



Why Actress Selenis Leyva and Her Sister, Trans Activist Marizol Leyva Are Closer Than Ever

Marizol's transition not only tested her determination to live life on her own terms, it also tested her lifelong bond to her sister Selenis. A failing marriage, an acting career on the rocks, and mental health woes did not allow Selenis to be there for her beloved sister as much as she would have liked. In their memoir, "My Sister: How One Sibling's Transition Changed Us Both," they recount the difficult decisions they each had to make to be whole and to love each other through unimaginable hurt.

Alicia Menendez:

When I first learned of Selenis and Marizol Leyva's memoir, *My Sister: How One Sibling's Transition Changed Us Both*, I assumed the title sort of said it all. But Selenis, who you know and love from her roles on *Orange Is the New Black* and *Diary of a Future President*, and Marizol, a model, a cook, activist, well, they could fill volumes with their stories. For Marizol, identifying as trans and loving herself through her gender transition did not come easily. There is a story for anyone who has ever fought to live life on their own terms.

This foster child comes into your life, into your home, baby Jose. What do you remember about Jose as a child?

Selenis Leyva: I loved babies, like you know, everything baby was amazing to me, and this little baby came in, and I just wanted to hold that baby, baby Jose, so much. That was my thing. But one of the things that stood out was because I had already had foster children around me, and other siblings, and family members, I knew the sound of the cries, you know? Babies cry a certain way, and what struck me immediately about this particular baby was that the cry was desperate, almost like an agony somehow. And that was because of the withdrawal, because the baby was born to a mother who was addicted to drugs.

So, I wanted to shower this baby with the love that I felt that it didn't have from the start.

Menendez: Marizol, how do you remember your sister?

Marizol Leyva: Always loving, caring, supportive, accepting. Always let me live my truth when I was around her. Strong, powerful, kind. Like my sister is everything to me, you know? She's always been there for me from the very beginning. I've been attached to her, as we discuss in the book, since day one.

Menendez: Marizol, you say you knew very young that you were different. How did that show up for you?

Marizol Leyva: I always dreamed of fantasizing of waking one day and being a girl, but in my reality I felt like, "This is not possible. I'm going to have to live this way forever and just accept me for who I am." I just knew I was very different at a very young age, because I saw the difference from girls, and boys, and then myself, and I didn't feel like I connected as a young boy.

Menendez: You go through so many ups and downs together, and as much as the book centers on Marizol's story, Selenis, you were not without your own struggles, especially during those teen years. What do you most recall from those times?

Selenis Leyva: I carried with me a lot of self hate from my childhood, and the anti-blackness that exists in our community, in the Latinx community, was very real, and it's something you don't even realize you're carrying with you until you start interacting with people outside of your own community, and you realize, "Oh, I was taught to feel always that I was the ugly duckling." Out of all my cousins, I was the one with the unruly hair, the wide nose, the full lips, and that was always seen as less than. And I carried myself as if I was less than.

So, those were heavy years, and because I was the oldest, I didn't talk about it. I was expected to just take care of everyone else and not talk about my issues. I was a girl who was in pain, and who did not feel worthy. And I think I'm talking about it more now in my forties than I was back then, like now I'm able to say, yes, I'm an Afro Latina and everything that I was taught that was ugly is not ugly. It is what it is. And I am this. And there's a celebration in that. So, I'm able to embrace that, but, but the damage has been done and there are days, and there are moments that I do look at myself and I go 'you know, if only...' And I have to catch myself because it's deeply, deeply rooted.

Menendez: Marizol, tell me about the experiences that helped you understand who you were and how you wanted to show up in the world.

Marizol Leyva: I think that one of the things that made me feel comfortable in my skin is knowing that there was a community to identify myself with, because for all my childhood, I felt like I was the only one, the outcast, a black sheep, the one that's weird, or different, and doesn't know who they are, and trying to find themselves. By the age of 16, I was introduced to a community by having the access to the internet and just connecting with different people online, and for me, it was a nice experience. It felt like I finally belonged somewhere. And then when I started to have conversations with people, knowing that I didn't even know there was all these different sexualities, and genders, and meeting my friend who was actually trans, but at the time I didn't know she was trans, and she broke it down to me. That was like the very moment that I felt like, "Oh my God, so this is possible that there is people like me who feel like they're born in the wrong body."

