



## Why Susan Gonzales Wants You to Understand Artificial Intelligence

This thought leader spent more than 20 years in tech and community engagement before founding [AI & You](#), a non-profit committed to educating marginalized communities about AI and emerging technologies. Susan shares everything from her personal digital best practices to the breast cancer diagnosis that forced her to grapple with her own arrogance, and the freedom she has found in choosing to be child-free.

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**Alicia Menendez:** My friend Susan Gonzalez spent years at big companies like Comcast and Facebook advocating for underserved communities. Now she's bringing her more than 20 years of experience in tech and engagement to AlandYou, a nonprofit working to engage and educate marginalized communities about artificial intelligence and new technologies. Susan's also a member of the committee advising President Biden on the National AI Initiative. Here's the thing though, Susan is coming to this work, work she feels is critical following a period of personal crisis, a breast cancer diagnosis, and the loss of both of her parents. Susan shares how she has been changed by that journey, as well as everything she wants you and other Latinas to know about the opportunity of inclusive AI. Susan, thank you so much for doing this.

**Susan Gonzales:** Thank you for having me.

**Menendez:** Stepping back and thinking about your career and its totality to me, so much of the work that you have done has been about taking complicated policy issues that are often opaque by design and trying to translate them for people in our communities. What I don't know is what it was about your upbringing or your adolescence that made that need for translation feel so urgent to you.

**Gonzales:** It's my parents. Both my parents were born in the US but my dad grew up in a place called Van Horn, Texas, which is West Texas and experienced a lot of discrimination because he was of Mexican descent. So for example, he was only allowed to go to sixth grade. He would be beaten for speaking Spanish or running and playing and would get beaten by a two by four for accidentally yelling at somebody else like in a game in Spanish. My dad was my best friend. My mom was an amazing mother. I was really lucky with both of them, but my dad and I had a special something. He would always say, okay, this Latina helped you to get to Washington DC, this was my first tour of duty and now it's your job to turn around and pull up four others. It was always that message of don't ever forget where you came from. Don't ever forget who you are and always pull up somebody else.

**Menendez:** I think about what your dad told you, this person lifted you up, so I need you to turn around and pull out more Latinas behind you. I want to be very transparent with the listener. You have been that person for me. And mentorship is incredible. A person who can offer you advice, who can offer you counsel, and you have been a mentor to me. But more importantly than that, you were a sponsor to me before I even knew what the word sponsor or sponsorship meant and was supposed to look like. And that is to say, not only did you offer me sage advice and counsel, you really opened doors for me and leveraged

the power of your connections on my behalf. So at the time that we met, I was working in the nonprofit space. I very much wanted to be working in media, and because you were at Comcast, you saw an opportunity for me to do some of these red carpet Comcast events and then to do something Comcast Newsmakers where I would get to sit with local folks, local leaders and talk to them about a variety of issues.

And it was pivotal for me. It was pivotal because someone else saw in me potential and gave me the actual opportunity to do the doing, which is so often the piece that is missing. And I have to imagine given how good of a sponsor you were to me, that either someone has been that to you or that there was an absent of that in your own come up. So first I want to know which it was, and then I want you to tell me about a time when either the presence or the absence of that mentor or sponsor made a difference in the trajectory of your career.

Gonzales: Absolutely. I have to say thank you by the way for sharing that. There was a Latina who I met many years ago. She was the one who first gave me an opportunity in Washington DC and I was in San Diego and I was graduating from the business school there. And she said, well, I'll give you a job if you want to come to DC. And I was like, okay. And you know one thing I remembered the most, I don't know, it just sticks with me. I remember one time I showed up at the office and I had a dress. And you know what, I'm from California. I don't wear boots so much. It's just, it gets cold, but not that cold. But I remember I got these like, what I thought were these styling off-white boots with heels, and then I had this, I don't even remember this type of dress.

And she made it very clear upon entry, yeah, we don't do that, that we don't do in DC. And I was like, okay. Duly noted. Never wore boots like that with a dress ever again. But to your point though, I think that's it. It's those of us who are at a different place in our career, it's upon us to look for that talent, to look for the diamond in the rough, and to have the courage to reach out. In this case for me to believe in you enough to be like, I think you can do this. Why can you not do this?

