



Episode 9: Making Space for Queer Identity Through Art

Art has always been an important way for 20 year-old Kaelah Serrano to explore and express her queer identity. Born and raised on Chicago's southwest side, Kaelah found an artistic home in Yollocalli Arts Reach, a nonprofit based in Little Village that provides arts, media, and storytelling education for young people—many of them Latinx—in Chicago. Yollocalli is an example of a crucial “third space”: a place separate from home and school where young people can socialize and learn. In this episode, reporter Grace Del Vecchio follows Kaelah's journey of self-discovery and explores how schools can better serve their Latinx LGBTQ+ students.

Grace Del Vecchio: By 2050 Latinas will make up a quarter of all women in the US. They're gaining an education, participating in the labor market, accumulating wealth, and embracing entrepreneurship. The future of the United States is irrevocably tied to the health and wellbeing of Latinas. This is 100 Latina Birthdays, an open source podcast from LWC Studios about the health, wellness and lifetime outcomes of Latinas in the US. Our narrative investigation and celebration of Latina health and wellbeing was reported in the greater Chicago area, but our findings have national implications. In this first season, we will chronicle the lives of Latina women and girls in the first two decades, from birth to age 20.

I'm Grace Del Vecchio, a reporter and fact-checker in Chicago. Since moving to Chicago from Philadelphia in 2018, I've had the opportunity to tell stories that center community voices with focuses on health, housing, policing, movements and identity. This story examines some of these themes through the lens of Kaelah Serrano.

Voices: Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Kaelah and Nicole, happy birthday to you!

Grace Del Vecchio: Queer Latina artist Kaelah Serrano has officially exited her teen years.

[in tape] What are you hoping that your twenties represent, and then what does the transition from your teens to your twenties symbolize for you?

Kaelah Serrano: Definitely growth and healing. I feel like there was a lot of things that I had to learn in my teen years, whether it was good experiences and bad. I feel like there was a lot of me growing as a person and healing and learning things. There was a lot of things that I struggled with, but I feel like now looking back, everything was a part of me and the person that I am now, and I do feel like I changed as a person from when I was first being a teenager to now, whether that be creatively in my career, in what I want to do as a student, as a friend, as a

family member, as a sister, I feel like, or just my place and how I view myself. I feel like there was a lot I had to learn.

Grace Del Vecchio: Kaelah is a true child of the internet age. Born in 2003, she was a high school junior when the COVID-19 pandemic started. That meant Kaelah's experience transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood was [more isolated and online](#) than previous generations. Studies show that signs of anxiety and depression in young people ages 12 to 25 [spiked during the first two years of the pandemic](#). While those rates are slowing, as of April 2023, [one in five adults](#) is living with mental illness and [one in five youth](#) ages 13 to 18 will experience debilitating mental illness in their lifetime. Kaelah was among the approximately 4 million teens who came of age in 2021. According to the Census Bureau data, [every 30 seconds, a Latino in the US turns 18](#). During the pandemic, these young people had to find community and navigate ways to grow and develop—virtually.

As one teen [was quoted](#) saying in a submission to the New York Times, “coming of age in 2021 is like realizing the world is going up in flames and you have to be the one to locate the fire extinguisher”. Despite these new and unexpected circumstances, Kaelah emerged from pandemic induced isolation, which was both physical and emotional, a more radiant version of herself than when she entered it. Born and raised on Chicago's Southwest side, she's the eldest of three sisters and the granddaughter of Mexican and Puerto Rican immigrants. Chicago's Southwest side is home to some of the city's [most predominantly Latino neighborhoods](#), including communities like Little Village, Pilsen, Back of the Yards, and Chicago Lawn.

The neighborhoods are known for their local street vendors and brightly colored murals and public art, and it was through artistic expression Kaelah found a safe space to explore multiple intersections of her identity. It was in art class in third or fourth grade that Kaelah first began to reflect on her identity as a Latina. For art projects, she thought about her Mexican and Puerto Rican grandparents, and also about the music her parents played. Her mom's favorite Selena tracks and Banda ballads, her dad's house records. In middle school, she took her first photo on her cousin's hand-me-down Samsung Galaxy for her school's photography club. This medium would come to play a big role in her young adult life. Kaelah wasn't allowed to use social media in middle school, but she did find herself using PicCollage.

