



## How One Day at a Time's Isabella Gomez Found Her Strength

"And if I'm going to play a Latinx woman, she better be strong as hell," Isabella tells Alicia in this powerful conversation about being fully present and finding your power. "And she better have something to say. And she better be smart. And she better have all of these things that I know Latinx women to be." But even working on such a popular show is no guarantee. "I was no longer an actor, I was a Latinx actor," Isabella tells Alicia. "Because I got my part of my privilege taken away, I can see that shift clear as day." The conversation goes there and many other intimate places as she recounts her life from Colombia to Orlando to Los Angeles.

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Alicia Menendez:

We are coming up on a very special anniversary, our 100<sup>th</sup> episode, and so we want to hear from you. Send us a voice memo to [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com) telling us what the podcast has meant to you, when you've kept going, a time you persevered. We want to hear it all.

Isabella Gomez was just 17 years old when she and her parents moved to LA so that she could pursue acting. Six months, hundreds of auditions later, and she'd received zero call backs. She adjusted her approach, she started having fun, and two months later, she booked her breakout role on One Day at a Time. We talk about getting the show, losing the show, getting it back, and what it's like to be a public person when you're still figuring out who you are.

Thanks for doing this.

Isabella Gomez: Of course. I'm so excited to do it.

Menendez: From quarantine.

Gomez: From quarantine.

Menendez: Take me back to your audition for One Day at a Time.

Gomez: Yes, so my first audition for One Day at a Time came actually after there was an article out that Norman Lear was redoing one of his shows, and I was at the time testing for another show, so I just kind of didn't think anything of it. My acting coach had sent it to me and was like, "You'd be perfect for the daughter." And I was like, "I'm doing this other thing." And obviously that show didn't go my way, and I got an audition for Elena Alvarez, and as I was reading the audition, I was like, "This sounds so familiar." And I realized it was the same article that my acting coach had sent me.

So, I went in, it was at Sony Studios, and it's always so exciting for an actor to get to go into a studio to do an audition. I go in, it's a sitcom, it's a comedy, and at this point in my life, I thought I was exclusively a dramatic actor, so I was like-

Menendez: Oooh!

Gomez: I know.

Menendez: Isabella, you were 22, and you're playing a teen. Is that weird?

Gomez: I've always looked so much younger than I am, and I've never felt an age, if that makes sense, so it's weird in that for example, like when she was having her quinceañera I was 18, so it wasn't correlating to my life. But in a way, it's actually really nice, because I get to be a little bit ahead of her, and remember what those experiences were like, and then have insight going back, instead of living it at the same time as her, and especially those years for a young woman are so hard. I think it's nice that I'm a couple years ahead of her.

Menendez: There's no amount of money you could pay me to be in my teens again.

Gomez: Oh my God. No thank you. And I barely just got out of them, and I'm like, "How did I do it?"

Menendez: Well, especially because your teens were not... I don't know what normal is, but they're certainly not average.

Gomez: Yeah, they were definitely not the norm.

Menendez: Was that real to you as you were going through it?

Gomez: I'm somebody that lives in my head a lot, so I never really settled into what all of it meant until I look back at it. For example, I'm an immigrant, and for some reason I just always saw myself as first gen, and I was like, "No, you're an immigrant." Like I remember living in Colombia. I lived there till I was 10. I had this whole other life. I didn't notice it as much going through it until I started working more, and then people saw me differently, and then people started acting a little different, and then especially once I moved to LA, I realized that it just wasn't the same.

My senior year I did online. I never went to prom. I guess I was valedictorian, but nobody told me. I didn't go to graduation. So, it's all these things that like "normal" people don't get, but I get to go to award shows and be in the same room as Lin-Manuel Miranda, and I get to go on set, and have a graduation on set, and I feel like I'm getting all of these meaningful experiences. They're just very different from what the average, I guess, kid would have.

Menendez: So much of One Day at a Time is about family. What is your family like?

Gomez: My family is the best. Well, right now I just do... I have my mom and my dad. I have an uncle, and aunt, and a little cousin in Florida, and the rest of my family's in Colombia still, so my parents and I are super close. My mom had me when she was 19, so she was just kind of always a friend, instead of a mom, and we're just really tight. I have always said my parents are my best friends, especially my dad. My mom gets really upset about me, because she's like, "It's team Sergio and team Isabella against me." But my dad and I are super similar, and they're just so much fun.

Menendez: You started acting really young. Tell me about your first acting job in Colombia.

