



Bio: Johanna Calle is the Senior Policy Advisor at the Office of New Americans (ONA) at the New Jersey Department of Human Services. In this role, Ms. Calle works on identifying, developing, and executing policies and strategies to advance efforts to welcome and empower immigrant communities in the state. Prior to joining the Department, Johanna served as the Director at the New Jersey Alliance for Immigrant Justice (NJAIJ). She played a key role in the passing of the legislation to expand access to Driver's Licenses to all and in the implementation of Attorney General Grewal's Immigrant Trust Directive. Johanna's professional experience also includes working the National American Civil Liberties Union and participating in the ACLU of Northern California's MiACLU campaign, visiting various affiliates fighting for immigrants' rights. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Political Science from The College of New Jersey and a Master of Criminal Justice from Rutgers University.

An Interview with Johanna Calle

Conducted by IWL Leadership Scholars Geidy Mendez and Prosie Palad, Class of 2019

Geidy Mendez & Prosie Palad: Where were you born and raised, and what was it like growing up? Do you remember any historical moments or really big changes that impacted you? Did you have an important or influential person in your life, such as a mentor or someone who's sponsored you in your life?

Johanna Calle: I was born in Ecuador and I came here when I was in the fifth grade. I was raised in Hackensack, New Jersey and that's where most of my childhood was spent. I came from Ecuador when I was a bit older, so I remember a little bit of there and a little bit of here. It was tough to transition here, coming to a country that you don't know and being with people who speak a language that you don't know. I remember not wearing the right clothes, not really fitting in or plugging into the school system the way that I would've expected to, because it was totally different. Before I came here, I spent a little over a year without my parents because my parents came first, so it was just me, my brothers and my grandmother for a bit. That was tough, adjusting

to having your parents away and having to go to a new school, because we ended up having to move to a different city before my parents left and I had to move in with my grandmother. It was a lot of transition in a short period of time for young children, and I think a lot of immigrant children have that experience of having to move around a lot, living with extended family, and spending some time without their parents, which is what happened with me, so it was a lot of adjusting. Even adjusting back to living with your siblings and parents when you finally reunite can also be an adjustment. I remember having a really hard time suddenly living with my parents again after having to live without them for a little over a year.

The Millennial and Gen Z generations have lived through multiple economic downturns and our life time has been filled with a lot. I think the first huge moment was 9/11, I was in high school at the time and I live in Bergen County, we are 15 minutes away from New York City. We could literally see the smoke from the skyline. A lot of my classmates had parents who worked in the city at the time, so that to me was one of the first pivotal historical moments that I can remember. I remember the economic crash, I was in college and my parents actually lost their home when the housing market crashed, they lost it to foreclosure. My dad was flipping houses, doing construction work and had properties that he was working on, and everything fell apart because of the housing market. As much as we were too young to realize it, I was very aware of the fact that housing market had crashed because my family was directly impacted. Then the election of the first Black president, I was full on very politically active in college, I wasn't a citizen yet but I felt like I had to be a part of it, and so I jumped in and I was doing voter registration and debate watching parties. I remember walking through my dorm room handing out papers and pamphlets about this guy, Barack Obama who I thought was amazing. Then he got elected, it was such a really amazing experience, I think that really changed how I saw civic engagement. It was my first experience really supporting a candidate as a young person and also paying attention to elections, I have probably watched everyday debate since and paid attention to every primary election since, it was life changing.

I've had a few really pivotal people in my life. When I was in elementary or high school a lot of my teachers were like that, they had a huge impact on me. My ESL teacher who was my first teacher that I had when I got here, was life changing. She took me under her wing and taught me how to speak English and taught me how to navigate this world that we live in. You get here and you're scared and you don't know what to do and you need someone who helps you figure it out. She was wonderful, I still talk to her to this day, she's amazing. A couple educators in high school as well were really influential and really helpful. There are folks that your mentors and there are folks who you may not have talked with as a mentor, but at the same time they had a huge impact on your life because of who they were. My swimming coach to this day I think about him because, it wasn't that we had this mentor relationship, but he was just a tough guy, he held really high standards and he expected you to do good all the time. I think as tough as that was, it teaches you some resiliency and teaches you to keep going, which I think is really great. I think we all have

mentors along the way at every stage of our lives. One of my dear friends was actually one of my bosses out of college. To this day she's fierce, strong woman who believes in empowering other women and that makes a really huge difference. I've met some really strong women along the way who also believe in that, and also support each other and make sure that we are there for each other. Those are some of the people that I think of.

GM & PP: How has your identity impacted your career choices? How has it been being a woman activist in your field, do you see any gender issues or disparities in the area of immigration?