Menendez: Selenis, you say that Marizol's identity was an unspoken truth in your family. What let you know that you knew, and your mom knew, but that it wasn't something that you wanted to talk about?

Selenis Leyva: I thought, and my mother, we thought, "Okay. Well, this little boy is gay, and that's just how it is, and we're going to love him, and continue to support him, and watch him, and take care of him, and protect him." And when I say protect, it was because we knew that in our community, in our circles, in our families, whenever the issue of being gay came up, it was always the butt of a joke. So, we knew that we had to protect this little baby, this boy, this young man, at all costs, and maybe people wouldn't almost realize it, or not realize it, but just wouldn't zoom in on it so much that it would be a thing. I wasn't thinking about transgender, because it wasn't part of my vocabulary, but I did know that when, at the age of 16, Jose turns to me and says, "I'm gay." I remember thinking like, "Okay, yeah. That's not new, but do you want to be a woman?" And it came from such a pure place of me seeing perhaps really, really deep and beyond the surface. There was an essence there that I knew, as a female, as a woman, and I can't even explain it more than that. Just like I

knew. It's almost like a connection, where you're just like, "But there's more." But there is more here. It's not just this.

Menendez: Marizol, how did you feel when your sister asked you that question?

Marizol Leyva: Scared, because a lot of the feelings I was feeling as a childhood, I'd never talked to anyone about it. Everything was just to myself, and I had to deal with that for most of my childhood, and when she asked me, it was just like... Kind of like that kind of reaction. I think that holding it in for so long, I couldn't even have an answer to her, because I was in shock.

Ad: *Miss Juleyka, nice to have you on. Must be a special reason.*

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Yeah, yeah. You know it's a special reason, since I like to be behind the scenes. All right, so when Cantu Beauty decided to come on board, I rushed.

Menendez: *You rushed to volunteer to try the products.*

Lantigua-Williams:

I know, but I've already been using their coconut curling cream for years, so I figured I wasn't gonna miss a chance to try out sister products.

Menendez: *I like the photo you sent me the other day. Your hair looked really good.*

Lantigua-Williams:

And that was just after one shampoo and conditioner. My curls were shiny and smooth, man, and my comb was not full of my own hair after I detangled it in the shower.

Menendez: *So, how many products are you using all told?*

Lantigua-Williams:

Right now, I've got like four, so I'm using the shampoo, the conditioner, the leave-in cream, and then can I just tell you what my favorite is?

Menendez: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Lantigua-Williams:

The Wave Whip. First of all, that name is everything, but I love how my waves and my curls just are fuller, they're more touchable, they're less frizzy. I mean, I know. I sound like an ad, but let me tell you.

Menendez: *Well, you can enjoy the benefits of the Cantu Beauty haircare line, picking up your favorites at Target or ordering from Target.com.*

Menendez: What is just so striking to me throughout My Sister is that you two clearly love each other so much and you come from a deeply loving family, and even with all of that love, and with more resources than a lot of people have, you still, Marizol, end up running up against a lot of the challenges that LGBTQ, specifically trans, specifically trans women of color, run up against. Including having a really precarious housing situation at some point, right? When you go through your late teens, your early twenties, your housing is in flux. There's a period where you're living with Selenis and that just doesn't work for either of you. And

Selenis, I sort of first want to hear from you. I mean, you play the role that a lot of us play in our families, right? Where we are the eldest, and people rely on us, and people expect us to show up, and at the same time have trouble with boundaries, and knowing how to set them, and when to set them, so this is sort of a critical moment for you, because it's the first time you really set a boundary with Marizol, and you do a thing that I cannot imagine having to do, which is to say, "You cannot live here and we have to find another place to live, and that other place is a shelter."

Selenis Leyva: Those are moments that I think about now that hurt, and that... I mean, obviously it worked out, right? And it was the moment of tough love. And it's a moment that I had been told by my parents and my other siblings that I needed to do with Marizol. Here I am, trying to be everyone's everything, right? And then I'm struggling with my own stuff.

