



## When *Gentefied* Co-Creator Linda Yvette Chávez Realized She Couldn't Quit

"If you find yourself in an industry doing all the jobs around the job you really want to do, check in on that," Linda tells Alicia. "There's some sort of fear around you not doing the thing you really want to do." She would know. After years of working in film and digital creative, Linda decided to follow her true passion: writing. Within two years of making that commitment, she was pitching and selling a television series. And there's so much more to Linda's story—breaking with tradition, sacrificing something of great value, and working harder than she thought she could.

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Alicia Menendez:

Linda Yvette Chávez was hustling hard, creating digital content, and deeply secretly wanting to write for television and film, which is funny, because she went to film school. She was ready to give up on that dream when she was offered the chance to co-write a digital series. That show, *Gentefied*, got so much buzz that she and her co-creator, Marvin Lemus, reworked it for TV and sold it to Netflix.

*Gentefied* focuses on three cousins who work together to keep their grandfather's Boyle Heights taco shop afloat. It is heartbreaking and hilarious, and like Linda, so smart and engaging that you'll want to watch it all in one sitting.

Linda, this is our first interview during a pandemic, so thank you for being willing to do this remotely. This is a little strange for us, so I appreciate you being willing to give it a whirl.

Linda Chávez: Absolutely. I mean, we have to keep going, even in the midst of this. I've definitely done multiple interviews now during this pandemic, and this has been a very... been really interesting, to hop on, and the first question everyone wants to ask is like, "Hey, you doing okay?"

Menendez: Are you doing okay?

Chávez: How are you holding up? Yeah, I am. I think those first few weeks were a little tough probably for all of us to kind of comprehend and wrap our head around what's happening. It's a new normal that we're all adjusting to. But how about you? How are you doing?

Menendez: I'm isolated with kids, which is like a whole different thing, and it gave me time to watch *Gentefied*, which-

Chávez: Yay!

Menendez: ... I loved. I truly loved. Let's start at the beginning of *Gentefied*. Marvin, the show's creator, pitches the idea to MACRO, which is this big production company. They like it. They tell him he needs to find someone to co-write it. He finds you through the Film Independent, where you had just finished a fellowship. When the head of the fellowship approached you with the opportunity, what was your reaction?

Chávez: It was the first-time pitch that he had brought to them. He had a small deck that he had presented to them, and they were like, "Awesome. Your background's more in directing. Can you bring someone on to co-write with you and develop this, and essentially create it

with you?” And when he brought it to me, my first reaction was like, “Yeah, please.” I had been trying to tell Latino stories for so long, not finding a place for those stories that I had been wanting to tell so desperately, and I was ready to do something more meaningful and deeper, and something that was true storytelling. And I liked his vision for what he wanted it to be. He was like, “Listen, I want you here because the voice, the thing that I read,” the sample I had sent him, “That’s the voice I want for this project. I want it to feel like that. I want us to work together to bring what we both have to this. Whatever I have, whatever. Throw that out. We need to tell the best story possible, and let’s be artists.”

And I hadn’t had the freedom to be just an artist in years, because I had been chasing numbers on the digital platforms that I was working with. And also just like the gentrification/gentrification of it all, for me, was like so true to my life in that moment, being a young professional, having all my friends, all of us are children of immigrants. We all are first gen. A lot of our parents came here undocumented. We had grown up with that American dream being seeded in us so strongly, and so we were coming into the upward mobility, but then finding ourselves wondering, as we moved into neighborhoods where we felt most comfortable and felt like home, because I lived in West Adams, this community in LA that’s predominantly Central American and Caribbean, and it’s people of color, and I felt comfortable there when I was going to grad school. I was like, “This is where I want to live, but how am I contributing to the gentrification, even though I’m a person of color? Does that include me? Am I also a part of the problem?”

And those are questions I was asking myself when he brought that to me, so when he brought it, I was ready to get into all of that.

Menendez: You and he did a lot of what you call trauma bonding. What did that look like?