Gomez: My first acting job that I remember, I've noticed I have a pretty bad memory, but I'm pretty sure this was my first one, is I did a commercial for a toilet paper company in Colombia. And I remember it was because when I was five or six, I randomly went up to my parents and was like, "I want to be an actor." And the industry in Colombia is so small, and it's mostly novellas, and there's not a lot of kids in those, and so they were like, "We don't know what to do." But my mom had a really close friend who was in the industry, so she

was like, "Hey, my daughter wants to act." And he was like, "Cool, let's put her in this thing I'm doing." And I just remember it being the most fun I've ever had.

I'm an only child, and I love adults. I've always just done better around adults, so I was the only kid on set, and they were asking me all these big questions about like what I wanted to wear, and they put the camera in front of me, and I remember people kind of being like, you know, "Don't be nervous," or whatever. And I was like, "Nervous? This is the coolest thing that's ever happened." And then I got paid with two Barbies instead of money, because there is no union in Colombia, and I thought... I was like, what? Six, seven? I was like, "This is the coolest thing ever! I get to be in front of a camera and I get free Barbies? Like this is the dream and I made it."

Menendez: I hope you have negotiated a better day rate for yourself at this point.

Gomez: I have. I've raised my standards a bit.

Menendez: So then when you're 10, you move to Orlando. What was the impetus for the move?

Gomez: So, my dad had another brother that lived in... He was a half brother that lived in Florida that they had lost touch, and he kind of reentered the picture and was like, "I'd love to reconnect with the family." And so, we came and visited, and kind of fell in love with the US, and I think overall, there's the idea of there's a better life waiting for you in the US, and at the time, my family members that lived here were like, "We'd love to have you," and my dad had a job at the company if he wanted to come, and it just seemed like everything clicked into place and it was a bit of a no brainer.

Menendez: Then, 2015, you move to LA. Was that to pursue acting?

Gomez: Yes. Yes. And it was actually my dad's call. We had been obviously toying with the idea of moving to LA. I was so scared. I'm very scared of change. I don't love it. And so, it was my dad that was like, "You know what? We're moving this summer and that's that." And we did. We got in a car and drove cross country and here we are.

Menendez: That's wild.

Gomez: It was so wild.

Menendez: And did things pick up immediately? Or was there a moment where you're like, "This is a terrible mistake?"

Gomez: Oh my God. So, the first time it felt like a terrible mistake was I was in our tiny little apartment, and school hadn't started yet, and I had no friends, my car wasn't here yet, we didn't have Wi-Fi, and I remember just sitting in my room and being like, "What did I do?" Like, "What is this? I don't... I'm going into my junior year and I know nobody." And I didn't even have an agent out here. So, that was scary. And then I also remember, so my first six months, I auditioned all the time, and especially pilot season, I think, my God, I was going out like five, six times a week, which is more than I had ever auditioned, and I didn't get a single callback in six months. Not one callback out of hundreds of auditions.

Menendez: Brutal.

Gomez: And I'm 17, and I just made my family leave everything they know to come pursue this thing that I thought I was ready for, and I'm not even getting a callback. And I remember just being so distraught, and not even knowing what to do, because I understood the

industry, but also in a way, in Florida I was kind of “bigger fish in a small pond,” so I was like, “Oh, I’m gonna get there and I’m gonna book.” And I didn’t.

And I remember it all kind of shifted for me. We went on a cruise to Hawaii, and I was on a beach in Hawaii with my parents talking about it, and they were talking to me about how I wasn’t having fun anymore, like an audition would come in and it wasn’t exciting. It was something I dreaded, and I didn’t want to go, and I felt so stressed, and so I just said, “You know what? If I’m not getting callbacks anyway, I’m just gonna have fun and enjoy this thing that I moved here for, that I love.” And so, after that, I started just going for fun, and auditioning as a thing that I liked to do, and that’s when I tested for that other show, and then two months later I booked *One Day at a Time*.

Menendez: There’s a lesson in there even for those of us who are not actors, which is like sometimes... I always thought that wanting something so much was the only way to get it. But there is some space between that and wanting something, but knowing that it’s not the end all, be all.

Gomez: Totally.

Menendez: That I think actually just makes you better at whatever it is you’re trying to do. It’s very counterintuitive.

Gomez: And also doing it for the right reasons. I still wanted to do it, but I think doing it because it was fun, and not because I felt like I needed to book a job, was so important. Because booking, going into an audition with the mindset of, “I’m gonna book this job,” does not service the character, the story, and people can tell. People can tell when you walk into an audition desperate, so yeah, it was... And it’s something that I still have to go back to all the time. I have to keep reminding myself, “You’re doing this because you love it. If it was for fame or for money, there are easier ways to get famous and rich, and so just have a good time.”