JC: I would have not have gotten into advocacy if it weren't for my experience of being undocumented. When I was a high school student, the Dream Act had still not been approved and I did not think I would go to college. The Dream Act didn't pass back in 2004 and it was introduced in 2001, so it had been an ongoing fight and I knew that I was going to be an advocate. I took a job at the ACLU, because it was the ACLU. The job was fundraising, which I wasn't excited about. But I was excited about being in the same building as the ACLU and working with them. While I was there, I had the opportunity to do immigration advocacy through "MiACLU." It was a tour from California, down the western border and southern border, like the freedom riders. We stopped by every state to talk to people about immigrant rights, and that really sparked more interest in immigrant issues. By then I already had my green card, so I was no longer undocumented, but I saw how vile, difficult and tough things were. In fact, that was in 2010-2011, it was the time of SB1070, where you had to show your papers to the police. People were literally being terrorized by the police while walking down the street, it was horrible. In my personal experience, I was no longer undocumented and I had my green card, but I saw so many families freaking out and being terrorized in states such as Texas and Alabama. At the ACLU I was doing mostly fundraising, but I had solidified that I needed to do hands on advocacy and impact the people on the ground. That's why I went into teaching, because I was an undocumented student, I was a bilingual student and I wanted to have the opportunity to help other kids who are in the same situation I was in. I taught bilingual ESL and I really appreciated it, as my students were just like me, they were immigrants, their parents were immigrants, and they were learning the language. Then I felt like I was on the ground with the people, but it was still hard to create structural change in the lives of people through a classroom and teaching. I was having a hard time with all of these political constraints around me while teaching and not being able to talk to the kids and their families freely. Teaching became a difficult career and field to be in, and that's when I made the decision to work at the alliance. They were just building the organization and they needed someone to come in and help, so I applied. There was a 50/50 chance that I would be teaching the next year, but I got the position before the next school year started. That's basically my trajectory in my personal experience. Every time I see parents and children freak out about something, I can't help but see myself in them and my family in those families. Even though I'm no longer personally impacted, it is a part of why I do what I do.

I've been very fortunate that in a lot of the social justice spaces and immigrants' rights work, it was a majority of women. I remember actually being really frustrated sometimes, because whenever there was a big win or something in the press that was really big, often you'd have a lot of voices, it's usually whoever gets in front of the microphone or camera to talk to the press about it. I remember thinking it was really frustrating when you feel like it doesn't quite reflect the reality. Most of the people that I worked with, most of the people that were in the trenches and in the battles that we fought on a lot of immigrants' rights issues, were women. The press doesn't reflect that, but that's what it was, and I remember feeling really interested in lifting up the voices of the women who were in the trenches because legislators and elected officials and people in power often just remember the one or two faces that they've interacted with maybe once, and they are not in the war room of activism where you are planning all these strategies and trying to figure out what to do next, and I was surrounded by women in those times. Because I was surrounded by women, we weren't dealing with the gender issues that you would've imagined. When I speak with other colleagues and friends of mine who are women who work in majority male spaces, I have a totally difference experience, because I don't have to deal with sexist comments, it's just not a part of my life in the work space. However, I think that male privilege is still very prevalent, even in the broader, larger national landscape of activism. I think about Black Lives Matter and how it was created by women, yet how many times do you see a man credited as the creator? No, it was three women, let's not forget that, and I think that's the case in a lot of these activist fights, women get erased and forgotten. Even the best well-meaning men and even in activist circles, people forget their privilege. That is unfortunately something that still exists.

GM & PP: What are some of the differences with working in immigration now versus two years ago, where Trump's presidency wasn't a big issue? Do you think there's more of demand for immigration rights or do you think it's more out there, more advertised and more focused on them?

JC: I like to tell folks that the immigration law has not changed. I think everyone feels like it has because of the implementation and what's happening with the federal government, but the laws to deport and terrorize people has always been in the books, but they are being enforced and interpreted to negatively impact immigrants and refugees, marginalized communities. Jay walking has always been illegal, but not every cop is giving out tickets for jaywalking. Is being an undocumented person in the United States a civil offense that could get you deported? Yes. Were they deporting everyone in the streets? No, and that has changed now. In a way, the law is still the same, but what has changed is that the people in charge of the federal government have decided that there is no middle ground, you are either here legally or not, and if not, then you have to go. And they are doing so in a way to treat certain communities unfairly. For instance, TPS has been allowed to be applied for in the past 20 years and everyone knew from day one that it was temporary, but they are now taking it away. It wasn't a status to be permanent and the federal

