



## How Lori Montenegro is Holding the Powerful Accountable

Noticias Telemundo's Washington D.C. bureau chief shares her unlikely path from correspondent to newsroom leader, and one of the most influential journalists in Spanish-language television.

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- Alicia Menendez: Lori Montenegro has blazed a remarkable path, from correspondent to head of Noticias Telemundo's Washington bureau. She is a gifted storyteller, you're going to hear Lori had me crying and laughing in equal measure, as she shares the ugly truths of this industry, the highs of going toe to toe with the President of the United States, and her standard for an excellent interview.
- Menendez: Hi, Lori.
- Lori Montenegro: Hi.
- Menendez: You to me are an international woman of mystery, because the way your bio was written, you were born, and then you worked as a correspondent in Spanish-language media, and there's basically nothing that happened in between.
- Montenegro: But a lot happened in between.
- Menendez: A lot happened in between. So tell me about that. Were you born in Cuba?
- Montenegro: So, I was born in Cuba, not in Havana. I was born in Oriente, Santiago de Cuba. I came to the United States with my parents when I was about a month and a half old.
- Menendez: So you have no memories of Cuba?
- Montenegro: None. No memories whatsoever of growing up. I grew up in Miami. Miami, Florida. My mother worked for the Arnaz family. She worked for Desi Arnaz's parents in Oriente, and they asked her if she was interested in migrating to the United States, because they were going to go live in Miami Beach. And so, she of course said yes, not with the intention of staying in the United States, but it was more of an opportunity to make money and return where she was already dating my father. Although we now know that that did not work out that way. So that is how they came here to the United States.
- Montenegro: My father traveled a year after my mom did, and arrived in Key West, Florida. And so, that's where it all began. My mother got pregnant with me and decided that she did not want me to be born in the United States. She wanted her daughter to be Cuban, so Cuban, that she got on a plane, she lied when they asked her how many months she was pregnant and she said, "Oh, I'm only six months." She lied, Alicia. Gets on this plane, Pan-American Airlines, and travels back to Havana, gets on a bus to go to Oriente. And on the way, she starts to have labor pains.
- Menendez: No way, amiga.

Montenegro: Oh, yes. I was born in November of 1959, and a couple of months later, January 1st, 1960, my mother traveled back to the United States with her daughter, her Cuban daughter.

Menendez: So, for you, growing up Cuban in Miami, Florida, what were the messages you were getting about what your responsibility was to your family, and what your responsibility was to your community?

Montenegro: Well, number one, my parents always said, this country opened up its arms to the Cuban people. It was a land of opportunity where, when you worked hard, you could succeed at anything that you wanted. You need to get an education. You need to work hard. You need to serve your community. But at the same time, we can't forget those who are left behind. Remember where you came from, remember what your roots were, but also remember that you have new roots that you need to grow, love, respect and contribute to. And so that's how I kind of grew up.

Montenegro: Now, remember, my parents come at a time when there was segregation. And so my father's first experience in this country was totally unpleasant. He arrives in Key West. They came on the ferry that went back and forth between Key West and Havana, and they get to this restaurant and nobody would come and take their order. Finally, an old Cuban man gets up and says to them, "I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, but they won't serve you in this restaurant because you are Black. And so you have to go to the next corner where they will serve you." So my mom looked at my dad, my mother says that his response, I can't repeat the word that he said, but he basically...

Menendez: Yes you can, this is PG-13. You can say whatever you want.

Montenegro: ...he just basically said, "What 'blank'-hole did you bring me to?" Because... We're not going to deny the fact that, in Cuba, there was racism, and there was discrimination. But they had never felt it to that degree where they wouldn't be served in a restaurant. And he had never experienced something like that. And so that was his first impression of the United States. And so it took my mom a couple of months, I am told, to get him to see the bigger picture.

Menendez: I wonder if there was discrimination or bias that you remember that you ran up against yourself, not just as a Black Cuban living in the United States, but the bias that exists within the community itself. Were you made to feel different?

Montenegro: So, I went to a school where they were mostly Cubans. And, I know for a fact that I was never invited to dance any fifteens, ninguna quinceañera, because I was Black, and I know that that was the fact. They never mentioned it, but it was just understood. You can't be in a classroom where there are 14 girls, 13 of them are invited to dance los quince, and one of them isn't and that one is me. I'm invited to the party, but I'm not invited to los quinces. So yes, those things did happen. And my mom would just say, "Ellos se lo pierden." "It's their loss, not yours. You know what you're worth, and you are loved." Don't cry, Alicia, por favor. Don't do that. Yeah, it hurts. It hurts, but I don't want you to... No tears shed. I mean, think it just made me a better person. It made me a much more sensitive person.