Menendez: *Miss Juleyka, nice to have you on! Must be a special reason.*

*Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:*

*Yeah, yeah. You know it’s a special reason, since I like to be behind the scenes. All right, so when Cantu Beauty decided to come on board, I rushed.*

Menendez: *You rushed to volunteer to try the products.*

*Lantigua-Williams:*

*Yes, I know I did, and it’s the first time. I know. But I’ve already been using their coconut curling cream for years, so I figured I wasn’t gonna miss a chance to try out sister products.*

Menendez: *I like the photo you sent me the other day. Your hair looked really good.*

*Lantigua-Williams:*

*And that was just after one shampoo and conditioner. My curls were shiny and smooth, man. And my comb was not full of my own hair after I detangled it in the shower.*

Menendez: *Even in pictures it’s coming through, like your hair looks shiny, and hydrated, and just so healthy.*

Lantigua-Williams:

*Thanks. I really appreciate that you let me send you those, because I'm really excited about the change.*

Menendez: *So, how many products are you using all told?*

Lantigua-Williams:

*Right now, I've got like four, so I'm using the shampoo, the conditioner, the leave-in cream, and then can I just tell you what my favorite is?*

Menendez: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Lantigua-Williams:

*The Wave Whip. First of all, that name is everything, but I love how my waves and my curls just are fuller, they're more touchable, they're less frizzy. I mean, I know I sound like an ad, but let me tell you.*

Menendez: *Well, you can enjoy the benefits of the Cantu Beauty haircare line, picking up your favorites at Target or ordering from Target.com.*

Menendez: One Day at a Time deals with some really heavy topics. It deals with immigration, it deals with consent, it deals with sexual orientation. How has being on the show impacted you?

Gomez: I am exponentially a better person because of the show. I think I grew up very unaware and very ignorant of the world. I switched cultures when I was 10, and I was completely new to this country, and then I lived in Florida, so I was just unaware of a lot of stuff. I didn't even know that I was unaware. I didn't realize that there was more to learn, and then you move to LA, which is super liberal, and super hippy dippie, and super whatever, and I get on a show like One Day at a Time, where we're talking about these things that I know nothing about, and it's just made me so much more aware. It's made me so much more empathetic. It's made me realize that I am not the center of the universe, which for a long time growing up as an only child, and especially as an immigrant where it like... You only have your core family. You think, "Oh, everything's kind of about me and how I'm transitioning through this."

And then I realized that that couldn't be further from the truth, and it's just, it's taught me so much about artistry, and humanity, and how much talking about these things actually means to people, because I also grew up... There's all the talk of representation, but I am white passing, and in Colombia, everything was dubbed into Spanish, and so I grew up thinking that Hannah Montana and Wizards of Waverly Place were about people like me, because those girls looked like me and they were speaking Spanish. And so, it's just made me so much more aware.

Menendez: We interviewed Gloria Calderón Kellett for one of our, like way back in the day, love her. Such a powerhouse. What have you learned from working with her?

Gomez: That anything is possible, and that anything is possible, and you can still be nice. She is a powerhouse, and she is taking over Hollywood, and she is so nice, and she... Can I curse?

Menendez: Yeah.

Gomez: And she gives a shit, man. She gives a shit about everything that she does, and everybody that's involved in her projects, and I think that is so powerful and meaningful, especially

in... I feel like our culture is so much about productivity, and how much can you do, and how much can you churn out, and do whatever it takes to be that way. I feel like even a few years ago, there was such an emphasis of like, "You can sleep with your dead." And like hustle, and hustle, and you don't have to be nice, you just have to get it done. And Gloria is the epitome of you can rest and have a balanced life, and of course she still struggles with that, but you can rest and have a balanced life and be nice, and still rise to the top. And I think that is such a good lesson to learn this early on.

Menendez: One Day at a Time originally on Netflix, loyal following, dedicated following, very vocal on social media. And never more vocal than when Netflix canceled the show. Where were you when you found out that they weren't gonna pick it up for another season?

Gomez: I was in Vancouver, and Mike and Gloria called me, and I'm in the back, and it's both of them, and they don't... They're not screaming, so I can tell something's wrong. And Gloria says, "Hey, they're not picking our little show up." And I felt, like I get teary eyed just thinking about it. I felt my soul unhinge. I just immediately started sobbing. It was really, really rough, and then I remember getting to the hotel room, and calling my parents, and crying in such a manner that they were like, "Who died? What's happening?" And I was like, "My TV family died." And they were like, "You've been in this industry for 15 years, you know this happens. Get it together!"

Menendez: And then when it got picked up again?

