



How Marta Segura Became LA's First Chief Heat Officer & Climate Emergency Mobilization Director

As a child growing up in San Jose, California, she wondered why her neighborhood was being sprayed with pesticides. The more questions she asked, the more she found herself drawn to environmental justice and community advocacy. Now, she is working to make sure that one of the biggest cities in the US is centering the most impacted communities in its climate change response.

Alicia Menendez: Marta Segura has dedicated her career to advocating for more equitable, healthier, and sustainable communities, work that earned her the spot as Los Angeles' first chief heat officer and climate emergency mobilization director. Marta and I talk about what it looks like to center communities most impacted by climate change, when anger moves the needle and when it does not, and how she learned to lead with solutions, not problems. Marta, thank you so much for doing this.

Marta Segura: You're welcome.

Menendez: Marta, can you tell me, growing up in San Jose, what were the stories that your parents were telling you about working conditions in the fields and in the factories?

Segura: My father came in the early 1940s as a Bracero, and so he was really young. He was like 16 or 17 years old.

Menendez: Marta, for those who don't know, what was the Bracero program?

Segura: Bracero was government recruited and hired support from Mexico during World War II because most of our men, and especially young men who could work the fields and factories, were fighting against the Nazis. They agreed to bring mostly young men from the rural areas of Mexico to work the fields of the United States. And so actually, my father said that he was treated really well. They gave them medical treatment, they gave them excellent food and lunches because they were part of the war effort. However, when the war ended, it was a different story. They wanted them to go back. The hatred and the racism led to poisoning of farm workers. And so my father tells us of a time when everybody that he was working with started feeling nausea, vomiting, fainting, and he did too. Some of them died and he was young, so he was able to recover.

Menendez: Marta, the reason I bring that up is you are so out ahead of the curve on the choice to study the environment, to study environmental policy. Was it in childhood, was it in your adolescence, where in your youth did you begin to connect the dots between those working conditions, those health conditions, and what was happening in the environment?

Segura: Yeah, I think it was my father and my mother. My mother also suffered a lot in the workplace. She worked in the canneries and told us of when she and her coworkers, the women, were not allowed to use the restroom because they were assembly line in the cannery. Her stories to overcome those and be a union leader and my father's stories of overcoming his challenges connected me much more to what my role would be in the world, I guess. I didn't think about it like this at the time, but when I was in high school, our

community and many other communities throughout California were being sprayed by Malathion. And it was mostly Mexican neighborhoods. We called them Mexican-American enclaves because they suspected that we were bringing in the fruit flies from Mexico. They even called them the Mexican fruit fly for a while, and it wasn't. It was the Mediterranean fruit fly.

Anyway, when we were being sprayed, I was wondering, "What are these crop dusters doing over the city?" I lived in San Jose. "Why are we being sprayed by pesticides? What's going on here?" That curiosity and that anger compelled me to look into what was happening to my neighborhood. I started asking my teachers, they told me to talk to a professor. I didn't even know there were professors And San Jose State University existed. I had never walked there. And so anyway, I asked the professor and he basically told me, "Look, this has not been studied on humans. We don't know the impacts on humans. We don't even know the impacts on animals. We just know that it kills fruit flies. And unfortunately, there was no study done in advance, but it was approved by the governor, and it was approved by the federal government to use on farms and on neighborhoods to make sure that we didn't destroyed the agriculture in California."

And that led me to really looking into the way that our communities were mistreated, misinformed, disengaged. That experience was really profound for me. The other one was our displacement. When we lived in San Jose, we first grew up near Guadalupe River, and when Silicon Valley was being planned, unbeknownst to us, this was part of the land that they wanted to take. So my family and hundreds of other families were evicted from this area, and the whole community was destroyed, houses were demolished and we were evicted. And that had an even more profound experience on me on, why didn't we know about this? What is going on? Why am I losing the only home I've ever known? And so I think those experiences, when you're not part of the decision-making process, you're not part of the power structure, make you feel vulnerable, but you want to fight against that vulnerability and see how you can gain access to those decisions. And that's what led me to environmental studies at UC Santa Barbara.