Chávez: Yeah. Yeah, trauma bonding. I know we say that a lot. He always says this. He’s like, “You know, I don’t like to work.” So, at the beginning of every session it was like, “Let’s do some chisme for like 20 minutes.” And you know, I will force myself to work, but if someone’s like, “Let’s do some chisme,” I’m like, “All right.” Because ultimately, I don’t really want to work, but I’m like, “I want to get into it.” So, we would do our chisme, and a lot of times it was therapy sessions for both of us. We were both very willing to be vulnerable, and I have a long history of doing therapy, so I was very ready to do it, and talk, and talk about our lives, and in that process we got to the core of a lot of the themes and issues we wanted to explore with the series, the digital series, that we then carried into the TV series when we created that.

But those core themes started in that first coffee shop on First Street in Boyle Heights, called Primera Taza. It’s not there any more because of gentrification. It all came from a lot of the things that we were experiencing, a lot of the issues that we had been confronting as first-gen kids, as young professionals, as children of immigrants. Everything that we were experiencing we felt we wanted to put onto the page, and also just relationships, like our relationships with our fathers, our mothers, our siblings, the way that love happens in our communities, the way that our mothers who work in factories are portrayed. All those things were things that we had never really seen the way that we’ve really experienced them, and so we were so adamant about putting that complexity onto the page, the complexity that I think a lot of people like about the series and are drawn to. That you laugh, but then you get hit with this, “Oh shit, this is reality, and this is real.” And for us, that tone is our lives, and I think it’s the lives of our communities, like we’re always faced with a

lot of difficult structural, institutional isms, right? That are always obstacles that we're up against.

But at the end of the day, we gotta survive. We gotta laugh. It's like this pandemic right now, you know? We're very well equipped for it, because we grew up with trauma after trauma after trauma, and learning how to cope with it, and learning how to roll with the punches, and a lot of times that included comedy, you know? Cracking jokes. And Marvin always says this, and I agree with it, like we both work around a ton of comedians, but the funniest people we know are our own families, like our own moms, our own cousins or siblings who crack jokes. You're just like, "Stop roasting me." You know? All of that, it's coping mechanisms, and I think that was the tone that we were trying to capture in this series, as well, where it's like yes, life is hard, but we're not all these really sad, sepia toned, sad immigrants rolling through the dirt roads in a desert in Mexico.

There's a complexity to who we are, and that's what we try to achieve with the series.

Menendez: At the point at which you two partnered up and this opportunity came your way, you it seems were at a crossroads, where you were sort of getting towards the end of your rope in terms of pursuing this specific dream.

Chávez: Yeah. Dang, you did your research.

Menendez: Got on the Google.

Chávez: You got on the Googles. My history is long before that I went to film school. I went to USC for grad school. I had been writing for many years and trying to tell these stories for a long time, and I felt like every time I tried to find a way to tell these types of stories, things didn't really pan out there the way that I had wanted to.

Menendez: Take me back one step, though. What happened between graduating from film school, and why not go directly into film? What you led you into then pursuing all of these digital opportunities?

Chávez: Oh, the step that's skipped is actually many years of work. I worked in different areas. I worked, I did short films as a director, I worked on documentary, I worked for these Emmy-Award-winning documentary filmmakers, Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar, who taught me so much about producing, and actually a lot of inspiration for Beatriz's character comes from the film called Made in LA, which is about garment workers in Los Angeles.

I'll be honest. Writing is what I knew I wanted to do first and foremost, and it's the one thing that I kept avoiding, because I kept doing all the other, and this is something I tell people. If you find yourself in an industry doing all the jobs around the job you really want to do, check in on that, because that means something. It means you're avoiding... There's some sort of fear around you not doing the thing you really want to do.

Menendez: What was the fear?

Chávez: For me, not being good enough. Not being able to achieve the dream. Not thinking that I was a good enough writer, that I could do a revision, that I could get it done, that I could deliver. All these things that I think are insecurities that have come from many, many traumas that I've worked through in therapy, and the thing with this particular moment for me, I said, "This is it. You have to dedicate yourself to thing that you want to do, which is writing. It's now or never. You can't give up on this industry, because the reality is you

haven't really tried in the one area that you know you want it, and that you know you could do it."

