



Why Investigative Journalist Jean Guerrero is Leaning into the Power of Her Personal Experience

The two time author has investigated everything from her father's mental health to white nationalists in the White House. Now in her new role as an LA Times Opinion columnist, Jean's examining both her own experiences and the limits of objectivity.

Alicia Menendez: Jean Guerrero knows that the truth isn't always neat and simple. Her quest to understand her own father lead her to journalism and to her first book, *Cruz: A Cross-Border Memoir*. Then she turned her attention to the forces that paint our communities as criminal, as violent, with her second book, *Hatemonger: Stephen Miller, Donald Trump, and the White Nationalist Agenda*. Now Jean, as an opinion columnist for the Los Angeles Times, is sharing more of herself, her way of seeing the world, and the truth, however complicated it may be. Hi Jean.

Jean Guerrero: Hi. How are you?

Menendez: I am so excited to talk to you and there's so many places we could start, but I actually think your most recent piece about your last name is a really good jumping off point for the conversation that I want to have, and I related so much to it. So Jean, how do you currently say your last name?

Guerrero: Guerrero.

Menendez: There was a period of time though where that was not how you'd say it. Can I hear how you would say it?

Guerrero: Guerrero.

Menendez: Tell me what happened in your life, that that is how you began to pronounce, some might say mispronounce, your own last name.

Guerrero: I grew up on the border in San Diego, just a few minutes north of Tijuana, which is where my dad grew up. My dad's an immigrant from Mexico and my mom is from Puerto Rico. And Spanish was my first language. Both of my parents spoke Spanish to me at home, but this was during an era of intense anti-immigrant, anti-Mexican hysteria in California. California saw this wave of anti-immigrant policies that preceded what we saw during the Trump era nationally. So there was a lot of anti-Mexican sentiment in the school where I started to go. My mom, who is a doctor, she put herself through medical school by joining the National Health Service Corp.

Guerrero: She thought it was really important for me and my sister to go to private school and so she put us in this private Episcopalian school where it was against the rules to speak Spanish. Most of the students were Mexican American and children of immigrants and they wanted us to assimilate or learn English as quickly as possible, and so they said it's just against the rules. It was to the point where if we were caught speaking Spanish, we had to stay in

detention and we had to write, "I will not speak Spanish. I will not speak Spanish," 100 times. I was a little goody two shoes, so I was like... I wanted to please my teachers and also I just knew how hard my mom was working to put me and my sister in that school. At that point, she was a single mom. My dad had some depression issue, which I wrote about in my first book.

Guerrero: But my mom was, she was really struggling and I wanted to do well. And so I was like, okay, I'm going to internalize this idea that speaking Spanish is bad. And I just started to associate my first language with delinquency and I just became the name that my teachers gave me, which was Jean Guerrero.

Menendez: It's wild. It's wild because you and I are the same age and you think of this... I think of this as a thing that happened back in the day, not in 90s California.

Guerrero: I didn't realize how much damage that it did to me, to my relationship with myself, with my family, until many, many years later.

Menendez: When you talk about that damage, I mean, a lot of it is just not being able to communicate with people you love. And if you can't communicate with people you love, then there's an inevitable distance that grows up between you.

Guerrero: Exactly. When I became Jean Guerrero, I also just stopped speaking Spanish. My mom was speaking to me in Spanish and I would respond in English. And then over time, English became my dominant language, which meant that it created a real chasm between myself and members of my family who didn't speak any English, like my Abuelita, my dad's mom who stepped up and filled the hole that my dad left in my life when he began to struggle with mental health issues. But she doesn't speak English, so as I internalized this English language supremacy, it created this distance between her and I, where our conversations were strained, they were shallow. It just limited my ability to communicate severely with people that I loved.

Menendez: As your dad began to distance from the family, I mean, you were pretty young. How did you understand at the time what was happening?

Guerrero: At first my dad was just, like I mentioned, depressed. So he was just sleeping all the time and at first I was like, my dad doesn't love us anymore. He doesn't care about us. He was just profoundly depressed. And it's complicated. This was during a period of intense anti-Mexican hysteria and I know my dad has always struggled with his identity. So I don't know to what extent that contributed. Eventually he disappeared. He was traveling around the world trying to escape what he said were CIA mind control experiments. He believed that he was being targeted by the CIA and that they were sending voices into his brain and electric shocks into his body. I didn't know where he was and my mom would always say, "Your dad has schizophrenia. He has paranoid schizophrenia."

Guerrero: It's because he was using drugs and it messed up his mind, because my dad was addicted to crack cocaine for many years. That's a big part of why I became a journalist in Mexico. I was so curious, where is my dad? Who is my dad? I knew my dad was from Mexico and that we used to go to Mexico all the time when I was a kid with him, and that started to spark my curiosity about Mexico and becoming a journalist in Mexico. Eventually he came back while I was in journalism school and started telling me his story of alleged CIA persecution and it led me down this really dark path where I was exploring, was my dad persecuted? I was just so enamored with him for the fact that he was back in my life and he was trusting me with all of these stories.