Menendez: A lot of us use artificial intelligence in our day-to-day life, encounter artificial intelligence in our day-to-day lives and are not even totally aware that that is what it is. What is your favorite example of the way in which most people interact with AI?

Gonzales: Logging in in the morning. Do you use your face to log in, facial recognition, get online, do you do shopping and when it says you might like this, well, guess what's figuring that out? The artificial intelligence behind what we're seeing. I look it as when we walk into a bakery, for example, and we see all of our favorite pastries, but that's all we see is the end result and there's so much that goes on behind it, and there were recipes that were required to make those pastries. Well, in this case, what we're seeing is the bakery, right? The recipes behind everything we're seeing online are the algorithms. The algorithms are actually instructions telling the computer essentially what to do.

Menendez: So let's talk about the opportunity and then the opportunity cost if Latinas are not included in AI, in the building of AI and the economic opportunity of AI. First, what is the opportunity for us? What is out there that we need to be thinking about?

Gonzales: Let me back up. The reason I pursued artificial intelligence after I left Facebook is because I was working on it there, and at the time I was working with the accessibility team, which at the time was one person and we were working on some policy issues, and I was like, this is so cool. This technology called AI allows the blind community to access this platform. And so that just planted something in my mind and I thought, well, if this could do

this for the blind community, can you imagine what it could do for all of our communities, marginalized communities, women, people of color.

Let's say you're a small business owner and you're managing your business from your phone. Well, chances are, highly likely there's a new AI tool that is going to help you be much more effective and efficient in marketing, for example. But our communities are not going to pursue these types of technologies if we don't have a fundamental understanding of what they are. That's why I decide to pursue AI is because I feel that if we don't have some level of comfort of knowledge of these technologies, then we're not going to adopt them. We're not going to adopt the new tools that could help our businesses, for example.

Menendez: So for us as Latinas, especially our audience, which is educated, awkwardly mobile, what is the thing we need to be doing, advocating for, educating ourselves on when it comes to AI?

Gonzales: Our own online safety to begin. Let's have a conversation about cookies, and I don't mean the yummy kind. I mean the kind that pop up when it's annoying, right, when you get online. Well, my suggestion is, is take the time to click on that teeny tiny little option that says manage my cookies. There will always be one that stays on that says strictly required. Okay, I get that. You need that for your website, but the others, you just unclick. I do that every single time I get on a new website because I feel it gives me power over what is accessed about me. I mean, AI is creating opportunities for companies and organizations to really learn a lot about us, and that's a great thing for example, when it comes to cardiovascular disease or healthcare. Someone just told me, yeah, I just went and got a mammogram and it's all AI now. I'm like, super. That's great. So those are the good things. My position is, is what I fundamentally, I started aiandyou.org to close this gap of understanding what AI is and how it impacts everyday lives. It's not coming later. It's here.

Menendez: When I was writing my book, *The Likeability Trap*, one of the ways that I made myself feel better about the possibility of robots taking my job in the future was to talk about emotional intelligence and how that is a uniquely human trait. So let's talk about the most human part of your story. You are a breast cancer survivor. What do you want us to know about that experience?

Gonzales: Well, it's five years ago that I was diagnosed and went through treatment and mammograms, they save lives. In my case, I was using bioidentical hormones, and even though I heard that message of like, oh, it could lead to cancer, I'm like, I don't care. Give this to me because I'm crying all the way to work. I'm crying all the way home. And then meanwhile, my mom had breast cancer. My sister did, two of my aunts did, but still wasn't making a connection in my head because honestly, my arrogance, well, I eat organic and I'm really active, so I'm probably not going to get it. My sister probably took the hit for this generation. Well, two years later, I got it. The day I started radiation treatment, my mom had a stroke and she was in her late 80s, and she was up here under my care nearby in an assisted living.

And so I was in radiation treatment. My mom was in the hospital. I would go to the hospital and then I'd go to the treatment next door, and then I'd come back to. It was crazy because I would go and then I would go to see my mom in rehab, and then she would move to the chair, and I would get in her hospital bed because I was tired from radiation. I think more than anything, just this arrogance that I had beforehand. It's like, well, my sister, she's not as healthy as I am. I'm not going to get it. Well, yeah, there we go.

Menendez: It's not an easy thing to say. I was arrogant. I was living arrogantly. I thought that I was somehow different, special, protected, blessed in some way. How then does that manifest in your life now, now that you know get no special dispensation?