Kaelah Serrano: And it was like an alternative social media and since I wasn't allowed to use social media, I would just use that. I remember I used to make friends on there. Maybe that was dangerous, but anyways, I used to make friends on there.

Grace Del Vecchio: The app allows users to cobble together various photos while applying copious amounts of filters and themed stickers. It was in some way a form of social media because users could post their edits publicly and interact with one another. The app ended up providing Kaelah with more than tools to edit her photos. It was her introduction to queer community.

Kaelah Serrano: That's when I realized some of my friends would post stuff, I guess gay content or those little "repost if you support gay marriage", stuff like that. And I remember I brought it up to my mom one time and my mom was like, "Well, that's wrong." And I remember being so shocked because I'm like, "okay, but they teach us in church that you should support all people and you should love all people?" I remember telling her that, and that's me at a young age! And she was telling me, "yeah, but not everything needs to be supported" because she goes back to the whole Bible nonsense thing. I don't want to say nonsense, but that's what she believes. So I remember that was really eye opening for me because I guess that's when I realized, "oh, this is a thing in other people's lives".

Grace Del Vecchio: At the time, Kaelah considered herself a queer ally, but she was continuously questioning herself whenever she showed signs of being queer.

Kaelah Serrano: I used to gaslight myself and I used to be like, "I just think women are so beautiful." That's it.

Grace Del Vecchio: Later, still in middle school, a nearly 14 year old Kaelah finally allowed herself to entertain the idea that maybe, just maybe, she was queer. And in high school, in her International Baccalaureate art classes, she embraced photography to explore her queerness through art. School was the first space where Kaelah was able to use art as a means of expression and exploration. It was also the first space where she found queer Latinx community with other young people who were asking the same questions as her. School is an important place for any young person, but as the number of young Latinx people who identify as queer and trans increases, so does the heightened need for a critical space like school to be a supportive environment for them.

In 2021, UnidosUS, previously known as National Council of La Raza, and the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization, [published a study on Latinx LGBTQ+ students' experiences](#). Their survey found that over one in five Latinx millennials identify as LGBTQ+. That's people ages 25 to 40 years old. Latinx members of Gen Z, Kaelah's generation, are identifying as LGBTQ+ [at even higher rates](#).

[Lorena Garcia](#) is a leading expert in the intersection of Latinx identity and sexuality and the development of these identities in young people.

Lorena Garcia: I am the daughter of Mexican immigrants, but I was born and raised in Chicago. I grew up in the West Town neighborhood. I'm an associate professor of sociology and Latin American and Latinx studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Grace Del Vecchio: While she was getting her bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Lorena began noticing how few studies centered the experiences of Latina youth. After graduating, she got a job as a case manager at a health center in her neighborhood, West Town, working with mostly black and Latinx youth. That's when she saw how young women's needs and wants when

it came to their sexual health were not being met. She decided to pursue a doctorate in sociology and feminist studies.

Lorena Garcia: My areas of expertise are specifically looking at the intersections of gender and sexuality, looking at Latina youth, and also right now studying social mobility.

Grace Del Vecchio: She compiled her research and insights into an award-winning book, [Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself: Latina Girls and Sexual Identity](#). In it, she argues for a more asset-based focus on Latinx youth sexual health and education.

Lorena Garcia: I was always troubled by the risk approach that people have about especially youth of color.

Grace Del Vecchio: Lorena says the risk mindset perpetuates a culture of danger around sex and sexuality. Teen birth rates are one common way to measure sexual activity and safety among youth. Teen pregnancy in the US is [on the decline](#), but that decline is [slowest among Latina teens](#). Latinas still have the highest rate of teen pregnancy out of any racial or ethnic group. [About half of Latinas](#) will have at least one pregnancy by age 20. This, of course, affects their lifetime prospects. Teen moms are [less likely](#) to graduate from high school than teens who aren't parents, and that impacts their future earning potential.

Already, [nearly half](#) of Latina mothers have less than 12 years of education, compared to the national average – 22% of moms. Teen parents are also more prone to [lower self-esteem and depression](#). However, [a literature review at Fordham University](#) found that common approaches to teen pregnancy do not address the very real sexual desires of Latina teens, and often ignore the experiences of LGBTQ+ Latinx teens. This marginalization ultimately does not help with teen pregnancy rates. Lorena argues that focusing on the risks isn't a framework that helps young people safely express their sexuality. It instead creates a fear of their own sexual curiosities and desires.