So, I said if I can't make this happen within a couple years, then that's it, then you can move on with your life and say, "I did everything I could, and it just didn't work out for me. But you gotta give it everything, Linda," is what I told myself. "You gotta give it, you gotta leave this feeling like I gave it everything I could, and I'm at peace." Because I always ask myself, how will you feel at the end of your life if you didn't do that?

Menendez: Totally.

Chávez: So, I gave it my all. I gave it everything, and within a few months I got *Gentefied*, and right away, within those two years, we were pitching our TV show, and I had put out, around that time, my family and I were very cute. We're a very cute little immigrant family, Mexican family, but we would do these dream meetings, where we would talk about our dreams, and what we wanted to achieve, and we would manifest or talk about things we wanted. My sister kept saying she wanted to be a mother, and I kept saying, "I want to create my own TV show." And I didn't know how it was gonna happen, because I knew I wasn't going through it the traditional way in television. I knew there was a traditional way. I had so much experience managing, and my skill level was not at a staff writer level. I knew that I... My writing, I knew that I could do way more than that, and I didn't want to come into television at that level, because I had so much experience in different areas, and skillsets that transferred, so I was like, "God, I don't know how you're gonna do it, but this is what I want to do."

And within, yeah, two years, I had sold, me and Marvin had sold the show to Netflix, and now about a year later, year and a half later, we just released it. And I gave it my all, so I can't say... You know, it came to really prove to me that the truth is when you feel a calling, you're meant to do it, and it's just really the only thing between you and that calling is what you choose to give it, like if you choose to go after it, because there was countless obstacles, but at the end of the day, you'll get there if that's truly what you want.

Ad: *Is there something that's getting in the way of you living the life you want? Of you being happy? In my own life, I have found that talking with a professional can make a big difference, but sometimes the logistics, finding the right person, the time to connect, gets in the way. BetterHelp Online Counseling assesses your needs and matches you with a professional counselor in a safe and private online environment. You can get help on your own time, in your own space. In fact, you can start communicating in under 24 hours. You can schedule secure weekly video or phone sessions, plus chat and text with your therapist anytime.*

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Menendez: I feel like your pitch experience has become lore, where it's like you go into 10 different pitch meetings, you have six different networks that say yes to it, which are incredible

odds. How did you refine that pitch, and how did you practice it, such that you were then just nailing it in the room?

Chávez:

Oh my gosh, that was such a journey. So, soon after the trailer for the digital series dropped, because the digital series never fully dropped, networks were calling and were asking like, "So, is this a TV series?" And they were like, "Oh, sure. Sure. Yeah." And then Marvin called me and was like, "Yo, girl. Let's come up with a pitch for a TV series." I was like, "All right, let's do it." And then the moment they were like, "Do something in two weeks." I remember telling Marvin like, "Two weeks? That sounds insane." I was like, "We need more than two weeks to develop a television pitch."

And I hadn't done television yet, but I did other type of pitches, like for other, for digital content. I'd pitched to tons of companies, and so I was like, "Two weeks to do a TV pitch." I was like, "That's dubious." But we, anyway, I was right, because then we, as the work went on, and then they brought in... America brought on Teri Weinberg, who has worked on series like *The Office*, and *Ugly Betty*, and as we all worked together, we discovered that the process was actually a five-month process.

And I don't know that this is true of every single person when they're developing a pitch, but we definitely busted our butts for five months. Writing, and rewriting, and redeveloping this pitch, until we knew it inside and out. Inside and outside, forwards and backwards, any question you wanted to ask us, we had the answer. We revised and repeated and found exactly the way to tell it, and soon after that, we took the digital series to premier at Sundance, and they were like, "Okay, we're gonna go out and pitch the minute you guys get back." And we were like, "Oh shit, okay. Let's do it!"

So, we got back, and got right into it, but it took five months of really prepping that pitch, and finding exactly what it was gonna be, and having not only... I mean, we had everything scripted down to the jokes, but even then, we would get together after every pitch day and rethink everything, and add in new jokes, so that even our producers would laugh, because they hadn't heard it before, because we wanted to stay fresh, and we did a lot of work to make sure that it always was being refined, and anything we learned or any questions asked during a pitch, we came back to the pitch and said, "Okay, they asked this. How do we add it in? How do we have the answer?"

