department of Homeland Security and the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Gladis and I dive into her new role as the executive director of the Young Center, her advocacy for a best interest of the child's standard for young immigrants facing deportation and how she does this incredibly emotional and complex work, always mindful of her own trauma. Gladis, thank you so much for doing this.

Gladis Molina Alt: You're welcome.

Menendez: Gladis, I want you to take me back, if you are willing, to growing up in El Salvador and what it is that you remember from the first 10 years of your life.

Molina Alt: Well, the first thought that comes to mind are rivers and nature and dirt. I remember the rain and the smell of adobe walls after the rain and I also remember men in green uniforms during the war. I remember helicopters and I remember seeing dead bodies. I remember going to get tortillas and then just having to stay there for a few hours or the night, until the gun fighting stopped, so that I can get back to my grandmother's house. I remember Christmases. I remember the wood oven where my grandma and my aunts would make pan de torta.

November was the most beautiful and sweet time during the year for me, because there was a wind that came and I just remember just feeling so giddy inside when that wind would come. There would be fogones, is what we would call them. Around town things would be lit up and wood would be burnt. So, yeah, it's a mix of the beautiful surroundings where I grew up, family and a sense of normal life, food, holidays. There's also traumatic events and sites that I remember that make my heart turn cold even as I think about it.

Menendez: Thank you. Thank you for all of that. I wonder, did your parents have a conversation with you? Did they talk with you about the move to the U.S. or was it a thing in your memory that just sort of happens?

Molina Alt: It was a thing that just happened. One of the memories that is so burned into my mind is a month before my fifth birthday. I'm holding my aunt's hand and my mom is getting in the cabin of a commune, a truck, a cargo truck and she's leaving. I have some sense that she's

going away for a long time, to maybe meet my dad in the U.S. and I'm just standing there with my aunt and my older brother. You know when a kid wants to scream inside?

Menendez: Yes.

Molina Alt: Now I understand it. Now that I've worked with kids and I've heard their stories. Especially in 2018 when I was working with cases directly with kids that are separated. I go, "That is family separation. That's what it is."

Menendez: It strikes me to think of you as that child wanting to scream. Then thinking about the fact that what you have done professionally is basically screaming on behalf of all of these children who the system is not set up for us to center their voices or to prioritize their voices. Do you remember the moment or the series of moments where, in your own mind, you connected the dot between your lived experience as a child migrant and the desire to advocate on behalf of other children who are going through the same experience?

Molina Alt: Yes. I think it started not so much from that memory, but what I was living. I was living undocumented because I got to Long Beach, to LA County when I was 10, but then I didn't get my Green Card until I was 21-years-old. It was in that decade between 10 and 20 years old, and this was the '90s, when Pete Wilson was trying to pass Prop 187, when I was a freshman in high school.

It was from that present experience of, "I'm undocumented, my parents don't know how to read or write. They don't know how to fill out applications. They don't know what to make sense of this paperwork coming from Immigration Service." That I was like, "Oh, my god. I need to become a lawyer, understand this so I can help my parents."

It was from that experience that I was like, "I don't like this. I don't like not knowing and I want to be able to do something." I think it was from that. Then, it sort of worked backwards, to where I began to see the experience of children, of family separation. It has been the work that has helped me, in many ways, dig the layers of my own experience.

Menendez: 2005, you begin working with immigrant children as a law clerk for Catholic Charities in LA, then law school, a staff attorney for the South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation Project in the Rio Grande Valley. 2008, you joined Kids in Need of Defense, which I think most of us know as KIND in LA. 2011, you moved to Phoenix to serve as a managing attorney for the Florence Immigrant & Refugee Rights Project. What is the calculus that is going into each of those moves? Because those are big moves.

Molina Alt: It was, "How do I get to do this work and be of service? Where's the need?" Literally, I've always been driven by, "Where am I needed?" Texas, it was, at that time, very few people knew about unaccompanied children and being detained. When I started working at Catholic Charities that summer of '05, I remember meeting my first unaccompanied kid in federal custody, in federal detention, if you will. A 14/15-year-old from Ecuador, a boy. I remember thinking, "Oh, I didn't know kids were detained." I didn't know that. Then, that led me to South Texas, because that's where the jobs were and that's where the majority of kids were detained. Then I went back to LA, because when I was working in the Valley, I realized how many kids were going through the system and reaching places like LA without an attorney. I thought, "Well, got to go back home and do something there." Then I came out to Arizona after SB 1070 here, because that passed in 2010. I just remember thinking to myself, "I'm now 30-years-old, I'm now twice the age I was when I was undocumented and going through Prop 187. I'm a lawyer. I can do something." I've

moved based on where I'm needed, where the work is happening, I guess. That's why I've made my moves.

Menendez: Gladis, can you paint a picture for us? Because I think there's something very opaque about this system and what goes into representing children in immigration court and juvenile court. Then what goes into something like representing children before the Departments of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement?

Molina Alt: Getting to know the kid's story. What has happened to that child, because it is their past that becomes the tools that I use to craft an argument or to even determine what is the relief of the case that I'm going to put forth in immigration court or in juvenile court? Before I can even get to the child's story, I have to build rapport and trust.

Get that child to a place where they feel safe enough to feel certain things and to remember certain things. Because with children, it's not like you can press a print button and their story comes out, because they have maybe not yet made sense of things that have happened to them. Or, they've been told, like, "Don't say this." Or, "Don't share this, because then you're going to stay in detention longer."

