



How Mayra Guillen Learned to Be an Advocate

The disappearance and murder of Vanessa Guillen sparked a movement, one that was fueled by her family's unrelenting demands for answers and accountability. At the core of that family is Mayra Guillen, Vanessa's older sister. Mayra shares what her family's tragedy and call to advocacy has taught her about how power operates.

Alicia Menendez: By her own estimation, Mayra Guillen is an unlikely advocate. But anyone who watched her in the days after her sister, Specialist Vanessa Guillen, disappeared from Fort Hood military base, knows that Mayra is a force. She's also the subject of the new Netflix documentary, *I Am Vanessa Guillen*, the story of Vanessa's murder, her family's fight for justice, and the movement to end sexual harassment and assault in the US military. Mayra and I talk about how she learned to navigate systems of power from the military to Congress, the complexity of processing grief in real time, and how she's figuring out who she is without her sister. Mayra, thank you so much for doing this.

Mayra Guillen: Thank you, Alicia, for having me on today.

Menendez: Where I want to start is with Vanessa herself and the relationship that you had. What do you want us to know about who Vanessa was when you were kids, when you were growing up? What do we need to know?

Guillen: We were definitely very different. We were only a year apart. I'm the oldest. She was always very outgoing as a child. She enjoyed the outdoors. That was like her favorite thing, playing outside when we were kids. Back then we didn't have all the technology that we have now, so we would spend most of our time outside. She loved playing soccer, anything that had to do with sports. She was very much like a tomboyish look. She would wear the shorts, and the ponytail, and T-shirts, and I was the more girly person. But we definitely got along very well and shared a lot of our childhood together.

Menendez: There's a part in the documentary, which I think will be very familiar to a lot of our listeners, which is that you as the oldest of three girls are very much mommy number two. Right? You have your mom, she's mommy number one, you are mommy number two. What did that look like as you were growing up? What was the responsibility of being mommy number two?

Guillen: Well you know, growing up in a Hispanic household, it's hard. Our parents they come here, they don't know English, they're immigrants, and we have to step forward and help them help us. My mom not knowing English kept her from communicating most of the time, and that's when I came in and I had to translate. They brought us here for much better opportunity than what they had as they were growing up. They weren't citizens. They came here illegally. And growing up we noticed that we had to work hard in order to not only achieve our goals but achieve the goals that they never got to work on.

Menendez: Growing up, what were the goals then that you set for yourself?

Guillen: Definitely I was still lost in the process as to what I wanted to do for myself. I was just going to college, really didn't take it serious enough. I actually dropped out freshman year after the first semester. At the time I really just needed to work and get money, and to be able to support my parents, to support my siblings. Even though both of my parents are very hard workers, the older they get the more help that they need of course. Us as older children, we believe that working and helping them economically solves their issues, but then where am I left? I didn't get to go to college. I didn't get to do a lot of the stuff that people with the economic support system do get.

Menendez: It strikes me though that that ties into what ends up being a big theme of this documentary, which is really how systems and structures interact with our lives and shape our lives in ways that are sometimes unimaginable. Can you tell me about your earliest memory of Vanessa expressing to you that she wanted to serve?

Guillen: For me, it's in high school. We were always together for soccer practice. She either wanted to pursue a career as a professional soccer player, but she saw that so far away. She was really good at the sport, but I think she didn't believe in herself enough to actually go to tryouts, and apply to different colleges, and just strive for more. She was in love with sports, so obviously for her being in the military wasn't going to be as hard. She was used to running, being outside, lifting heavy objects, so she figured that she could serve her country, go to college, and keep playing soccer all at once. And she also wanted to bring some honor into our family.

Menendez: Your mom though totally against it. I mean there's a story in the doc where your mom says Vanessa comes to me, we're in the bedroom and she says, "I either want to be an astronaut or I want to go into the military." And your mom says, "Well, then you better go to the moon." You know, like your mom was sort of crystal clear, so I want to be clear. Vanessa was doing this against resistance, which also tells me something about who Vanessa was.

Guillen: Right. Vanessa was really a go-getter. She did not take no for an answer. She respected my mom's decision to an extent where she kind of lied and said, "Okay. You know what? I'm not going." But then she shows up with the paperwork like, "Hey, I'm sorry, but it's a done deal." And of course we're taken by surprise. I just feel like for her it was just more of a reality. As sad as it sounds too, it was easier to serve than to actually pursue a career due to the economic struggles and such that an immigrant family has to face.

Menendez: Mayra, you've been asked to tell the story so many times of the day that Vanessa disappeared, and you tell it thoroughly throughout the documentary so I'm not going to ask you to tell it again. What I'm going to ask instead is, do you remember the moment when you realized that the Army was not going to help you find your sister?

Guillen: Definitely. It only took one call. I mean the same day of the 22nd when I heard no response, I decided it was only right to reach out to the chain of command. It was definitely hard trying to find a contact. The moment that I did I called, I told them who I was, why I was calling, and they had no clue, like no idea. And it's sad because that person was supposed to be the person that kept attendance of its unit. The irony there that he didn't know where Vanessa was at the time or had made false check-ins, just proved how much they cared. It was just another person. So definitely that's when it raised all red flags and I was like, "I have to be there in person in order to get some information because over the phone it's never work out. They're never going to pay attention."

Menendez: As is often the case of, as you said, the first born, the oldest daughter of immigrants, you really take a lead internally in organizing some of this, for example, trying to find an

attorney who could represent you. What did it require of you to begin navigating those systems, those questions of how it was that you were going to try to find your sister?

Guillen: It was very hard because I felt like it was all on my shoulders. Of course, I wasn't going to let any of my siblings take this on. I mean they're much younger than myself. It was hard, but I felt like I had to do it. I mean I would do it for anyone in my family. But definitely it took maturing extremely fast. It took a lot from my personal life, which I can't complain. I mean I've dedicated this issue to myself for the last almost three years.

Of course, I would rather have Vanessa back, but we can't change that, unfortunately. So just trying to find Natalie, she's our family attorney, she really explained to me the process and to how things work, what we were going to do, when we were going to do it, and just the reality of things that we didn't know of. I mean we had never been involved in politics. We had never been involved in anything military, so our lives completely changed.

Menendez: Can you tell me what she described to you, what that process was that she laid out?

Guillen: It took us understanding that the military in no way was interested in helping us as a family. It took us understanding that it was going to be a long process due to their own jurisdiction. No law enforcement on the outside could intervene unless the government in itself, in this case would be Congress, would allow them to. So she had a plan in how we needed to get the media involved, Congress involved.

It took us all the way to Capitol Hill, to meeting with the president, and now the last two years of advocating. Things just happened one after another. We thought that peaceful protesting would bring us the attention we needed because unfortunately the public eye is what makes these issues bigger. And of course the hashtag, I Am Vanessa Guillen, helped a lot because it showed that there was truly a systematic problem within the military regarding sexual assault, sexual harassment.

Menendez: Again, you are in many ways sort of the central communicator throughout all of this. You are the one who first sort of has that gut feeling that Vanessa's missing, that something is wrong. You are the one who receives the call confirming her death, and then you are the one who has to communicate that to your mom, and who has to sort of pull yourself together, put what you are feeling aside, and as your [inaudible 00:10:29] tells you, "Be strong for your mom." This is an immeasurable grief. It's also a public grief and a public trauma, and I wonder what type of support you had around you or had to build around yourself to process everything that was happening?

Guillen: Well growing up, again, being the oldest, I was very used to taking the lead, not because I wanted to but because I had to. At that moment when things did come down to who's going to speak up for my mom and dad when they don't know English and would have to go up against the chain of command that wasn't doing anything about finding my sister, it was very hard just having to translate over and over again back and forth what was going on. Sometimes there was ways that I couldn't even explain it to my parents because it was just hard on me. Definitely finding out about the day she was found is just something that ... I almost will never forget that call.

Each and every single sentence is still very much programmed within me, and it's just things that I can't repeat it. It won't come out my mouth. But it's definitely hard, but someone had to do it. I just had to put my feelings aside most of the time and just keep going forward, not think, not have time to overthink, just keeping myself busy and just keep thinking that, "In the end, you are doing all of this for Vanessa. And if we didn't do it, no one else was going to do it."

Menendez: Mayra, I'm so sorry that you had to go through all of that, and I am sorry that you were continuing to have to go through it. Did you talk to someone? Did you have friends around you? Were there outer circles of the family who were showing up for you? I mean how did you get through this?

Guillen: I honestly don't know. And sometimes I look back and I ask myself, "You know what? But how?" I think back and I think like, "Those were horrible moments." I mean, my dad was someone that I could talk to. He was another very strong person throughout this whole process in a sense. I could confide in him when I knew firsthand information. He was the person that I spoke to first out of everyone in the family. And he would always keep telling me, "Remember why you're doing this and who you're doing it for." He's like, "We can never get half the force that you have. All we can do is support you and try to keep going with this as far as we can." Because obviously as parents, I don't know how they feel. There's a difference in between the love of a sister and then the love of a mother and a father, so I can only imagine what they went through. And I knew I had to do this not only for Vanessa but for them as well. I did have close friends also that kept me put together and always reminded me, "Hey," again, "You can't back down. You can't give up. You have to keep going." But as in therapy and stuff, I never really looked into that direction, I guess because I'm mostly scared of the outcome. As Hispanics, you know we don't really believe in mental health, and depression, and raising awareness to those things. So it's kind of hard to accept it, that you need that type of help, that you need to speak to someone about what you're feeling, what you're thinking. And I feel like we're kind of midway through the whole process, and I would hate to open up to someone and then go back again and have to receive therapy again after the sentencing and such. So I'm waiting for the whole thing to be over in a way where I have some closure, and then I could go talk to someone and just let it all out.

Menendez: Well Mayra, I mean this with my whole heart, which is I hope you find the help and support that you need because you deserve that. I want you to tell me, Mayra, what have you learned through this process about the military that you want our listeners to know?

Guillen: I learned that this was an issue from decades ago. And I was so surprised, because from my point of view, when my sister joined I had no idea that they had such a dark background regarding sexual assault and harassment. I actually couldn't believe it. Because when you think military, you think [inaudible 00:14:52]. You think proud. You think all these high expectations. And you would never think that they have such a dark background. At least I didn't, because I didn't have anybody else that joined that close to me other than my sister.

So knowing that this goes as far back as like seven decades ago, it was very upsetting to know that they still hadn't passed any type of law concerning the situation or the way that they still let the military do a lot of these things that in civilian life law enforcement has the right to do. And that's one source that gave us the strength to keep going, to finally once and for all get some type of law to be implemented to help the victims, help the survivors, and give a voice to those that were silenced for so long.

Menendez: What have you learned throughout this process, Mayra, about how to be an effective advocate? If you could sort of compare for me where you started, how you understood the use of your voice and your advocacy for Vanessa, and where you are today, what has

changed in this process about how you have come to understand the role of an effective advocate and what effective advocacy looks like?

Guillen: I never considered myself an advocate. I leave that to those that suffered through military sexual trauma and harassment. I simply used my voice to speak up for my sister, who unfortunately is no longer here. As hard as it was, I'm not an expert on these issues. I know there's people that have been working on this for years, and they know left to right every single law, every single thing that there is to know about military sexual trauma, and sexual harassment, and assault. But definitely I've learned a lot about the issue. I continue to talk to Congress, but I don't talk to them as an expert and advocate. I talk to them as the sister that lost someone due to that issue.

I don't bring in like stats. I don't bring in data. I simply speak from the heart in regards to how this needs to be solved. And not only for Vanessa, because unfortunately she's not here, but for the rest of the service members that will continue to be in service, and for future generations to come. That's the way that I see things, and I've grown a lot in this area. I've learned a lot about politics, how things work, how lawmakers can either work together or completely go against each other, unfortunately, and when the public gets together they can really make a huge change.

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

Guillen: No, thank you, Alicia, for allowing me to use your platform.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua, and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Florence Barrau-Adams 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 RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, or wherever you're listening right now.

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