Lorena Garcia: I really wanted to focus the question on thinking about the questions that we're asking about their lives, and so that probably also meant, for me, it felt like we needed to be willing to ask questions that adults sometimes are not comfortable about the experiences of young people. They don't want to hear that they're sexual beings and they have these emerging sexualities and gender identities that they're exploring.

Grace Del Vecchio: Lorena says the risk mindset leads young people to police themselves and each other. It stifles opportunity for open dialogue and education around what sexuality can look like. Educators and healthcare professionals [agree](#) that conversations are the best way to educate young people and mitigate the risks of sexual activity, like pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. And [the sex talk](#) can and should include talking about relationships, sexuality, consent, and intimacy. To Lorena, sex ed is an opportunity to facilitate these conversations.

- Lorena Garcia: To me, it's about the ways we don't use that space in the classroom where young people are learning all kinds of material to also facilitate ways for them to think of themselves and allow themselves to think about their sexuality in these expansive ways and to think about their desires.
- Grace Del Vecchio: In high school, Kaelah tried to shrug off the opinions of others. She didn't feel a need to come out to anyone. "Why should she", she thought. No one was placing the expectation on her straight peers.
- Kaelah Serrano: You don't have to prove anything to other people. Your business is your business. It's my journey. Nobody else's. I can't focus on what everybody else is going to think.
- Grace Del Vecchio: But Kaelah struggled to maintain this mindset when it came to her family. She found herself trying to fit into a cisgender, heterosexual mold because it felt safer and more comfortable in that context. So she felt she was policing herself for the sake of her family.
- Kaelah Serrano: So for example, the people I even dated or had something with, a lot of times I would feel more safer or I don't want to say safer, but at that time, yes, I would steer more to relationships or connections with guys instead because in my head I always looked at it like of this possibility, okay, what if things I actually do end up long-term or something? How am I supposed to explain it to my parents or how am I supposed to explain it to other people? I mean, I'm still young too. So that was something that I didn't realize I was doing that up until, I think, about this past year. I really started to notice it because I'm like, okay, why am I still censoring myself? I am already happy with who I am. I know this about myself. Why am I still censoring myself and steering away from possibilities or things that would make me happy?
- Grace Del Vecchio: For young people raised in religion like Kaelah, this part of their upbringing usually plays a role in their relationship to sexuality. Of the Latina teens that Lorena spoke to for her book who were raised religious, specifically Catholic or Christian, many grappled with the aspects of their upbringings that didn't quite fit in with their own personal beliefs. They felt there were misalignments regarding the rules around sexuality.
- Lorena Garcia: It was important, it was a meaningful part of their lives, but yet they still saw the contradictions in some of the lessons.
- Grace Del Vecchio: But Lorena says they actually are often able to square their meaningful relationship with religion, with their beliefs about sexuality. They find ways to create balance between what they were raised to believe and what they have come to know to be true for themselves. For the teens Lorena features in her book, the religion they were raised with was often still important to them, but they didn't feel the pressure to abide by its rules and regulations.