Menendez: When you talk about wanting to gain access to power, I think it's important to point out that is an education and learning of its own, how power operates, how you get access to power, how you position yourself to make sure that you are in the rooms where decisions are being made. How did you learn that piece of it? What was it that you were doing to make sure that you were in the rooms where decisions were being made about your community?

Segura: I think the same drive to protect my community, the same drive to ensure that we were not being disregarded and that we were part of the solution, that came from a passion and an anger within. And that passion and anger got channeled and converted into, I want to be in that room and I want to be making decisions, and I want to make sure that I do that on behalf of our communities. And then I saw that fire in my mother. I saw that fire in my father. So I had models in my lifetime because they may not have had power, but they did make all the changes they could within the workplace and within their context, and I saw them doing it. And so I guess initially, you could call it "ganas." In Spanish, we call it "ganas." And it was just this fire in my belly that I needed to be part of that solution. I may not have always been as diplomatic and as articulate-

Menendez: Wait, tell me about that because that is, I think a big part of the work of becoming an advocate is understanding what kind of advocate you want to be and understanding what

kind of advocacy is effective. So tell me about a time that you now look back on that you say, "Hmm, had I approached that differently, perhaps things would've gone in a different direction."

Segura: I'll tell you about a positive experience when I wasn't great. I actually, in one of my first jobs after graduate school, and I had my master's degree in environmental sciences as well, I was hired by The Labor Center, very left, very progressive, but I felt like my boss, my supervisor, was leaving me out of some pretty substantial decisions. And remember, this is my first job out of graduate school, but here I am thinking, "Hey, I need to be part of the decision-making process here." So I approached her and I said, "Look, I don't feel like you're respecting me. I don't feel like you're including me." And I was actually visibly angry and upset, so she could see that I wasn't trying to hide it. And then she just turned to me and said, "Well, Marta, if you want to be part of the decision, you have to propose the solutions, not just the problem. All you've given me are the challenges and the problems. You haven't given me a proposal on how we're going to solve these challenges that you've brought to my attention." And I was like, "Wow."

Menendez: Can you tell me about a project where you have seen that work, where you have seen a community be engaged about what it is they need, they want, and then a policy outcome that addressed those core concerns?

Segura: Well, the creation of my office, the Climate Emergency Mobilization Office, is actually the result of decades of work on behalf of the environmental justice community to be represented, to have an innovative governance model within the city of Los Angeles.

Menendez: You just said a lot of policy people words. What do those mean?

Segura: Okay. Basically, environmental justice organizations wanted a better way, a more meaningful way to be engaged in the decision-making process at the City of Los Angeles. And they came up with the design of this office to create a commission that represented those most disinvested communities. Seven of the leaders that we have on this commission represent the most pollution-burdened communities of Los Angeles. They also represent labor, they also represent youth, they also represent Native Americans from the region, and they also represent climate experts, but that's the smallest part of it. The wisdom and experience that we wanted to honor on this commission, wisdom and experience from community leaders.

Last year, for example, and actually for the past few years, the city council has wanted to pass building decarbonization policy. And what that means is when you don't have a building with gas lines, it's all electricity, solar panels, renewable energy buildings, because we had a whole process for engaging community leaders, they came up with their recommendations and we presented that to the commission and to the council, and that ended up creating a compromise. Communities were able to endorse new building decarbonization, but not existing building decarbonization. More work needed to be done. And this was pivotal because it would've impacted housing, and we already have a homelessness crisis, so we don't want to retrofit existing buildings if we don't have a financially-stable plan to do it in a way that does not affect displacement.