Menendez: How does that sensitive person decide she wants to be a journalist?

Montenegro: I didn't. So, it's time to go to college. My parents didn't have a whole lot of money, and I really never gave a whole lot of thought to it. My father never set foot in a kindergarten. Didn't even go that far. Just didn't get there. His mother taught him how to read and write, and it was a grocery store owner who taught him math. And, my mother only got up to the eighth grade when she had to stop school to go to work. And so, they never really talked

to me much about going to the university, although they did say getting an education was very, very important.

Montenegro: So, I remember graduating from high school, and one day, my mom, right before graduation, came to me. And, I don't know how she found this out, Alicia, but that woman was so visionary. She said to me, "Look, I got these papers, and this is Pell Grant. Un Pell grant. "The Pell grant." That's what she was saying. "Apply. And you're going to go to Miami-Dade Community College for two years. And then you can transfer," she said. Who gave her this information? I have no idea, but that's how important education was. She went out and got the information. So, I get to Miami-Dade Community College. I have no idea what I wanted to study. I was one of these people that wants to be everything, just everything. And I decide to go, "eenie, meenie, miney, moe, catch a tiger by the toe," and it landed on broadcast television. It was that versus criminology.

Montenegro: And so, my first semester at Miami-Dade Community College, Professor Kearns sent about four of us to an interview, three or four of us, to an interview at a radio station in Miami Beach. And he said, "Oh, none of you are going to get the job, but I want you to start to get this experience of about what this is about." There was a news director there, and he, George Addison, decides, he interviews me. And then about two or three months passed by, I never heard a thing. And all of a sudden, the phone rang one afternoon and it's him. And he says, "Oh, do you remember? You came in and did this interview. We want to know if you're still interested. We have an opening, and we'd like to hire you." And I'm on the phone, staring at the phone, going, "Are you kidding? This isn't radio?" And he said, "No, no, we're not kidding. And when can you start?" And, this is how it all started.

Menendez: 2013, you get your big sit down interview with then President Barack Obama. I think there are two types of people, the types of people like me who get good news like that and immediately want to vomit, because they're so nervous about everything that is riding on that opportunity. And there are people who are like, it just puts a real bounce in their step. Which kind are you?

Montenegro: I'm like you. Oh, yeah. I mean, listen, little immigrant girl, parents that never went to school, or at least one of them didn't, and the other one never finished, goes into the White House and gets to sit down with the president of the United States. Wow. I can't take that for granted. That was my parents' sacrifice. I owe so much to them, their advice, their encouragement. Someone told me one time, I was transferring jobs, and they said to me, "When those Mexicans see that you're Black, you won't last there. You won't even be there six months." And I was so stunned by that comment. And then, what, six, seven years later, I'm sitting in front of the first African American president of the United States. It's surreal. It doesn't get any better than that. And my legs were shaking, if that's what you want to know.

Menendez: I want to make it clear to our listeners, many of whom are not journalists themselves, the stakes of something like interviewing the president of the United States, especially when you are one of only two Spanish-language networks that will have the access and opportunity to have that kind of interview. There's, one, the pressure on you to make news, to ask something that is fresh and topical and that every other news station in the country is going to be playing 24/7. And there is the pressure on you, as a person who does represent a community, to come in and accomplish something on behalf of the community, to get a story in, that normally wouldn't be a story, to make something top of mind. How did you prepare? Do you remember the prep that went into that interview?

Montenegro: Oh, of course. I mean, lots of reading, lots of asking different people from different backgrounds, "¿Que pregunto? What should I ask?" I mean, it's obvious when we go into these interviews, you want to be asking about news of the day. You want to be on top of that. Up until the second you sit down and they put that microphone on, until you turn that phone off, you're looking at the phone in case something last minute comes in. But, a lot of reading and a lot of consulting. I don't think that we as journalists should pretend that we know everything, because we don't. Yes, we have common sense and we should be able to rationalize and analyze, but I always think it's, for me, the key of a good interview, is asking other people.

Montenegro: And, maybe I have a way of asking a question, and then I'll consult with somebody else, it's the same question. And they will give me a better way to ask that question, because sometimes we fall into this thing where we-

Menendez: That's a great point.