- Lorena Garcia: I think that religion is there, but I think we don't give Latinas enough credit for their critical thinking on these contradictions.
- Grace Del Vecchio: About [two out of every five](#) US Latinos identify as Catholic and one in five as Protestant. For Kaelah, her religious upbringing was a source of confusion growing up. Raised non-denominational Christian and also Catholic, she was taught that the Bible says to love everyone regardless of who they are or what they do, but to her, this principle was very rarely practiced. Instead, she witnessed judgment towards those who didn't follow the Christian teachings exactly. Kaelah didn't want to disappoint her parents and grandparents by questioning the religion they raised her with, but there were always things she didn't agree with. In particular, the Christian teachings that romantic relationships should be strictly between a man and a woman. The times she was bold enough to question it, she was often shut down.
- Kaelah Serrano: Even when I was in church, they would always talk about abstinence like okay, all the time when we would have these little youth panels or whatever or we would have to put any question we had in a cup and then they would read it out loud and then answer the questions. I put something like, why is homosexuality a sin? And they read it out loud and then everybody's like, "Who put this one?" And I raised my hand just like that. I know. What was the point of putting it in a cup? Come on. Then they're like, "Well, it says this and this in the Bible and that it's not right." And then there was this girl who literally told me, she looked at me, she was sitting in front of me. She looked at me and she's like, "Well, men and women were created a certain way to partake in sexual acts. So of course if anything else that's other than that, it's a sin." I was like, "Girl, be quiet." I literally looked at her like I can't believe you're telling me that right now.
- Grace Del Vecchio: Encounters like this didn't deter Kaelah from being curious about her own sexuality. For a while, she was content with exploring her queerness without announcing it to the world, steadfast in her belief that she didn't owe anyone a coming out. That is until the fall of 2022, when she began dating someone seriously and bringing them around to her family's home.
- At first, when her family questioned her, she said they were just friends, but her family continued to probe, making comments about her partner's masculine presentation and the amount of time the two were spending together. It developed into a serious relationship and the comments were starting to get on her nerves. So:
- Kaelah Serrano: I just woke up one day and I was like, you know what? I should just tell my mom, forget it. I just ripped the bandaid off. If I don't tell her now, I am probably never going to tell her, and I don't know how long I'm going to stay up in this house either, so might as well. So then I ended up telling her, and it was a mix of emotions. First my mom was like, "Oh yeah, I kind of already knew. I was just waiting for you to tell me." But then she's also devastated like, "I didn't raise you like this. Where did I go wrong?" This and that, this whole religious thing, and

then she was telling me that she didn't want me to tell anybody. I'm going to say now things are totally different with me and my mom, but at that time it was still very kind of bad because it's like she's telling me, oh, you don't need to tell anybody. I don't want you to tell nobody. Keep it a secret.

Grace Del Vecchio: It didn't stay a secret for long. Soon, Kaelah's mom told her dad and her dad told the whole family. Those first months were hard. Sharing this part of her identity with her family drove a wedge between Kaelah and her parents, but she doesn't regret telling them, and there were family members who surprised Kaelah. Cousins and other relatives reached out to tell her that they support her and love her. In particular, her sisters are her biggest supporters.

Kaelah Serrano: I really do appreciate that because it's something that I didn't expect, but at the same time, I do think it brought us closer in that aspect with my other family members.

Grace Del Vecchio: Kaelah sees herself setting a fierce example for her younger sisters of how to trust their own worldviews, even if they contradict what they were raised to believe about sexuality. Kaelah had the ability to explore her sexuality differently in the context outside her home and family life. Young people interact with what sociologists call [“three places”](#), the home, school and a social environment or organization, virtual or otherwise. All three places contribute different things to the development and affirmation of their identities. The ability for teens to explore their sexuality in a school setting depends on [the environment](#) that administrators and educators create.

[A 2021 national survey on LGBTQ+ youth mental health](#) from the Trevor Project highlighted that queer Latinx students are at high risk of anxiety and depressive disorders. 40% of them have experienced assault or harassment at school due to race and sexual orientation, and 18% have attempted suicide. This tracks with the experiences of the wider LGBTQ+ community. The same survey found that when it comes to LGBTQ+ youth, 73% experienced symptoms of anxiety, 58% symptoms of depression and 14% attempted suicide. There are opportunities to empower youth with holistic and well-rounded information at school. This is why instead of utilizing the term sexual education, Lorena proposes sexuality education.

Lorena Garcia: I feel like sexuality, opening it up to that way opens up possibilities for thinking about sexuality not only in terms of identities, but thinking about sexuality in terms of practices, in terms of the meanings that we make of things and really encourages I think those who are teaching the material, but also young people as they're coming across it to not only fixate on what we often think about the act, whatever the act is itself. It's sort of a very narrow way to think about sexuality.

Grace Del Vecchio: Kaelah recalled the effects of what she felt was a narrow and exclusionary sex ed curriculum at Chicago Public Schools.

Kaelah Serrano: And that also leads people to be in dangerous situations, because if you're not teaching people about how to be safe or you're not teaching people about other things, it just could cause people to be in situations that are not good for them and also make people feel lost and left out.

Grace Del Vecchio: We reached out to Chicago Public Schools to ask about their sex ed curriculum, but were unable to get a statement or interview in time for the production of this episode. Kaelah also noted that queerness was never brought up.

Lorena says there's a need to "queer" the understanding around sex and sexuality education. Queering sex ed is a part of the process of developing a healthy lens for sexuality. It's the practice of [expanding curricula](#) so it doesn't operate under the assumption that students are cisgender and heterosexual, or treating heteronormativity as the starting point. Lorena argues that queering education forces people to see which identities have been considered the norm and which have been excluded.

Lorena Garcia: It really sort of invites people to sort of shift what's at the center of the story and how, starting from a different point, centering something that is always, in this case, it's always been excluded or marginalized. How does that also shift everything else that you've thought about? And so for me, that's one concrete example how to develop this queer youth lens is to start from that point. For me, I think that's a way because it also encourages folks to move outside of their comfort zone.

Grace Del Vecchio: Lorena also believes that queering education makes room for bigger conversations about systems, and the way that resources are distributed in Chicago.

Lorena Garcia: To me, queering the classroom it means also thinking about it beyond just in terms of sexuality, right? For me, queering the classroom sexuality education means it's also thinking about how this connects to violence against trans folks, for instance.

Grace Del Vecchio: [The UnidosUS report](#) also found that Latinx LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to be prevented from expressing their sexuality and gender identities in school, including 10% reporting that they are not allowed to use their preferred pronouns. According to the report, Latinx LGBTQ+ students attending schools with supportive staff and inclusive curricula had higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression. Those who attend schools with gay straight alliances and ethnic clubs are less likely to miss school and more likely to feel a greater sense of belonging.

Just in Kaelah's lifetime, US Latinos have made enormous strides in their educational achievements. In 2011, the high school graduation rate for Latino students was 71%, and eight years later it had gone up to 82%. That's according to [another UnidosUS report](#). The overall public high school graduation rate for

the 2019-2020 school year was 87%. Put another way, in 2018, according to research group Excelencia in Education, [7 out of 10 Latino adults](#) age 25 or over had a high school diploma. Reaching this milestone in education translates to greater stability and economic opportunity as adults. So making sure school is a safe place for LGBTQ+ Latinx youth, if it improves their attendance and academic performance, can have a long-lasting impact on their lives.

But across the country, state legislators and local politicians are [waging campaigns](#) against LGBTQ+ youth and their families, making schools dangerous places to even talk about sexuality or gender identity.

CBS News clip: More than 500 bills restricting the rights of LGBTQ+ people have been introduced across the country this year. 77 of those bills have been passed impacting education and healthcare.

Grace Del Vecchio: [That's a clip from CBS News](#). As of June 2023, the American Civil Liberties Union identified [nearly 230 bills](#) specifically targeting LGBTQ+ people and topics within schools. The specifics of these bills run the gamut, from clamping down on trans students participating in sports to forcing teachers to out students and prohibiting any discussions on school campuses of LGBTQ+ people and issues. But for Kaelah, school was a safe space. Like an elementary school art class, when her classmates were asked to talk about their backgrounds.

Kaelah Serrano: It would be like, okay, draw something that represents you, and when we would share it around in class, you would see the differences of how people viewed themselves or would talk about themselves or things that represent themselves.

Grace Del Vecchio: Kaelah says her classmates were predominantly Latinx. It wasn't until her family moved to a different neighborhood after high school that she felt that that part of her identity was not the norm. But still, artistic expression remained her way of engaging with it. Young people develop their identities within the [first two places](#), school and the home, but it's often [in a third space](#) where they're able to explore more intersections and openly share their experiences with new people.

A third, or a tertiary place, can be extracurricular activities like a sports club, friends and friend groups, and for those in Kaelah's generation, social media and online communities, like her PicCollage days.

Lorena argues that social media has great potential for education and community. For Kaelah, it's provided both, particularly a source of information about queerness, but also sexual health and safety: conversations that weren't happening at home.

Kaelah Serrano: I also think that it's educating people at a younger age too, because it's like, I know when I was younger it was such a taboo topic. Nobody talked about it. It was like just if you know about it, you know about it. If you don't, you don't. But I definitely think that social media has played a role and has taught a lot of

people things about themselves at a younger age. When you see that exposure, it makes you think about things or makes you feel okay about things that you already know about yourself.

Grace Del Vecchio: Of course, Lorena says, there are real drawbacks and dangers to existing on social media, especially for young people.

Lorena Garcia: To say that it's 100% perfect and seamless, no, it's not a 100% perfect and it's not seamless. But I think look, young people access to social media quite a bit, and so it's also been the case for me when I've talked to young women and young people about sexuality that they're using it a lot to communicate information to each other.

Grace Del Vecchio: [Research](#) on the relationship between young people and social media continues to develop, but current studies show that this relationship is complex and nuanced. Both the [American Psychological Association](#) and Harvard University's [School of Graduate Education](#) conduct and cite studies which show that social media literacy is essential to young people's health and safety. In 2018, a group of Australian psychologists created [a definition for social media literacy](#), which has since been cited by the National Institutes of Public Health. They defined social media literacy as critical thinking about social media, which includes being empowered with the knowledge and skills to analyze, evaluate, produce, and participate in social media. Above all, social media literacy empowers users to be critical of what they see online and engage in discussion about it.

Kaelah wasn't even a year old when Mark Zuckerberg first launched Facebook in 2004, and she was just seven years old when Kevin Strom launched Instagram in 2010. Social media has existed her entire life. Developing this literacy doesn't happen in a single conversation. It's continuous and requires constant adaptation. Lorena says that in order to encourage social media literacy, adults should be mindful of how they moderate teens' social media usage. To her, it is another opportunity for adults to engage in critical youth studies. When adults truly ask young people what their experience is, this allows them to better understand it and therefore be better at helping them stay safe. Social media can be a space for young people to connect with one another about topics that might be taboo in the other two places, like sexuality and sex.

Lorena Garcia: I think there's ways to incorporate that as part of what we think about even what sexuality education is. And part of the reasons why it hasn't is because I think adults don't feel that comfortable with social media. They have all this anxiety about how young people are using it, and so then because of that are not really as open-minded to how it can be such an incredible resource and tool.

Grace Del Vecchio: For many students, the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent lockdown cut off their access to arts programs and in-person extracurricular activities. So online spaces, remote extracurriculars, and communities on social media stepped in as a viable third place. Kaelah was in her junior year in March of 2020 and found

herself longing for community and also wanting to take her photography more seriously, so she started searching for virtual opportunities that checked these boxes.

That's when she came across [Yollocalli Arts Reach](#), or Yollo for short, founded in 1997 by the National Museum of Mexican Art, its goal is to provide more educational opportunities for young artists in the surrounding community. The name Yollocalli comes from the Nahuatl words, yollo meaning heart and calli, meaning house. Yollocalli is now based in Little Village and trains local, predominantly Latinx youth in art media and storytelling practices all for free. Kaelah ended up joining one of Yollo's radio programs, [Your Story Your Way](#), which teaches students the ins and outs of radio production from interviewing sources and researching, to drafting a script and editing audio. Students can also participate in programs about murals and street art, photography and other forms of multimedia. They grow leadership skills through the organization's youth council. When Kaelah joined the radio program for the first time in 2021, it was operating fully online due to the pandemic.

Kaelah Serrano: A virtual space made me feel accepted because I think because they were so good at teaching us how to use the equipment and go literally live on radio through our homes, that was so insane to me. I swear the moment they were trying to explain it to me at first, my head was hurting. I'm like, oh my God, I'm anxious. How is this going to work? But I swear they were there to support everybody. They kept telling us over and over again, it's okay if you make mistakes. It's okay if you don't understand. And I think just hearing that over and over again made me feel better because again, we're all youth here.

Grace Del Vecchio: Through Yollocalli, Kaelah gained access to a laptop, something she lacked, and editing software.

Kaelah Serrano: I actually have never owned a laptop up until literally last month I got my own very own laptop. So before then, since I was doing Yollocalli, while I was in school or other stuff, they let me use the laptop because I have to use a laptop for the radio and recording and doing GarageBand and stuff.

Grace Del Vecchio: Kaelah is describing the [Digital Divide](#), the unequal access to technology across regions and demographics in the US. In a [2018 Pew Research Center study](#), almost one in four Latino children lived in homes with no high-speed internet. 18% of Latino students reported [not having access to a computer](#) at home. So Yollocalli's laptop for Kaelah probably helped with more than her extracurricular activities.