Menendez: Marta, your role as the climate emergency and mobilization director, you are the first person to have that role, which I think is important because there are other people who are listening who may not work on climate justice, but they may be stepping into a role where they have to, in some ways, define the role as they go. I wonder what you have learned about the process of being the first in a role.

Segura: Yes, you're right. I'm the first director for climate at the city, also the first chief heat officer, so I have a dual role. And the best way to increase my effectiveness is through a collaborative approach, unsiloing these projects by offering my support, offering my thought leadership and solutions. Going back to the solutions. It's challenging when you're creating a new model of governance, when you're creating a method that hasn't really been used before, and you have to keep on building the awareness around why we're innovating governance to begin with within the city body and external too, with grassroots that are like I was, impatient. We want more engagement. We want more meaningful decision making on our behalf. This is still too slow for us. So I get pressed from both sides.

Menendez: I always love the journey of an outside agitator who becomes an inside operator, where you are forced to see it from both vantage points. When you decided to take on this job, did you have conditions of satisfaction in order to take it on? Did you say, "I will do this, but it has to be done a certain way"? I think very often we talk about that in terms of salaries and benefits and those types of negotiations, which is slightly less relevant when you're talking about a municipal job or a government job. Were there other conditions that you wanted met before you agreed to take this on?

Segura: I think the main component that I pushed for before I took this on is ensuring that I had the ability to frame the way which we pushed for climate action and it had to center on equity, with the recognition that there have been historically dis-invested in redline communities that also are suffering from pollution burden, that that would be out in the open, that that would be part of why we are focusing and prioritizing finite investments, and other investments actually, into these communities first and foremost. That's another thing that I wanted to be clear, is that I was there to convey the recommendations and the voices of the community in a format that the commission and the council could hear it, but at the same time, it's not coming from me, it's coming from the community.

Menendez: Marta, my final question to you. I want to loop back to two things you talked about that I don't know that I've ever had guests bring up, but I identify so much with, which is both this idea of anger and this idea of impatience, which I think very often can propel us, different points in our life, but certainly for me in my youth. And that never goes away. You kind of round off the edges, you kind of get some things done, but I think those of us who harbor those types of frustrations, it's part of the drive. And I wonder how you have harnessed it to be more of a help than a hindrance?

Segura: That's a great question.

Menendez: Especially because Latinas, we're not allowed to be angry.

Segura: We're not allowed to be angry or aggressive. I think my first lesson came from that experience that I shared with my first supervisor, Marianne Brown. But then later on when I was a statewide director for Communities for a Better Environment, and I was given a leadership position within the organization that's there to shake up the status quo and build really strong campaigns and empower leaders, I did a 360 evaluation.

Menendez: Love a 360 evaluation.

Segura: My organizers told me, "Marta, within our meetings, you're still acting like that angry organizer," but I'm supposed to be their leader in leading campaigns. I had to take off my organizing angry hat in our staff meetings with our organizers, and be the voice of calm and reason, and model a strategy that would work for the entire community. They were organizers, they could speak like that because they were speaking in that moment for their

community. I was there to facilitate their leadership and the leadership of the community. So then I thought, "Oh, my gosh, I really have to step up to this and be the voice and the strategist and the calm that they need me to be in this storm." And so when I realized I would be more effective for building community leadership in that way, and people that I respect and trust were telling me this, yeah, that was a really big lesson. And then I had many little lessons like that along the way to remind me what style would be more effective. And I think I, for the most part, have learned well, but like you said, it never goes away. And if it does, you lose the passion and the drive to do the work because you're there representing what you believe in and what brought you there to begin with, and that's what gets me up at four o'clock in the morning, that's what keeps me working till midnight and beyond sometimes. If there's stuff to be done and I need to do it, I am driven to do it and accomplish it.

Menendez: Whew. Got chills from that. Marta, thank you so much for taking the time to do this. What powerful lessons.

Segura: Powerful interview. Thank you, Alicia. I really appreciate it.

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

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