It was constant work and refinement, and yeah, two, three weeks later, we had pitched to 10 networks and we had six offers. So, we actually did not know that that was so crazy. We had no idea how it's rare to... People are usually hoping for one, maybe two, maybe three networks to make an offer on their work. So, for us to have gotten that many offers, we just... I mean, there was a lot of things that we were naïve about, because we hadn't specifically worked in that part of television, and it was wild. It was very much like it's this weird combination of we worked our asses off, but it also feels like a fairy tale in a lot of ways, like a rags to riches type of tale, where we just went from these people who probably should have had all the odds against us, but we... I don't know, we always felt like if we work hard we'll get to it, and maybe that's our immigrant work ethic coming through, our Mexican parents, who taught, and Guatemalan for Marvin, parents who taught us if you work hard and just keep going, you're gonna get it. You're gonna get there.

And that's how we showed up to everything, every single day, throughout this whole process. Just like we couldn't give up on this thing that we loved so much. It's very similar to our parents. They kept working and working, because they couldn't give up on us, us as their children, to give us everything that we deserved, because they loved us so much.

And I think that's the type of love that he and I had for this baby that we have, and this creative baby that we, as creative partners, have.

Ad: *Hey, today I want to tell you about a new podcast I am loving. It's called Dear Young Rocker. Remember the 14-year-old version of you? Awkward, insecure, the weirdo in you fiercely independent, but longing to connect? In this narrative podcast, join host Chelsea Ursin as she relives her teen years struggling to feel cool enough to exist and finding a home in music. Each episode dives deep into teen Chelsea's journal entries as she navigates school, family, relationships, and joining her first band. And occasionally, adult Chelsea chimes in with advice for her younger self.*

*At the same time that it offers a poignant, funny look at what being a teenager is like, Dear Young Rocker also creates honest dialogue around the issues of body image, gender power dynamics, and mental health, and it shines a spotlight on the way those are magnified during our teen years.*

Menendez: You have said that growing up, you wanted to save your family. Why did you think that they needed saving?

Chávez: Oh dang, girl. You're asking some deep ass questions.

Menendez: I want to know about you. I want this to be one of those marquee interviews, so that when you're an even bigger star, people come back to it and be like, "Oh, this is at the beginning."

Chávez: This is her real real, right here. Listen, you know, we always talk about I grew up low income, I grew up with... My parents have always been hard working, but when we first had our first home, I remember we didn't have any money. We didn't have anything. We got by with family supporting each other. We were all low income. We were all struggling. And I remember my grandmother getting food stamps, and the government cheese. All low-income kids joke about the government cheese.

And for me, my mom putting water into the milk, and into the shampoo and conditioner, to make it last a few weeks more, a month more, because we couldn't afford to get more. Or you know, the age-old joke of like, "Oh, beans again? Frijoles otra vez?" Like every day, frijoles. Every day, frijoles. It's when you grow up low income, so much around you reminds you that you are, and specifically for me, it was just like not having... You know, one outfit, two outfits a year for school that we got that was new. And maybe every two years or every year a new pair of sneakers. And not like a nice pair of sneakers, like the stuff that people would make fun of, and me always dreaming about like I wish I had some Nikes. That would be dope. You know, seeing the kids with Nikes was always really cool.

And like I said, we were low income in a little bit of a mixed-income community, so there were kids, some kids in my school who did have those things. Not a lot, but there was some kids who did. Having that, and seeing my parents struggle financially, they always made it work. They always worked hard and made it work. But you know, that strain of that financial strain is always with you from a very early age, because you feel it. You see it. You see how you have less than. So, I think for a lot of kids who grow up low income, especially if you're a child of immigrants, you grow up with a sense of like, "Well, it's so hard for us, we're here for the American dream, so I'm gonna bust my butt and I'm gonna get that dream. And I'm gonna save everybody. We're all getting out of this together. I'm gonna make so much money that I'm gonna get a mansion, and we're all gonna live in that mansion."