Guerrero: I spent many years in a very dark place and ultimately came to terms with the fact that I would never be able to know my dad and that there's just many different things that contribute to who he is that are just so complicated from the traumas and physical abuse that he endured as a child. I don't know. I've started to think about the whole experience really differently lately because of how prevalent conspiracy theories and mental illness are now in our society. We have this mental health crisis in America where people don't have a grip on reality, and I've just sort of reexamining my whole experience with my dad through that lens, which has been interesting.

Menendez: You don't just study your dad and do this as a passion project. You write a book called *Cruz: A Cross-Border Memoir*, which is incredibly well regarded and received. I think a lot of our listeners have the experience of having a parent, often a father, who is absent or with whom they have a complicated relationship and I think there is this fantasy that we will come to some point of understanding where all of a sudden everything will be clear. Not only will we understand them and ourselves, we're going to heal generational trauma. And it's not always that tidy.

Guerrero: That's so true, Alicia. I thought that my first book was going to be like, I don't know, I thought of it as like an exorcism. I was like, I'm getting rid of all of this pain and my attachment to my dad and I'm going to stop chasing him and I'm going to stop all of the self destructiveness where I've been sort of mimicking his behavior in my life. But honestly, it was just the beginning. It was the beginning of my healing process. I thought it was going to be the end, like it was that chapter, but trauma is something that you deal with over the course of your life and grief is something that never goes away. You just have to learn how to live with it.

Guerrero: My relationship with my dad, it's just been up and down. Writing the book definitely brought us closer together because I learned so much about him and I feel like the process of him telling me his stories was really therapeutic for him. But then the pandemic hit and my dad just plunged right back into another... This underworld where I can't reach him. I just, I can't reach him, and I just have to accept that.

Menendez: This entire time you're building your journalism career, you write not one, but two books in the process. Your second book is really how you and I have come to know each other because you wrote this brilliantly well researched book on Stephen Miller, who most of us know as the architect of so many of the Trump era immigration policies. First, I want to know, what even brought you to Stephen Miller as a subject of interest?

Guerrero: Well, so I had been reporting on his immigration, like the impact of his immigration policies from-

Menendez: Right. You were one of the first people to report on family separation.

Guerrero: Yeah. I was reporting on family separations and I was just so frustrated because I just, I kept seeing so many national news outlets just reporting what the Trump administration was saying, like, "Oh, we are just separating people who are breaking the law." That gets really complicated because even people who are crossing quote unquote illegally have the right under US federal law to request asylum from border patrol officers. But I had so many cases of parents who were presenting at ports of entry, had done literally everything the way that you're supposed to, had come presented with papers at the port of entry, requested asylum, and then those people were being tortured through family separations

also. So I was like, this is clearly not about national security. This has nothing to do with enforcing the law.

Guerrero: This is about something more sinister. That was a hypothesis. And ultimately I wanted to explore, who is the person who's designing these policies and what is motivating him? And that's how I came to this book about Stephen Miller, which is so strange in a way because he's almost like the opposite of my dad. My dad was always crossing borders. He was always literal and metaphysical between realities and countries and substance abuse and sobriety and mental illness and sanity. And then there's Stephen Miller, who's very rigid and creating borders. But at the same time, I don't know, there were interesting similarities for me when I was learning about Stephen Miller's childhood and how there were some difficulties there.

Guerrero: For me, it was a very careful line between painting an accurate portrait of a human being who's doing a lot of damage and romanticizing or glorifying him. I don't know, we have this anti-hero fetish in our culture where even if somebody's doing bad things, we still relish it in a way. And I really wanted to be careful not to feed into that really toxic mentality. I wanted to paint a picture of who he was. He's somebody who as a child was preyed upon by these older figures who saw a kid who was vulnerable and upset because of what had happened to his family. They'd lost a lot of money and he just felt like an outcast and they gave him a sense of purpose and a sense of meaning through these attacks on multiculturalism and all of the things that make this country so amazing. And it led to a man hell bent on enforcing white nationalist policies that systematically targeted brown and black people coming into this country and living in this country.

Menendez: Jean, how do you think about your career as a journalist? Because it is... Do you agree it's a pretty unique path that you've taken?

Guerrero: Yeah, I think so. Yeah. Because I've just, I started out, I graduated from college and the first job that I took was as a foreign correspondent in Mexico City reporting for The Wall Street Journal and Dow Jones Newswires. And then after that I took that big leap where I was like, I'm going to quit my job and I'm going to write this book about my dad that I've been thinking about for many, many years. I knew that was a really big risk to take, but I felt like if I was ever going to do it, it was going to be early on in my career. So I did that and then I got into public radio, which was a different medium, but that was amazing because it taught me how to write for broadcast, which teaches you to write concisely and to the point.