government is saying that it's temporary, which means we can take it away whenever we want, which is what they are doing. So that's where I think immigration and ICE has always been a really broken nasty federal agency, that has never stood by constitutional rights. The difference is now; they have been given the discretion to do whatever they want. I remember a case of a kid in Seattle, who's dad was picked up by ICE and he was picked up too. He was 19 or 21, he didn't know why he was detained and they had him sign a paper to confirm that he wasn't a gang member. Surely after, when they submitted the paperwork to deport him, the report had been changed and it said that he was a gang member and that he had admitted to being a gang member. I asked one of the attorneys we were working with and they said they had a client that this happened to three years ago. The attorney said that ICE had changed testimonies and people's documents before, that's not new, it has just gotten worse.

GM & PP: What are other obstacles at NJ Alliance or other organizations where you've held a leadership position?

JC: I think every career position is going to have its limitations. When I was at the ACLU, it was difficult because I was in no way affecting advocacy. I was fundraising, which meant that every piece of money I supported in raising was helping to pay lawyers, advocates and further the fights. I left fundraising thinking I would never want to do it again and then I got the job at the Alliance. The job is to keep this organization afloat and part of that includes fundraising. I feel like one of the limitations is adjustments, because sometimes when we are students and young professionals, we have this mantic view of what our career is going to look like. One of the lessons I've learned is that every single one of those positions has taught me something to bring me where I am today. At the time I felt that I was just fundraising and it wasn't fun or important to me. But because of the time I spent working in fundraising at the ACLU, I am now in a better position because of it. I've had horrible bosses before that, after college I worked at a hospital where I did background checks for doctors. I moved up quickly because I was young and I knew the technology, but I hated the job and my boss was rough, mean and difficult. Years later, I think about her because I learned how to be a boss and how to have tough skin during challenges that were part of the job. People can be difficult to work with; I've learned this especially now that I manage someone. I tell her that you have to learn how to be a chameleon, because with politicians, you have to put your lobbyist hat on and you have to look, sound and be the part. Sometimes you are with the community and that's a different conversation. I like to use the term currency. I have two dogs and when they were in dog training, the instructor said to find the currency, find the thing that they want so they will do anything for it. I think it's the same thing for people, so in every challenge I've had, I think about that person's currency, what is their motivation? Is it professional or personal connection? It is a transactional relationship. Personally I've always found it hard to check yourself, as a woman, undocumented, and as someone who is Latina. With bicultural experiences, I think many of us have a difficult time navigating this world while being members of multiple worlds. I have to tell myself that I am not part of the impacted immigrant community despite myself being one. I

can't say what it feels to have a president such as Trump as an undocumented person because I'm not anymore. It's also hard because as someone that runs a statewide organization, it makes me the man and part of an established organization, where sometimes you become so structured and lose sight of the actual ground and are disconnected. I also have to check myself so I don't lose sight of those privileges, check your privilege and check yourself so that you work through your personal biases and feelings. No matter how I feel about it, I'm not the one that is going to be deported tomorrow. That is going to change how I impact the policies and work I do. In some ways, I am in a position of safety and I always have to check myself about safety.

GM & PP: How do you implement that concept of checking yourself because it's not very common to check yourself within a social justice space. How do you propose an idea of checking oneself in their activism?

JC: I had an interesting experience with TFA (Teach for America), I have some reservations on their approach to addressing education disparities, one of the things they did really well was the idea of pushing people to check themselves, mostly because the TFA-ers are mostly upper middle class white people that go into Black/brown neighborhoods. There were a lot of conversations about checking yourself and being mindful because of that. Working in that environment, I had to check myself. The students lived in Newark, where shootings would happen around their homes, while I got to go back to my nice house in Bergen county and where I had no concerns. Having to learn that as a teacher, of low-income kids from Newark - I immediately realized that because we were both brown and Latino, and because of my own experience, it does not mean that I understood their struggle. I really carry that into my own non-profit social justice work. No one gets to walk around, and act like they do not have biases or privilege. We all do. That is how I check myself. I get frustrated when people in social justice don't check themselves. We tell white middle class people to check themselves all the time, we tell privileged people to check themselves, and then we carry a chip on our shoulder like we know everything, and that is not at all the case. That is how we end up hurting our own communities, because we have this savior complex. This savior complex does not only affect or impact white people, it is something we all have to be mindful of. We all have blinders on, we just have to be aware of it.

GM & PP: Moving forward in your career path and personal life, what do you hope to accomplish in the next five years? Is there something more you want, in terms of your dreams for yourself, or for your organization, that you haven't achieved already? What is important for us to know about your new role?