Gomez: I had been texting Mike and Gloria for a couple days because I could feel it in the air that something was shifting, and I remember Mike had told me, "We'll know by tomorrow." And then I got on a flight to Spain, so all of the time things were different, and I had been on this flight for freaking like 12 hours, whatever long, and I got off on immigration, and my parents had come with me, and I opened my texts, and it was something like it was Gloria and Mike, and Gloria said, "Gomez, you there?" And Gloria said... Mike said, "Gomez, you there?" Gloria said, "It's done. We're doing the show." Or something like that.

And I didn't know how to handle myself. I'm in an immigrations line, and I didn't, I wanted to tell both my parents at the same time, so I just squealed to myself. I texted my boyfriend at the time, and it was frickin' like 1:00 AM here, 2:00 AM here, and I woke him up, and he's like, "What's happening? Are you okay?" And I was like, "We got the show back! We got the show back!" And he was like, "Oh my God!" And then I got to go the next day to a convention and I had a Q&A scheduled, or a panel, so there was what felt like millions of people in this fricking audience, and I got to tell them, and we all got to just scream and cry together.

Menendez: So fun.

Gomez: And it was just the most surreal, like couldn't make it up, should be in a movie kind of moment I've ever had.

Ad: *Blackness isn't just about race. I'm Denene Milner, and I'm a New York Times best-selling author. On my podcast, Speakeasy with Denene, I dive into the beauty and humanity of blackness, with people like writer Tayari Jones, journalist Demetria Lucas, and rapper Killer Mike. Listen to Speakeasy with Denene from Georgia Public Broadcasting. Subscribe for free at [gpb.org/podcasts](http://gpb.org/podcasts), or on your favorite podcast app.*

Menendez: Having the show, then having it taken away, then having it given back, how has that changed you and your approach to the work?

Gomez: I am infinitely more grateful for what I get to do. I always realized that I was super lucky to be doing the show that I was doing, and I realized that we were getting spoiled, because every director that came in, every guest star that came in were like, "This is so special. There isn't a show like this and there isn't a cast like this, and there isn't a set like this in show business right now." And so, getting that taken away is why I was so distraught, because I realized what I had. But then having it back, first of all, it made me realize the power of telling stories that matter. And that's why I got into this. I'm fascinated by humans, and I like to tell stories that aren't my own, and the Alvarez family is a story that is the story of so many people that I know, but that isn't told on TV often.

And so, I realize the importance of that, and I realized my privilege, and also my responsibility moving forward, that as long as I have the ability to, I would love to be able to do work on characters that matter, and characters that have something to say, and especially right now, there's a lot of talk about who gets to play what, and so a lot of my roles now, even though I'm white passing, are mostly Latinx. And if I'm gonna play a Latinx woman, she better be strong as hell, and she better have something to say, and she better be smart, and she better have all of these things that I know Latinx women to be, that is not how we're portrayed at all.

And so, getting it back has taught me that stories that matter, matter. And representation matters. And when you are telling a story authentically, not only from the people in front of the screen, but down to our writers, or producers, our directors, the people that put our costumes on us, the people that do our makeup, all of that matters, and I think if I ever had the privilege to have a say in another project, I would be much more aware of the things that I would want out of it.

Menendez: My advice would be that if you're on a super buzzy show, and you are this fresh new face of a super buzzy show, that that opens up a world of opportunities in audition land. But my understanding from reading other interviews with you is you actually feel like it has narrowed the range of roles that's offered to you.

Gomez: Yeah. So, what it is about that is you are told, once you get a series regular, that everything is easier. For me, though, my experience was I look the way that I look, so I was going out for every role, which meant mostly white roles, because people didn't really put it together that Isabella Gomez was Latina, because she looked like me and she spoke like me, so I was going out a ton. Granted, I was also going out a ton for like guest stars, and like day players, so of course once you're a series reg that your team goes, "Let's not submit for those, because you're trying to build, and going from series reg to a one-day player on a show is not really building."

So, of course those were gonna diminish. However, I became a series reg on a show that is all about being Latina, and it's all about our Latinx culture, and all my interviews have something to do with me being Latina, and I think that it shifted the people's perspectives of me. I was no longer an actor. I was a Latinx actor. And unfortunately, that means something right now, and my team is incredible, and they try to get me into every room possible, and granted, of course it did open up a lot of doors. I started having like casting director meetings, which I would have never been able to have without this show, and I started going in for like huge studio movies that I would have never been seen for.

So, it opened up doors, but it also opened them up not in a way that I was expecting them to. I thought that I would be able to get to audition for everything, and I don't, because we have had casting directors say, "No, she can't audition for this role because she's Latina."