Montenegro: Yeah. We ask questions and kind of... Because the interviewee also preps. We all should let them know, they get prepped too. And so, we need to ask questions in a way that we're not going to get the typical answer or the one that they were prepped for. You want to make news, but you also want to get something more profound. You really want to know what a person is thinking or how they feel. And so that's how I approached that interview, and tried to approach every other interview that I have ever done.

Montenegro: I think also, on the other side of it, you don't want them to always think, "Oh, she's easy." Or that he's an easy interview. I think we need to be firm, but in a very respectful manner. We don't have to shout. We don't have to be aggressive but in a disrespectful manner. We need to remember that this is the presidency, okay? It doesn't matter who's sitting there. It is the presidency. And so there's a certain respect that needs to go into that. And, you always want to be able to leave the door open, so that that person will grant you another interview. But I also want them to walk away with, "It was a tough interview, but it was fair. I wouldn't mind doing it again."

Menendez: I also, I was watching a bunch of your... They weren't your reels, but they were pieces that have been done on you. And it also was so fun to watch, because you're still sort of a pint-sized person, how fast you have to walk when you're doing your walk and talks. In Capitol House, I was like, "Lori can move." I was like, "She is being tough and fair. She is like, keeping it going."

Montenegro: Yeah. I got a funny story for you. Secretary Becerra now, when he was in the House of Representatives, one day, we were calling him for an interview. And, the producer says to me, "He says that they'll give you the interview, but you've got to go now." So I didn't get a chance to change my shoes. And so I had on some flats, some tennis shoes. And so we ran to the Capitol. We get there. And I don't know why Congressman Becerra, at that time, looks down, looks at my feet and goes, "Tennis shoes?" And that has been a running joke between us forever and ever after that. And I said, "Well, you made me run here, and I sure as heck was not going to miss the interview."

Menendez: I love that so much. You've been married almost 30 years?

Montenegro: 37 years.

Menendez: Okay. You're married almost 40 years. You have two adult children. And I've seen you out there. You've been hustling for the past 37 years. So how'd you find a way to make all of that happen in between?

Montenegro: Oh, I think that's the biggest challenge of all, Alicia. There were sacrifices that were made. I'm going to admit to you that I felt guilty because there were recitals that were missed, vacations that were postponed, birthdays that had to be delayed because of work. But, I had a very understanding family, a very understanding husband, who, when we married, I was already in the business, so he kind of understood. There's a funny story. As a matter of fact, when we were dating, I had sprained my ankle and I was in radio, and I had to go cover the elections in the City of Miami. And he actually drove me around and held the microphone, while I could do my interviews, while on crutches.

Menendez: That's when you knew he was a keeper.

Montenegro: Yes. That's how I knew he was a keeper. But seriously, I look back now, and I realize that there were mistakes that I made. I don't regret anything in my career. I don't think we should regret anything. I think we tried to either learn from it or... When we're advising and talking to young women out there and future journalists, we try to explain our experiences so that they can learn from it.

Montenegro: One of the things that I started to do, after my daughter was born, like I said, they're 10 years apart. So, I decided that, every school year, every time it would start, I would take off the first week. Always took, that became non-negotiable for me. I took off the first week of school, because that's where you try to reassure them. That's where, if you have to go pick them up, if they're walking home from school, if they're catching the bus. And I would take them after school to go get ice cream or do something fun with them, that first week. And I realized the difference that that started to make in their lives. Listen, work balance is important. It's just not something to say. You have to take care of your spouse. You have to take care of the kids. You have to take care, sometimes, the family members, and you've got to make time for everything. Because in the end, when that career is not there, Alicia, those are the people that are there.

Menendez: When this chapter professionally is done, what do you want the mark that you left on this industry to be?

Montenegro: Oh, wow. You've left me speechless.

Menendez: You've paved a big way, Lori. You know you have.

Montenegro: Listen. I'm just a woman who has been very blessed. I think to say, and some people have told me this... I have had college students, people that I'd never met, never thought that I met, who are my skin color or people of color, who've come up and said to me, "I saw you when I was growing up, and you made me believe. And you proved to me that I could be where you're at, or I could do anything that you could." We know that there are not a lot of people who look like me on Hispanic television. We know that. And so, yes, I know that in that sense, I was blessed with being a trailblazer. And so to answer your question, I hope that people remember, especially those who look like me, that I represented them well.

Menendez: I love you, Lori. Thank you. Thank you for taking the time to do this.

Montenegro: I love you more.

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 mix this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com). Slide into our DMS on Instagram, tweet us, @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, [latinatolatina.com/shop](http://latinatolatina.com/shop). And remember, please subscribe or follow us on Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now.

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