JC: For advocacy in terms of immigration, we can't look past three to six months. We are living in a world where we are way too unsure for me to think about where we are going to be in five years with immigration specifically. Hopefully, if the election goes well, and all this happens in the next 6 months, maybe we will see progress on the policy side. I know you're talking

professionally, but a lot of this stuff impacts my profession. If we get a governor that in the next three to five years gives us driver licenses, and sanctuary state, that will change my personal career because my personal goal as a professional, is to get those things to happen. If those things don't happen, we turn to fighting negative policies, because for the past 8 years we had to be on the defensive, constantly trying to protect the very little we had. If that is what happens in the next three to five years in my career, that could change what I do as a professional.

I still can't think past three to six months. I have a really hard time thinking about my big dreams right now. I have hope that the community I love so much stops feeling attacked and that we can figure out a way to create permanent policy solutions that impact the lives of millions of people. This is still very much the thing that moves me and that is with me all the time. This is what I wish to see and I wish we could see that, that's my dream, to achieve some sort of fix of this immigration system because it's not just laws or policies, its people who are being impacted by this. Our communities are the most impacted in basically every single way, COVID has lifted up every kind of inequality that exists in this country. So that's my hope, my wish, my dream, I don't really think of them as career or professional dreams, I go where I think I can create the most impact.

I am now the Senior Policy Advisor with the Office of New Americans in the Department of Human Services here in the state of New Jersey. My role is new in that the Office of New Americans was established by an executive order signed by governor Murphy last year. I was hired to identify, develop, and execute policies and strategies to advance efforts to welcome and empower immigrant communities in the state. Many states across the country have similar agencies and there are a lot of policies and initiatives within the government that could really be put in place to make sure that immigrants can navigate a life here. Having been someone who came to this country, I understand how difficult it is to not even know how navigate this world around you, what resources are available to you and that's really what the ONA would do and that is truly what my role is here now. It's a bit different because it means that I am not doing immigrant's rights activism in the way that I was doing it before. It's definitely the other side of the coin, I think that change in the world happens through government action and public action, and action of people and the way the government is structured and the policies in place. Policy, law and regulation impact everyone every single day, because of that it's a really great opportunity to impact and shape how our state treats immigrant and refugee communities and make sure that we're doing the right thing and get the resources that are available to them. Immigrant's rights activism is still very much in my veins because it has been part of my life all of my life, having been undocumented, still having family that is undocumented, having family that is impacted by this, will always impact my life. I feel like I'm still part of the fight in my personal role and then also supporting the movement for our community in my professional role.

GM & PP: Can you offer one piece of advice for us, for students who haven't yet explored career force and are moving towards that?

JC: Something that I tell young professionals and young mentees is that don't get hung up on that position that you think you want for the rest of your life. I think that unfortunately, we talk to students at the high school and college level and act as if you're going to graduate high school and college for this one job, and do that for the rest of your life. And that is so not the truth. Ask anyone, the majority of professionals go through ten to fifteen different careers in their lifetime. I think a lot of kids and students graduate college and freak out because they haven't gotten a job in the field that thought they wanted to be in. They have this idea that they're going to get their degree and their career is going to start off with that. I remember being that student. When I was working at the hospital, I hated it. Part of me thought, "I went through all that schooling to work at this hospital doing something that has nothing to do with my career." And yet, that job, single handedly, gave me all the administrative skills that I needed to get a job at the ACLU. A lot of folks get frustrated with that. The career path is not a ladder; it is a jig saw puzzle. It's going to feel really confusing, and you're going to feel like you're losing out and sucking at life, and it's not what you want to do, and you're not meeting your goals, and your family isn't going to be proud, and you're failing at a career. Many first time college students feel that they have to prove to their family that the worth of spending money and time in college was worth it. And everyone, even parents have this idea that you're going to go to school, you're going to become a lawyer, and now you'll be in this really successful profession for the rest of your life. It's really hard for you to work through being uncomfortable with that and the pressure that comes from the people around you, for you to say that, "I trust the process, I trust the system. I'm not going to get my dream job when I'm 22." And that's okay. It's just going to take time to get that career experience, and get any position you can take and learn from it, because that's going to help you get to where you want to be. I went through it. With first time college students and immigrants, you don't have people around you who know what you're going through, because they don't know. Very established people, with families who come from generations of college careers, sometimes have networks that you don't have. With that point, it's not something that you can compare yourself to. All you can do is try to learn from it. Trust it. It sucks but trust the process.

GM & PP: Thank you so much again. We'll keep in touch in the future. Have a good night.