And my team be like, “Hey, sure. She’s still an actor. Your character isn’t specifically any ethnicity. Why can’t she do it?” And them being like, “Well, we already have a POC in the movie or in the show or whatever, and we don’t need another one.” Or whatever. So, that is what I allude to is it’s not a problem with my team, or people not wanting to see me as people seeing me differently, because now I am so outspoken about being Latina, and now I’m on this Latinx show, and it’s changed things.

Menendez: It’s wild. Hollywood’s wild.

Gomez: I talk about it because it was such a shock to me, because as a white-passing woman of color, I walked and moved around the world and around this industry in a very different way, without realizing my privilege. So, when I got my privilege partially taken away because again, though, I’m getting a hell of a lot more auditions than my Afro-Latinx counterparts would. So, I still have a lot of privilege because of the way that I look, but because I got part of my privilege taken away, I can see that shift clear as day, and it... I think it’s important to talk about. Because I am a much better actor than I was four years ago, but I am not getting the same traction that I could have potentially, had I been cast in a white role instead of a Latinx role.

Menendez: So nuts. “We already have a person of color,” is just such a like, “Whoa!” What people in Hollywood are allowed to say that would be like an HR offense in another office.

Gomez: Oh my God. It’s insanity.

Menendez: And this is a personal question, so you can pass on it if you want, but I ask it from the place of a big sister, which is what is it like to be in your early twenties, and so public, so public-facing, and trying to date?

Gomez: Ooh. God. That’s like two questions and layers on top of layers. I don’t think it’s been until actually pretty recently that I’ve started understanding what it means for me to put my life out there as much as I do, because I’m super active on social media.

Menendez: Is there something that happened that made you sort of realize, like, “Oh, this is complicated.”

Gomez: It’s been a bunch of little things. I think one of the things that really throws me is actually when I do interviews and when I do press, and somebody brings up something that I put on my social media. It throws me for a loop, because it’s hard to put faces to like, yes, I have almost half a million followers, so everything I put out, almost half a million people are looking at, but I don’t know that, because I just press send and then I keep texting my friends, and who cares?

So, when interviewers are like, “Oh, so I heard you started a juice cleanse.” I’m like, “What the? How do you know this thing about my life?” And then I’m like, “Oh yeah, you willingly put it out there.” So, it’s been like a year of that, and I am somebody who’s always really enjoyed hard conversations, and been open to a fault, and that was always a positive until recently, where now I feel very guarded, and I... Which is unfortunate, because I feel like I’m learning less, because I’m not asking the questions I want to ask, or saying the things I want to say, because I’m so scared of people misinterpreting my intentions, or taking things out of context.

Menendez: And I think there are a lot of people who are your age, who grew up on social media, who haven’t given it that level of thought.



Gomez: Yeah. I mean, it made me anxious and uncomfortable enough that I had to give it thought, so I've definitely shifted into being a lot more private about that kind of stuff, and about my life in general, which truthfully feels really weird, because I crave connection is another reason why I'm an artist and an actor, is I crave wanting to know about people's lives, and people knowing about mine, and talking about stuff, and it feels very odd to be secretive about stuff that consumes so much of your life. But I think at least for the time being, it is a smart choice for me.

Menendez: Yeah. No, I feel... I very much connect with that and connect with the fact that it's like you pay a price either way. Do you know what you want to do next?

Gomez: No idea. Oh, I have an idea. I want to do, which this is a very young Hollywood thing to say, but I'd love to do something a little more meaty, a little more dramatic, a little more intense, because I also find that being on a sitcom puts you in a certain type of box, and thankfully my sitcom's a very different kind of sitcom, where I do get super meaty scenes, and I do get to actually be a human and not just be like, "ba-dum-tss!" all the time, but I do find that sometimes there's resistance from casting directors, and rightfully so, because they're like, "Well, she's a sitcom actor. She's funny. And that's what she does."

And my team's like, "No, no, no, no, no. We promise. Can you just see her?" And they're like, "Eh. Well, there's 50 other girls that have credits that prove that they can do this other thing." So, I would love to do something deep and dark and meaty, and I've also grown a lot in my process within the past year or so, and I'd love to see how that would show up with a new character that I haven't been doing for three years.

Menendez: It's exciting. I love that idea. Love that idea of you doing something different.

Gomez: Yeah.

Menendez: Thank you so much for taking the time to do this. You are-

Gomez: Of course.

Menendez: I've read all these things that talk about how charming you are, but you are more charming than I could have imagined, so thank you.

Gomez: Oh, thank you!

Menendez: Thank you for being so thoughtful.

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](mailto: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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