Menendez: You have a marriage that is falling apart. You're going through depression. Your career is stuck in the mud. I mean, it was uncanny how often you two were in a very challenging place at the same time.

Selenis Leyva: Oh my God. It was so hard, and I didn't have anyone to talk to. There was no one that I can say, "You know what? Today I thought about how I'm going to kill myself. Today, that's my thought." And that moment, where I literally said, "You can't live here anymore," it was literally like, "Let me try this. I've tried everything else but the tough love." Right? I cried. I cried so much in that car, but there was something. Something that told me this really could possibly be a turning point, and I think, obviously after reading, um, writing the book together, and going through it, and talking about that moment, it was when Marizol had her own epiphany that night.

Marizol Leyva: When she first told me like, "Okay, you can't live here anymore," yes, I was completely heartbroken. It was just like, "Oh my God. I'm so used to having my sister." And then I knew that at the same time, this is like I have to do this regardless, because I'm going through my own issues. I knew my sister was going through her own issues. So, I didn't want to continue to add my baggage onto her. And so, I knew that this was it. I have to make the best out of this situation and make something happen. So, that night when I got dropped off and I'm meeting everyone at the shelter, I felt relief. I had hope. I felt faith. I went to sleep, and you know my mom taught us to pray, and I just prayed that night, and I cried myself to sleep. But not of sad tears, it was happy tears, because I felt like I was finally going somewhere in my life that was more positive than all the experiences that I experienced beforehand.

Menendez: Selenis, how did you learn to live with, to manage your own depression?

Selenis Leyva: I think there was just the realization that I had a human being, my daughter, who needed me, and it was a moment where I said, "Well, who's going to care for her? Who's going to love her?" And I felt horrible at the thought that I was in so much pain that I was willing to let go of the one person that I love the most on this earth. That one moment that I talk about in the book, I knew at that moment that if I hadn't looked back in that rear view mirror and saw my daughter's car seat, I would not be here today. I'm fully aware of that. And I remember, I think it might have been the same day that I started looking for psychologists and psychiatrists, and I had both, and I did both, and I got on medication, and it was really, really hard, because the medication... For anyone who has dealt with taking antidepressants, it changes you. I felt like I was not me anymore. Whatever me was. Whatever that memory of me, it was no longer there. But I was able to function. I was able

to get out of bed. I was able to be present for my daughter, even though I felt like there was a part of me that was missing.

And then one day I said, "Okay, I think it's time to get off of these and let's see what happens." But I stayed with the therapy for a while, because I knew I needed something.

Menendez: Marizol, during the years where you were at the shelter, there's so much progress. You legally change your name, your gender on government forms. You've got a stable job, though I will say in the process of getting that stable job, you experience employment discrimination and deal with a lot of the systemic issues that trans women deal with. And then, just as we feel like things were really coming together for you, you meet a man who turns your world upside down. How?

Marizol Leyva: For me, for a while, it was hard to even date as a trans woman. There are a lot of men who are attracted to trans women, but they have their issues, their insecurities, because of what society puts on them as a man. And so, I just knew that for someone like me, like what are the odds of you finding somebody that's going to accept you for who you are? So, I felt like this person... I believed him. And everything starts out being great at the beginning, and then that's when I started feeling like I was losing myself and being controlled. I end up leaving my job because of it. Everything's being controlled.

I wasn't seeing my family like I used to see them, or my friends. I no longer had social media. And these were all signs from someone who is a domestic violence partner. At the time, I felt like I was giving in to all of these things because I felt like as a trans woman, I was a woman first. I felt like that was like, "Okay, that's what I have to own up to, because I'm a woman, and he's the man, so I should listen to what he says." And also, there was something about me wanting to hold onto it, because I would often be told, "You will never find somebody like me that is going to accept you. Who you gonna find? You're not gonna find nobody. Nobody's gonna want you." It was very intense, but I just want to say these are... This is our reality, and how society looks at trans people, that plays a very big part when it comes to people who are attracted to trans people, because that alone brings so much issues into a relationship, because that person might not be... You know, they think they're ready, but they're not.