A lot of it is focusing on the child and helping that child get to a place where they feel safe to speak about their past. It also requires building relationships in the courtroom and with the Department of Homeland Security. One of the very first key lessons I learned as a young lawyer in South Texas was that everybody's trying to do their job, even the law enforcement side. That it doesn't benefit my client if I antagonize the other side or if I demonize the other side.

Menendez: Was that where you started though, or was that a thing you had to learn?

Molina Alt: I had to learn that.

Menendez: How do you cultivate those relationships with people you might have fundamental disagreements with?

Molina Alt: For me, it was very much about, "How can I get them to see the human side of this system that we're in?" What that required is for me to also show up as a human being towards them. It was focusing on the humanity of everyone involved and the child's story. How we all had decision points along the case to make, about how that case was going to turn out.

Menendez: I found it interesting in going over your story and your resume, that you did spend time on Capitol Hill as a CHCI Fellow. You could have become a policy person on Capitol Hill, you could have become a legislator. There are lots of ways to affect change. What did you see that made you realize the law was the place for you? How did the knowledge you gained during that period, where you did have really close proximity to the process, inform how you now think about immigration and immigration reform?

Molina Alt: That's such a good question, because I remember vividly that year and thinking to myself, "I don't want to spend time trying to land the policy that is going to impact everybody when somebody needs help right now." For me, what it came down to is while we figure out how to fix the system and how to get to agreement on a particular policy point, there is somebody right now who is going through deportation proceedings or who is undocumented.

They're a senior in high school and they're not going to graduate and they need a Social Security Card so that they can apply for FAFSA or apply to the UC system. They cannot

wait for a policy to be agreed upon or passed. That's what pulled me in terms of my skillset, my interest, but also where I found the fire in me.

Menendez: There's something I go back to over and over that I learned in college. I feel bad, because I don't remember the guest lecturer who came in and put this in my mind, but they described public service as having two different components. Think of it as a river that is raging. There are people at the top who are trying to fill up all the holes in the dam and those are your macro thinkers. Those are your legislators, those are your policy people. But then, there's an understanding there's always going to be a hole in the dam. There's always going to be someone who slips through that hole. There need to be people downriver who can catch each of those individuals who fall through. They are equally important roles. We need people at the top fixing the dam and we need people at the bottom of the river catching as many people as they can. But it is critical, I think, for a person who has a heart of service, to figure out where they are meant to be.

Molina Alt: Yes. As you say that, it moves me, because I remember June of 1990 and flying in. Because my dad brought me on a fake visa. He was supposed to be my padrino on that flight. I wasn't his daughter, but that's how I got to LA. I remember flying into LAX and it was nighttime and I saw the vastness of the city and lights. My legs were dangling on the seat, because I'm short. I remember thinking to myself, "Who am I going to be in this place?" And wanting to answer that question. Little did I know that I would end up being a lawyer, advocating for kids in that very circumstance that I was sitting in at that time, landing in a new place. To me, that has always felt like a calling and almost like this abiding duty to do for others what I've needed myself.

Menendez: In 2016, you joined the Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights, leading the Child Advocate Program and its work to advance the best interests of the child's standard for immigrant children facing deportation proceedings in this country. What do you believe that standard should be and how is that standard different than what we have now?

Molina Alt: There is a standard of best interest that has come to have a negative connotation in certain spaces in the law. The Young Center is mindful of that context and that space about how best interest has been used sometimes within systems to separate or remove children from their families. Particularly children of color. So, when we talk about best interest in the Young Center, we talk about it being child-centered interest. Including the child's voice and wishes into that analysis.

Oftentimes, we think about, "What does the child want and where is the safety line for that child?" Often, those are the two big things that we look at. Then, we look at identity and we look at the development of that child in how we go about presenting our recommendations or our determinations in what is in the child's best interest. For us, it boils down to, "How does the child get centered into that analysis?" Rather than, "What are the judgments of society or the prejudicial factors that sometimes have been factored into that analysis in the past?"

Menendez: Gladis, you referenced this in passing, but I want to frame it a different way, which is, this is hard work. This is emotional work. This is work that is hard not to take home with you. I imagine that is doubly so if you have the lived experience of some of the children that you represent. I wonder, both the work you have done to address, unpack your own trauma to make sure that the work does not re-traumatize you and to make sure that you are taking

care of yourself and living a life that is separate from this work, so that then you are able to return to the work renewed and sustained?

Molina Alt: For me, when I think of that question, the kids' strength and resilience somehow hold me too. Just seeing that, right? I think, "Wow, look at what they've gone through and how they're still able to smile and trust and feel joy." To me, that fills me. My family, just seeing the sacrifices my parents have made and how far we've come as a family. Knowing that, in many ways, I am lucky that I get to do this work because of the opportunities that I had. I go back to this spirit of gratitude. Gratitude for the kids and what they teach me and share with me. Gratitude for my family and where we've come along. Also my coworkers, they often hold me up. They're the ones that, when I feel confused, beaten or like I don't know how I'm going to show up another day to work, I see how they keep showing up and that uplifts me.

There's the larger community of people who believe in this. People like you that produce things that uplift me, because of somebody else's story, right? Or something that I read that reminds me that we all go through spaces like this in different industries in the world. In different jobs, but that the human spirit can thrive, that we can make it. I lean on those things, I lean into the spirit of the kids, family, coworkers and the larger community. The Latina community for me is one of those circles.

Menendez: Gladis, I am so grateful for your time. Thank you for doing this.

Molina Alt: Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer, Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you, email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why Gladis Molina Alt Wants Our Immigration System to Redefine What is in the Best Interest of Children." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. April 10, 2023. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by:

