



How Nelini Stamp Sets Injustice Aflame

She calls herself a “fire-starter,” and has a long list of rabble-raising moments to prove it. Before turning 18, she registered people to vote by pleading “Please register and vote for me! I can’t vote.” Later, she marched in an anti stop-and-frisk protest to the home of NYC’s mayor. But walking into the Working Families Party to volunteer for Obama changed the course of her life. That path led to joining Occupy Wall Street and spending three weeks camped out in the streets. Along the way, she co-founded Dream Defenders. Honestly, Nelini embodies the phrase “Power to the people.”

Crowd: *And it’s not my fault. Not where I was, not how I dressed.
And it’s not my fault. Not where I was, not how I dressed.
And the rapist was you!*

Alicia Menendez:

Recognize that chant? It’s the English version of the anti-rape anthem by Chilean activists that went viral. This version is by a flash mob of more than 100 women, performing outside of the New York City courthouse where Harvey Weinstein will be tried for rape. At the front of that pack of women was Nelini Stamp. She’s the co-founder of the Resistance Revival Chorus and Dream Defenders, and one of the leaders of the Working Family Party.

Nelini is that woman who inspired us to ask, how does she do it all? She’s here, so let’s find out. Nelini, nice to meet you off the Twitter!

Nelini Stamp: Thank you. Yeah, nice to meet you, too. Thank you for having me, Alicia. I’m very excited.

Menendez: Amazing. What did it feel like to stand outside of that courthouse, and then outside of a Trump building, and say those words?

Stamp: It felt cathartic. I mean, I didn’t really... I’ve done a lot of actions over the last decade, and sometimes you feel you’re excited about making the impact, you’re excited about engaging in it, but sometimes you’re like, “Well, I’ve done this a lot.” And there was something different that happened to me. Being a survivor in my own right, being able to point and say, “Un violador es tu,” like, “The violator is you,” like, “You are the rapist,” was so powerful. And the fact that especially when we were doing it in front of the Weinstein trial, you had the judges, you had the courts, you had their... The story is and the song goes it’s the courts, it’s the judges, it’s the cops, it’s the system, right?

Menendez: Right.

Stamp: And to say that, and to be there with all of those things was just so, so powerful. And then to ride the train, we actually had a woman... We did it on the train, as well, and there was an elderly woman who was sitting down and started to cry. She was right in front of me, and I just swelled up with all of these emotions, because I could just only think of what she

was thinking as a woman, watching all of these women on the subway, just packing this subway and chanting this, and saying, "It's not my fault."

Menendez: The fault wasn't mine, not where I was, not how I dressed. You are the rapist. Where, in your own life, do these words resonate?

Stamp: I was assaulted and it was one of those things when I was younger, I was about 19 years old, in a club, one of those teen clubs in New York, and my... For days later, people were like, "Oh, well, you were drunk." Or, "Oh, you were this." Like it wasn't... I was trying to figure out what happened, and because I did have a fuzzy memory, I was making all of these excuses. I was going back and saying, "Well, what did I wear?" Or, "Was I inviting?" Or, "Was I..."

But at the end of the day I said no, I remember that clearly, and it doesn't matter where I was, where I was dressed. The fact is that people should not be committing rape or assault on women. And it also happens to men, as well, but this is... The violator and the rapist in your path is... It just resonates so well, because it's in the path. It's not that anybody does anything to deserve this.

Menendez: Also at the front of that group of women were two other Latina to Latina guests, Nathalie Molina Niño, Paola Mendoza. How did this action come together?

Stamp: Yeah, so some of us, Paola Mendoza is one of also the other co-founders of the Resistance Survivor Chorus. We move a little-

Menendez: She's the one who put you on my radar.

Stamp: Yeah, she's great. I love her so much. And you know, a bunch of us were talking about we were, when we saw Alatesis, the Chilean feminist group, and we saw it going, happening everywhere, like I saw it from my European comrades who I organize with. It just blew up all over the place, and I just remember crying. Watching the videos of how powerful it was to see people all over Latin America, people all over the world just say, "This is a problem." It's not just the flash pan of Me Too. It's not just these big moments that have a lot of shine on it. It's happening every day and people are really suffering.

And you know, Paola was like, "We should do this, and I've got some people to talk to about." And I... Yara, who is also one of the other... who helped with the choreography, helped translate it with Paola, was like, "Oh, I would love to do this and I've got some more women." And then Sarah Sophie Flicker, another one of our co-founders of the Chorus is like, "We should do this out at the Weinstein trial." But we wanted to be respectful to the silence breakers, to actually the people who are most impacted, not make anything that we did to interfere with getting justice.

Menendez: You call yourself a rabble-rouser. Where does that show up in your life outside of protests?

Stamp: It shows up in a lot of... I grew up in New York City, in Brooklyn, and Staten Island, New York, which explains a lot, to be honest, about... I have both Biggie and the Wu-Tang in me. Just gotta represent. There were just certain things all of my life, and especially with my family, too. I'd be like, "Why do we do these normal things?" Well, not normal things, but, "What is this traditional thing that we're doing?" And I think it was just like the way I was raised, like I have two moms. That was really hard for a very Catholic, Puerto Rican family to go through when my mother came out when I was a kid. And just like, I think the

notion of not living that traditional lifestyle, when it was starting to break in the United States, it just made me a natural rabble-rouser.

I would go in school and be like, "My mom's a lesbian." People like, "Don't talk about that." Or I would say thespian, because that's what I thought it meant, because I had a lisp. Sorry, that's my snort. And so I'd be like, "She's a thespian." So, I feel like it was just always, I was always that kind of, in a sense, a fire starter. Whether it be like bucking traditional norms, or kind of standing up for stuff, but that isn't super political.

Menendez: What do you pinpoint as the beginning of your political consciousness?

Stamp: I'll say it's like two moments, and they're very intertwined, was one time my cousin jumped the subway, actually right around here at the 42nd Street station, and I saw the cops just tackle him and beat him up, and didn't realize that he had a baby cousin with him that was like... I mean, I was like six, so I saw it. And I just was freaking out for a really long time, but I just... A moment there was just like, "Don't trust these people. Just don't trust the cops." Right?

And then the other moment was September 11th. It was my fourth day of high school, and just... It was September 11th and the aftermath of it, because I just remember seeing a lot of my Muslim, Arab, Sikh, you name it, friends, that would just get stereotyped as one entity. Scared for their lives. And my family being very much like, "This is terrible. What happened?" I mean, Staten Island, we lost the most people, and so people... I remember going home after a few days, because we couldn't... Bridges, and the ferry was closed, and people being like, "Where's my dad? Where's my mom?" Firefighters and cops, and also just how easily we went to war after. All of these things, and I remember the first... My first actual action was leaving school and protesting the Iraq war.

And so that was a huge... Just growing up, and being there in that moment, and just that kind of post-September 11th was like a super political, transformative thing for me.

Menendez: 2004, you wouldn't even have been 18 yet. Right?

Stamp: Mm-hmm (Affirmative).

Menendez: But you were registering people to vote.

Stamp: Yes.

Menendez: Why did that feel important in that moment?

Stamp: I mean, there was a moment of... I felt really hopeless, like I wasn't 18, so I couldn't vote myself. My cousin was signing up for the National Guard, and I was nervous that... I mean, he ended up being deployed. At this point, my cousin was deployed a few times. But at that point, not yet, right? And I was just scared of somebody who's just a little bit older than me, who I look up to, going and getting murdered, getting killed, killing others. The war was just... It was really ugly, and for me, registering people was a way to get civically involved, but also to say that like, "This is for my future, too." Right? This is for... I'm just 17 years old, I want to see change, and a difference, so please register and vote for me.

So, it was also like a cry for help to others, and it felt really empowering to do that.

Menendez: You dropout of high school. Why?

Stamp: Yeah. A lot of things. So, I dropped out of high school... Well, officially, legally by record I think it's like 2006, I think, but I stopped going to school my senior year, and part of it was after we got the financial aid, like after we got FAFSA that said, "You are not gonna get financial aid."

Menendez: As part of your application to college.

Stamp: As part of the application to college, right? So, applying to college, you go through the financial aid process. You look at things, and I really wanted to go to a school that had musical theater. I auditioned. I went on a bunch of auditions, but when we got our financial aid letter back, I just... There's something clicked. Something shut off. I believe that was like a moment that I lost a lot of hope in my future. I was a young teenager that didn't have the help that I needed.

Menendez: The way your story is often written, it contextualizes what you've experienced personally, things like the eviction, in the context of a larger global moment that was happening. That it happens in tandem with the financial crisis. When did you realize that what you were experiencing was not an anomaly?

Stamp: One was like the message of hope and change from Obama. I remember being very inspired by it. This is two years after I dropped out, but I got my GED finally in 2008. Which was, I was really excited. I was like, "All right, I'm gonna go to school." And I remember my grandfather wrote me like a down-payment check of a thousand dollars. He was like, "Now, you gotta get the rest on your own loans." And I was like, "All right, I'm gonna go to the bank." And when I went to the bank, they were like, "No, we're not giving loans out any more." This was July of 2008, like July-August, I believe.

And I was a summer camp counselor, so I didn't have every day to go back and forth to the bank, but I remember being like, "Something's fishy here." And then when the banks crashed, I just clearly... That day, the news, the media, everything, I was like, "Oh. This is the bigger picture. This is the bigger picture." And I'm the type of person that I don't just like... I then have to be obsessed about it, so then I was like doing the Google holes before they were probably Google holes, just going through, and I did that, and I was just like, "Wait a second. These banks were doing this? And they were doing that? They were giving loans to people, they were giving predatory loans to people that couldn't..." So, I started to learn all of this stuff, and that's where it really kind of tied together to me, and as I got deeper and deeper into politics, and deeper and deeper into seeing what was happening, I kept on looking, actually reading about stuff and was like, "Oh, this is all systemic."

Lyrics: *What's up?*

Ad: *When it comes to fertility, lots of us have been told, "Just wait and see." But now we have tools to help us plan and track everything. Our finances, our steps. Why is this one thing still wait and see? That's why Modern Fertility was created. It's the easy and affordable way to test your fertility hormones at home with a simple finger prick. Mail it in with a prepaid label and get your personalized results within 10 days. Traditional testing with your doctor can cost over a thousand dollars, but Modern Fertility only costs \$159, and you get the same information.*

And if you go to modernfertility.com/latina, you can get \$20 off your test. Plus, if you have an HSA or FSA, you can use that money on Modern Fertility. You'll get insights into how many eggs you have, hormone levels, and any reproductive red flags. The results go in

depth into what every hormone means, and you can also talk one-on-one with a fertility nurse to review your results and options for next steps. Right now, Modern Fertility is offering our listeners \$20 off the test when you go to modernfertility.com/latina. That means your test will cost \$139, instead of the hundreds or thousands it could cost at a doctor's office.

Get \$20 off your fertility test when you go to modernfertility.com/latina.

Menendez: How, then, do you become involved with Occupy Wall Street?

Stamp: Yeah. I didn't really get political in anything, and I found an ad on Craigslist that was like, "Be a part of this moment of hope and change," and all this stuff, and I walk into the Working Families Party office, and I went, "Why does this place look really familiar?" I was looking online for ads. I mean, for anything to help with the Obama campaign, and I found a online ad in Craigslist, and it brought me to the Working Families Party office, like a few days later. But walked in, and they were like, "You're gonna go canvas, or you're gonna go knock on doors." It's knocking on doors, which is canvassing. That's what we call it. For Brian X. Foley for State Senate in Long Island.

And I was like, "Excuse me? I came here to work for Obama." It's like, "Pardon me." I was 100% that. And they were like, "Okay, whatever, kid." And just were like, "You get in this car, drive to Long Island." And the experience of knocking on doors changed my life. It was just... I was like, "You're struggling, too?" And so that was another moment of connecting it to that it wasn't... That there's the systemic problem, but that also, a bunch of people are suffering and it's not just... I had for so long, in high school, and just convinced myself it was me against the world. And so, to actually talk to people that were all struggling for a variety... things that I had never even heard of before, right?

I was lucky enough to always have health insurance, but people who I would talk to that were struggling with health insurance. Just across the board, right? Folks with different abilities, and ability needs, and just not getting what they needed, and I was like, "Oh." I was like, "All right, I don't care if I'm canvassing for Obama, or Brian X. Foley for State Senate. This place is messed up and we gotta do something about it." That's when I was like, "This is the place that I'm gonna be, at Working Families Party." My best friends now, Mary was like, "Hey, do you want to come to these general assemblies on Friday afternoons?" And I was like, "What time?" They were like, "3:00. We're gonna talk about occupying Wall Street." And I was like, "No."

I remember just completely dismissing the idea. I was like, "You're gonna occupy what? All right, cool." And then I would go to these meetings, and people were talking about anarchism, and socialism, and I was kind of like, "This is a lot. I didn't go to college. I don't know what you're talking about. I do know that this country's messed up, but..." So, I was feeling it out, and again, the night of... I went to the day, I actually missed the whole, the morning, the actual first march. When I got there, we had already been at what we call Liberty Square, but Zuccotti Park, and I remember being like, "All right, this is cool." But people were just sitting around, lounging around. But that evening, there was something that really special happened, which was, one, it was the first time the mic check was used, because we couldn't use amplified sound. The permit ended at like 7:00 PM, or something like that, or some time at night.

And so, there was a mic check, and I just remember being like, "There's something that..." And which is why I love being a part of the chorus. There's something that doing

something in unison, that is beyond just arguing, or debating, or taking action. There's something deep within me that gets triggered, and I just remember it was just so beautiful moment, and everybody stood up, and they were telling their stories about why they were there. And I was like, "That's it. I'm in. I'm just in." Every time people get to tell their stories, and it's really powerful, I just... I'm a sucker for it, but it's what moves people, and I just remember being like, "Yep. This is the movement. Let's go."

I volunteered for outreach coordinator for something that I had no idea what we were gonna do, but it was just... and just became in the movement, so deep. But I do remember going through the streets on Broadway, like traffic goes down, we're going north. Traffic is going south, we're going north. And saying like, "We are the 99%." And like, "And so are you, and so are you." And people leaning out of their windows, people leaning out of their taxis and being like, "Yes." And I just... It felt like a movie, and also, it's New York City downtown, so your voices echo really powerfully, and I just remember in that moment, like I remember what outfit I was wearing.

I don't know why I was wearing a skirt, but I was wearing a skirt, and a tank top, and combat boots, because I always had to wear the combat boots, because you didn't want your feet to get run over by the scooters, the cop scooters. And I just remember just seeing people. People's reaction, like people who were just watching, or in the stores, or wherever they were on Broadway, whether they were in their apartments, whether they were in a store, people just watching us, and some people being like, "What? Who are these kids?" And then some people being like... You could see it in their faces. It was like, "Thank you."

And the memory of just that... It just, it sounded like a stadium. Even though it was probably a thousand of us, but it sounded like a stadium, and I was like, "Revolution's coming." That's what I thought.

Menendez: Draw a line for me from your work with Occupy to your co-founding Dream Defenders.

Stamp: Yeah, I mean, part of what happened during Occupy Wall Street is that it opened up a lot of people in movement to police brutality, to racial justice, as well, because a lot of people were talking about economic justice, and then there was a group of folks who were just like, "It's racial and economic. Let's not forget racial justice." Somebody from an organization called me and was like, "Hey, can you train these kids in Florida to go and do a direct action around George Zimmerman?" I was like, "Wait, what?" I was like, "What's happening?"

Menendez: Right, and let's also just break it down, what a direct action is.

Stamp: Oh, yeah. Totally. So, a direction action is when you, similar to... When you take physical action, and that could be, there's like thousands of ways to do it, right? Thousands of tactics. But when you take physical action to either protest, you can protest a legislation, protest an unjust law, protest something that happened that was unjust, and so a protest, like a protest where you march can be a direct action. A thing where you block an intersection of the street can be a direct action.

Menendez: And what makes an effective direct action?

Stamp: What makes an effective direct action in my mind is when you know your target, you know where you want your outcome to be, and your direct action moves you from... moves the target, to get to your outcome. Right? There's that type of direction action.

There's two, actually. So, there's one that actually moves you closer to getting your outcome, and there's another direct action tactic that moves the public to have more empathy, or moves the public, moves people who maybe were not participating allies to be participating in your action, or in your campaign, and we, in the summer, were doing a big march mobilization to Bloomberg's house, and when he was at the time the mayor, to end stop and frisk. And so, people had heard about that work, and called me, and said, "Hey, there are these... I'm sure you heard of George Zimmerman murdering Trayvon Martin, and he hasn't been arrested. There is a group of students and alumni of some of the state schools, like FSU, Florida State University, and FAMU, and they want to do an action. They want to march 40 miles from Daytona to Sanford, and shut down the police precinct to make sure that Zimmerman gets arrested."

And I was like, "All right." And I went down to Florida and helped them train them to do a direct action. Train them in the safety of like, okay, if you're blockading, how your body can be, so that... Cops have particular ways of pulling apart people, just to make sure that they were okay in their bodies, and to show solidarity, and during those three days, all of the people on the march were like, "We should turn this into an organization." We were like, "What if we could be the new SNCC?" I remember that was definitely something that we said. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Like, "What if we could be this new youth civil rights organization?"

And that's what brought me, and then two months, I moved down to Miami and spent a good seven months helping build the Dream Defenders.

Menendez: You've dedicated your life to this movement. Your young life. I'm sure you will have many lives after this. How can our listeners effect change? Whatever type of change they want to see where they are.

Stamp: People think that you need an organization, or a movement to effect change, and the thing is that people are organized wherever they are. You probably have, for those folks who have kids in daycare, you have other parents that you are with the daycare community. Whether you have a job that you have your colleagues with, whether it's a parent group. Maybe you're students, and you're in a club in college, right? We're all organized in some sort of way.

And in terms of how to effect change, it's like whether it's you want a stop sign on your block, or you want to get someone elected, or create a different legislation, or pass a legislation, it starts with knowing what you want and getting a group of people together to get it done, and you don't need to be doing this for however long people have been doing it. People know how to advocate for themselves. We advocate for ourselves every day, whether it be sometimes we advocate for our salary. Sometimes we advocate for us at the doctor's office. We advocate. Just taking that and understanding that you can do it with your community, and making it happen together.

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 mixer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. We love hearing from you. We really do. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or wherever you're listening. And please leave a review; it is the quickest way to help us grow as a community. Finally, be sure to follow us on Twitter and Instagram: we're @LatinaToLatina.

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