And I know there are good men out there who are attracted to trans women, and they will treat you with the most respect and accept you for who you are, as the woman you are. You just gotta learn how to pick them.

Menendez: That's great advice. Selenis, as an Afro-Latina, as a mom, as a sister to a trans woman, how are you processing this moment that we're now in?

Selenis Leyva: For me, as a mother, as an Afro-Latina, I'm excited that my daughter is living through this time, that she's seeing this, that she is educating herself, that she's challenging her thoughts, that she's challenging what's being taught in schools. She's challenging her friends. They're having conversations now that maybe were just not acceptable before. We grew up in a household with a Cuban father, so politics was not something that you wanted, right? Cuban man. And politics was something that you could not talk about. 'Aquí no se habla de Fidel, aquí no.' You know? I mean it was very clear if you were a Democrat, you were a Communist. But through conversation with my father, with my Cuban father, and it wasn't easy. At first, it was ugly. But you know what? Now my dad, who was a registered Republican, has voted Democrat and is a different person. But that came with years of really honest conversations that were ugly at times.

So, if we are in this phase of honest, ugly conversation, I'm all for it. Because that's the only way we're gonna see the other side of this. We've done a really great job in this country pacifying everything, covering it up with fake smiles. I'm in an industry, in Hollywood, where when you have diversity rules. Really, diversity? Let me tell you. I have had to, as an Afro-Latina in Hollywood, I have had to suck it in. I've had to keep my mouth quiet for a long time. Because there is fear that you will be blacklisted because a white person, Caucasian people can act crazy. They can go to rehab many, many times. See, they could stop production. They could have breakdowns. But you have a person of color, even remotely, even saying something like, "I don't like my trailer," and suddenly you're the difficult one. I am not gonna live in fear anymore. I lived in fear for a very, very long time, and I'm excited that we're here where we are, because that's it. It's been exposed.

And if I'm on a set, and suddenly I'm being treated very differently than my Caucasian counterparts, you will hear from me. Enough is enough. I feel we cannot go back. We can never go back.

Menendez: Yep. I fully agree with all of that. I also want to be on set the day that you do that, so please, just give me a heads up when it's coming. Here's my final question. So much of My Sister, and what I think makes it so specific, but so universal, is that you both spend the early part of your lives fighting so hard to be who you want to be, and to have the life that you want to have. Marizol, I'll start with you. What is like now to live something closer to the life that you always imagined for yourself?

Marizol Leyva: It's very liberating. I'm very proud of myself, because I've come a very long way, and having a book out there, audio book, being an activist and being the voice for my trans community, LGBTQ+ community. I've never been around, first of all, trans women who are voices for the community, who are activists, and it's not until when my sister invited me to this women's event that she was presenting an award for Laverne Cox, for woman of the year, and I was her guest, and there were many trans women there, and I got to sit with them, and hear their stories, and I was just like, "Oh my God, there's people out here making a difference in a positive way."

And so, I knew that I wanted to do that, as well. It's so liberating, so inspiring, because if I could change one life, I feel like I've done my job.

Menendez: And Selenis, for you?

Selenis Leyva: First of all, I love me. I know who I am. I'm very clear as to the people I want in my life and I'm not apologetic about it. Because I found myself for a very long time living for other people, and I'm finally living for me, and I'm telling you, no one can tell... Now, it's on. Whoever meets me now is in trouble, because now it is on. I had somebody who told me-

Marizol Leyva: Preach.

Selenis Leyva: Who I dated years ago, and he said, "I'm so lucky you don't know you're a queen." And I was like, "What?" And I completely understand him now, like, "Yeah. Yeah, you better believe you're lucky that I didn't know that I was a queen, because I would not have put up with so much." You know, and now I'm in a place where it's on and there's no going back. Just like I feel like historically we can't go back, Selenis Leyva's not going back, so buckle up, people. Buckle up.

Menendez: I love it! I love it. Thank you both so much. This was so wonderful.

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. Manuela Bedoya is our intern. We love hearing from you. Email us at 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 ways to help us grow as a community.

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