Gonzales: Well, there's been a lot of life happening in the last five years. I quit Facebook because I just had it. I was over it. I was over it. I was over the commute, but I was over a lot of other things. And at the time, I didn't realize how much of it came from my own experience as an employee. And by the way, I was choked and silence. I never said anything. So when my performance reviews would come up and it would be like, well, Susan, people are saying, that your emails are too short or they're too curt, or they're this, or you're too abrupt or then I would turn on the charm, and then six months later, okay, it's all good. Then I back up, negative feedback and on, and it was, oh God, I just dreaded those reviews. And then soon after I left Facebook, I got diagnosed with cancer. So then took that road, and then I ended a long-term relationship and I thought, you know what? I have a lot of fun with you, but you have a bad temper and you don't like to work. I'm out. And then my dad started to decline and he passed away, and then my mom started to decline. She passed away, and then it was COVID, and here we are. So I have to say everything looks very, very different post losing my parents, post cancer. Yeah. Well, I told a friend recently, I said, there's two words I will never say the rest of my life, and those are my boss.

Menendez: Until the robot comes and then you have a boss.

Gonzales: Yeah.

Menendez: Susan, you were the first adult woman I met who was very clear about the fact that you did not want children and you had never wanted children. And I remember, I don't know, I was fascinated by you because you weren't ambivalent, you were crystal clear, and you stood in that truth. I imagine that you didn't start there, that you started from the place that there's all the social pressure to have kids and do the mom thing. What did it require of you to go from, also tell me if I'm wrong, but to go from there to I don't want kids, I don't want kids. I love being a tia, period, end of story.

Gonzales: Yeah. Well, I have the beauty of having a sister who's 10 years older and a brother who's six years older. So I have been very, very involved with her three and my brothers two, and I think a part of it, I got a little scared straight. And then meanwhile, my whole DC career happened, which I didn't plan on, and I ended up there almost 10 years. But I knew I didn't want to live on the East Coast, and so I would date people there, but then that wouldn't stay because I knew I really wasn't going to live on the East Coast, and I was really into outdoor fitness.

So I got certified to be an outdoor trainer. I called it First Steps Fitness. I focused on pre and postnatal moms. At one point I had all these moms and their strollers with their babies, and I had this really, in Golden Gate Park. I remember it like yesterday, and it was like this spiritual experience. All of a sudden it was like whoosh came over me and I was like, nope, I don't want this. I think I had children in another life because I'm everybody's, I'm Nina, I'm the Malina. Like my name to my nine nieces and nephews is Nina. That's all they know me as. I'm the aunt we would all want actually, and it's been great. And I have never looked back, not once.

Menendez: Did your Mexican mom feel satiated by the grandchildren she already had, or was there sadness on her part that you weren't going to be a mother?

Gonzales: No, sadness. You know what was interesting, my mom, when she was young, I think I guess like 19 or 20, still in Texas, she had perfect Spanish and perfect English. And

apparently, or she tells that one of her teachers said, you would make a great interpreter, and in fact, I have an opportunity for you in Washington DC and my grandmother wouldn't let her go. And so in some respects, my mom would say, I wish I only had the opportunities you have. So maybe in some way I was living the life that she was not allowed to live.

Menendez: I think an unspoken reality of being the sister specifically who does not have children, is that you often become the defacto caretaker for your aging parents. I mean, you did end up becoming a caretaker even if it wasn't the caretaker of a child. What did you learn? What did you wish you knew at the outset of beginning to care for your parents?

Gonzales: Well, I could see how caring for elderly parents can break up a family and losing them because it's so stressful. And one thing that my siblings and I made it very clear with each other is like, we're going through this together. But I would have to say nothing, absolutely nothing could ever measure up against walking through my parents through their final journey, through their final hours. And it's something I prayed for, for years, for like 10 years because they were 94 and 95. I would be in Europe. Wherever there was cathedral, I would be there and I would pray, please let me be with them. Please let me be with them. And I was. Those experiences, those are life changers, that's for sure.

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

Gonzales: Thank you, my love. Thank you you.

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](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com). Slide into our DMs on Instagram, or tweet us @Latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise at [latinatolatina.com/shop](http://latinatolatina.com/shop). And remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcast, Google podcast, 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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