Guerrero: So it really transformed my long form writing as well and my ability to edit my own work and also to write with a voice, like my own voice. Now I'm an opinion columnist at the Los Angeles Times. And for many years, for most of my career, I always thought of myself as a very objective, I'm a news reporter. I'm not giving my opinion. I'm separating out my feelings and my emotions from my reporting. But that really changed during the Trump era, where I realized that that kind of objectivity is actually very destructive and reinforcing of institutional racism in our society. And the Stephen Miller book was pure reporting. It was like, there's not a single opinion in that book, but the title is a very bold title. My editor was like, "I want you to find a word that describes Stephen Miller. Just one word."

Guerrero: At first I was very hesitant about that because when I was writing my first book, I was like, I don't believe in labels. My mom gave my dad a label, he's schizophrenia, and for me I felt like that was very limiting in my understanding of my dad. But at the same time, I was like,

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this is a public figure who is using labels and using reductiveness and demonization to hurt a lot of people. And I feel like I have a responsibility as a journalist to call this what it is, because he is a person in a position of power. And so I just thought and thought, and after a while, the title Hatemonger came to me. I realized that this is something that very concisely captures the behavior that Stephen Miller has embodied over the course of his career. What he's really after is stoking hatred towards immigrants, towards Muslims, towards anyone who would stand in the way of this white nationalist agenda.

Menendez: So I want to loop back to where we started, which is this question of your name. So you spend all these years being Guerrero or Guerrero.

Guerrero: Yeah.

Menendez: It's actually, as I understand it, the blow back or the fallout from having written Hatemonger and having white nationalists come after you that reignites this desire to properly say and assert your last name.

Guerrero: Exactly. It happened slowly, because there were all these seeds that were planted in me over the year, seeing other Latinas doing this. Julissa Natzely Arce Raya, who you had on your show, You Sound Like a White Girl, she writes about reclaiming her Indigenous middle name. Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodríguez, in For Brown Girls With Sharp Edges and Tender Hearts writes about reclaiming her name. And all of these beautiful pieces of art that I was reading of people doing this, not just in the Latino community, but lately also with the rise in anti-Asian crimes. Chinese American writer Marian Chia-Ming Liu at the Washington Post, she writes about reclaiming her name. And so I was finding inspiration in all of these other people and that's what motivated me to write the column.

Guerrero: But then when I started getting attacks that were personal about my family, just a flood of racism in my inbox because of my coverage on white nationalism. People telling me over and over again, you should go back to Mexico, calling me slurs about being Mexican. It just caused this swelling in me of pride that I'd had before, but it wasn't like... I don't know. It just wasn't so big and overt. And I was like, you know what? I'm done. I'm done saying my name in a way that makes people feel comfortable, these white people feel comfortable. I'm going to fully embrace Jean Guerrero. I want to cause these people snarling at me to shrivel at the sound Guerrero. My name is Jean Guerrero. I was like, I'm not going to try to make you feel comfortable anymore.

Menendez: The final code switch or duality of Jean Guerrero that I want to get to is this idea that you as an investigative journalist go into the darkest crevices of our culture. How do you pull yourself out and maintain the lightness that I experience when I am in your presence?

Guerrero: That's really, really sweet of you to say.

Menendez: Because it could be dark. It is some dark stuff that you are grappling with.

Guerrero: Yeah. Yeah.

Menendez: I see you on your longboard on the boardwalk and I'm just like, what?

Guerrero: That's what's kind of saved me over the past few years because I've always been a very intense person where I've gotten consumed by work and the mission of journalism and investigative journalism. And I've realized very recently, the process of... There's been so many processes of healing that have opened up doors for other processes of healing. And learning to fully embody my own history and my family's history has opened the doorway for me to be healthier towards my own physicality. I'm just lately realizing the importance of everything outside of work, spending time outside. Longboarding is something that I

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took up recently and surfing, and I recently moved close to the beach so that I can just be outside. If I could go back and talk to younger Jean, who's starting out in journalism, I would be like, "Dude, go party. Go."

Menendez: Chill out, Jean.

Guerrero: Yeah.

Menendez: Chill.

Guerrero: Exactly. I would just be like, go on that vacation. Go hang out with your friends.

Menendez: It'd be crystal clear though young Jean would not have listened to you. Young Jean would've been like, thanks old lady. Thanks for the advice.

Guerrero: That's so true.

Menendez: But I'm going to go back to studying Stephen Miller.

Guerrero: That's so true.

Menendez: Jean, thank you so much for doing this.

Guerrero: Thank you so much for having me. It's been great.

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 episode. We love hearing from you, it makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram. Tweet us @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember, please subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, 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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