And I remember my dad used to drive us to Beverly Hills, and he would point to the different houses, and he would say like, “Mija, that’s where you’re gonna live. Mijo, that’s where you’re gonna live.” He was always kind of like putting into our heads, both my parents, like, “This is where you belong. You can be there, and I want you to dream for that.” They had that attitude, even sitting at dinner tables and telling us, “You’re gonna go to college.” That was enough for me to say, “Okay, I’m gonna go to college.”

Menendez: Well, not only that. You had a mother who was telling you, “I think you’re gonna be a writer.”

Chávez: Yeah. Girl, you really, you read everything. Yeah, she did.

Menendez: That’s rare.

Chávez: Yeah. No, I remember when I was little, I was like the little adult who was like, “So, when I grow up, I’m gonna be a lawyer, and I’m gonna make lots of money.” And my mom and my dad were like, “I don’t know, mija. You’re really good. I think you’re gonna be a writer.” Because I would write poetry, and short stories, and little books when I was little, and I read, like I devoured books, like devoured. When I say I was a bookworm, girl, I was at the... The library is up the street from here, the public one, I just lived there. Every week was like, “What’s the new topic that I’m obsessed with?” And it was everything from hamsters to ice hockey. I wanted to learn everything.

And I would read a lot of books, a lot of fiction, like Narnia, like all the things. All the things. And so, I would write a lot, because I loved stories, and I loved storytelling, and to me, it never seemed like a career, though. It was like that’s something I do for fun, and I love moving people with it. I used to love writing poems that would make people cry. I just loved it. I just loved that I could write something that moved someone, and it was usually like my parents, or my siblings, or my aunts and my grandma, but there was something about that, that I felt within me, that felt so good and so right, to be able to move someone with my work. But I didn’t know that I could make a career out of it.

So, you know, my parents being like, “I think you’re gonna be a writer.” To me it was like, “First of all, y’all are broke for a reason. No, you can’t make money being a writer.” I was like that kid, who was like, “What? You’re crazy.” There’s a saying in Spanish, right, Por eso estamos como estamos. It’s like, “Por eso estamos como estamos.” Like, “I’m gonna go be a lawyer. I’m gonna make money.” But the minute I went to college, the first year was really tough, but then I took this class with Harry Elam at Stanford, who introduced me to Cherríe Moraga, who’s this queer Chicana playwright, who was a feminist, and played a huge role in the Chicana rights movement with her work, and she... The first thing I read of hers was *Giving Up the Ghost*, and I remember thinking, “Oh!”

Like I saw her writing about her community, it was like this farmworker community, and of course, our communities are very similar. Obviously, even my... I have family who’ve done farm work and all that. It was my people, essentially, and I was like, “Wait a second. Hold up. You can write about your people, and make a career...” Well, first of all, you can write about your people, because everything I’d read up until that point, for the most part, was white people. Secondly, you can make money doing that? It all just like for me, was like this moment of... It was just a big moment, to be like, “Wow, I can do that.”

Menendez: I remember the first time I read *This Bridge Called My Back*, and I was like-

Chávez: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah!

Menendez: Oh, I grew up in a Latino community, and it almost didn't occur to me that it was a minority experience, and I remember reading that and being like, "Oh, this is a radical act?" Like this is... I was so in my own little world of not realizing how radical it was to tell your story and to own your story for those women.

Chávez: Yeah. It's so radical. It's crazy, and this is again, goes back to like if you can't see it, you can't be it, right? That if Cherríe hadn't pursued her passion, her love, and I'm sure there's people who inspired her to do the same, I wouldn't be here. I needed her work. I needed her to do her work so that I could exist in the way that I am existing now. That is a full circle wild moment for me, because that's what started my journey, like seeing something and being like, "What the hell? I can do this?" It's so vital and so important, and one of the big reasons why I never gave up on this show. It was a hard road. It was a very, very hard road to make this, and one of the things that really brought me to show up to it fully was knowing that it was gonna make such a huge difference to so many people, and would create more creators, and we need them. You know, we need these folks to show up every day to create their art.

And yeah, so I'm grateful to my parents, who saw me as a writer, and I'm grateful to Cherríe for allowing me to fully take in what I know now, very, very viscerally know now that it's my calling to do. Those early moments of writing poetry, and telling stories, and storytelling, all that, that was just the universe telling me, "Yo, this is who you are. This is what you're gonna do. This is your life." But it took these moments to really embrace that and say, "No, no, no. This really is your calling now. Own it, and step into it, and empower yourself to push it through."

Menendez: So much of the ethos of the show is about what you are willing to sacrifice in order to survive. What have you sacrificed in order to get to this point?

Chávez: What have I sacrificed to get to this point? Heavy. Deep. Okay, I'm gonna be real. I think for me, a big sacrifice has been I don't have a traditional life that every Mexican daughter would have, which is like to have a husband, and kids, and when I say kids, usually a bunch, and to be able to be available for every weekend, like family barbecue, and every get together, and every birthday party. Which, as Latinos, as we know, that's a thing. We all, all the primos, everybody shows up to every week. Every weekend, there's 50 parties for so-and-so's kid's birthday, so-and-so's kid's quinceañera, the baptism, the this, the that, and that's what I grew up with. I grew up with a very tight knit, you always show up for each other, which is such a part of the series, right? Very much. A lot of Ana's stuff is based on me.

But, like how do you sacrifice that part to go after your dream? For me, it was definitely like sacrificing that part of it, and also sacrificing that traditional timeline of marriage and children. I mean, first of all, do you want it or not? Right? And that, for me, was a struggle for a long time, because I have a full-blown career that demands a lot. For me to be able to show up to this dream every day meant that I had to invest in me, and make this time for me, because I... In most of the time during this process, I barely could keep myself together. I can't even imagine children, or a family, or a husband, or whatever it may be, and I know you're doing it, which is crazy. Every person I meet who is doing it, anyone who's at my level in terms of a creative, or EP, I'm always, like for example, Gloria Calderón Kellett, who is the creator of *One Day at a Time*, is a mentor of ours and a friend, and every time I meet with her, and I see her all the time, I'm like, "How are you doing it? How do you do? Tell me all your secrets. How are you raising children, have a husband, all the things?"



She's down, too, like her showing me her calendar, but I'm still like, "Oh, I think it just has to happen to figure it out."

But I felt like I had to sacrifice that to make this happen in a way that would keep me still sane, because I am a huge advocate for mental health, and I am a huge... I've dealt with a lot of mental health issues over the years, and I'm very aware of what I can handle and what I cannot, and in this time, to keep myself healthy and strong, it was like, "This is what I can handle." And truthfully, this is more important to me, more than anything, my dream.

So, I think that was a sacrifice that was always difficult to process, but-

Menendez: You have time.

Chávez: .... here we are, you know? And I think some sacrifices are worth it. Yeah, and also that. There's also that. But you know, when you hear again, being Latinas, that clock starts ticking for your family when you're like 24. Like 21 already, they're like, "So, where are the kids? Where's the marriage? What's happening?" That clock is ticking from the get go, so it's a very real pressure that still shows up for us consistently, and so we're fighting against that, too. Being able to tell people like, "Listen, first of all, do I want it? Secondly, wait, I have to do this first." And I don't think that's a traditional thing in our communities.

Menendez: What do you want to do next?

Chávez: What do I want to do next? Oh, goodness. Well, I mean I work, so I have TV, but I also have work in the feature space, so I actually have a few really exciting big projects that will hopefully be coming out, getting made in the next year or so. But beyond that, I want to direct, so that feature that I talked about earlier, that was about my grandmother, is a feature that I have in the Sundance Momentum Fellowship right now, and they're helping me. That fellowship is really for mid level folks, like at this point in their careers, who need more support to keep launching, but what I asked of them was to support me in making this feature film and directing it, so for me, what's next is trying to direct that film.

Menendez: Thank you for your extreme patience with us.

Chávez: Thank you for all your amazing, incredible questions, like it's very deep.

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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