[Radio intro sound]

Speaker 6: The following program was brought to you by Yollocalli, keeping it weird since 1997. Oh, who's that? Who are you? You're not allowed to be in here.

- Speaker 7: Hey, yo, somebody get their grandma. Now you got to do it like this.
- Speaker 6: What's Up is back with another two hours of fully youth produced content, tapping into the matters and concerns of youth in Chicago.
- Grace Del Vecchio: Yollocalli became Kaelah's third place. She found an intersectional community with other Latinx youth.
- Speaker 8: Listen at your own risk because your mind might explode.
- Grace Del Vecchio: Many of whom were also exploring their own sexualities, and she received training and mentorship, all of the tools to create her own art and stories.
- August Abitang: My name is August Abitang. I am co-instructor of Your Story Your Way, the radio journalism class.
- Grace Del Vecchio: August comes from a family of Yollocalli students. His sisters also participated in its programs. He was a student there in 2013, and in 2021 became an instructor. Kaelah met August the following year when she joined the radio journalism class a second time.
- August Abitang: I guess this is also part of the core tenets that we're all learning. I'm in the teacher position or the instructor position, but I'll learn every day just the same as y'all. Y'all will teach too. You know what I mean? We're here collectively.
- Grace Del Vecchio: Something that sets Yollocalli apart is the organization's deliberate effort to avoid [adulthood](#). Adulthood is a practice of discriminating against or holding prejudice against young people. Lorena says that in order to nurture the interests of young people, it's important not to do it in a way that's top down or adultist.
- Lorena Garcia: It's a different kind of structure in the sense that it's a structure that has listened to the voices of young people, taken into account what they're telling you they need, not what adults think they need.
- Grace Del Vecchio: As a former student, August could see this different structure at Yollocalli and how it played a role in developing a culture which placed youth at the center.
- August Abitang: I feel like most, if not all of the people that have taught me from Yollo have been listeners. They listen first. They listen to your input. They care what you think. They give space. They hold space for you to share your opinions, and I think that's the first step. I think that adulthood mentality comes from a lack of understanding.
- Grace Del Vecchio: That summer got off to a rough start for Kaelah. After the death of a family member, she couldn't find the drive she once had to actively participate in the program. She missed classes and struggled to communicate with August and the

other instructors. But both August and Kaelah can pinpoint the moment when she started to regain her drive and passion for storytelling, and it shows in the stories that she produced that summer. August worked with Kaelah for at least three separate radio shows, but one week's show especially stood out to him.

Kaelah: Hi, you are listening to WLPN LP Chicago 105.5 FM, broadcasting live from Studio B here in Bridgeport. This is What's Up, season 20. Today, Your Show, Your Body, Your Way, the overturning of Roe v. Wade. We are here with Yolo-

Isha: Isha.

Melissa: Melissa.

Kaelah Serrano: And Kaelah. Today's show is going to be about the recent overturning of Roe v. Wade and what it entails-

August Abitang: Oh man, that was one of my favorite episodes. Kaelah was on the show. She had a really big part on that show too. I think it was all women on this episode and they interviewed someone from Planned Parenthood, but also just giving their takes and how we made them feel, but backing it up with research and everything, I think that was the best show of this season, to be honest. I think that's when we really seen her potential.

Kaelah Serrano: Of course, that one's definitely my favorite just because I felt like it was current with the times and it was just so interesting. It also sparked up conversation with people in Yollo because there was some people in Yollo too who would only talk about women's rights, women's rights, and me and somebody else kind of mentioned, well, also maybe we should educate ourselves and mention in the show that there's other people who have certain anatomy that they don't identify as a woman. So I thought that was really important and it's like we're kind of teaching each other too, making each other aware, especially when you work with a radio outlet. I think it's important because you never know who's listening and you should always be mindful and aware of that stuff.

Grace Del Vecchio: On a hot Tuesday in the early afternoon at the end of May 2023, Kaelah stood in an empty gallery at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Pilsen. Her gaze slowly took in [one of the walls](#), which had August's original cover art for the radio program. Each colorful square, the cover of a different show that was produced in 2022. Kaelah stopped at each show she worked on pointing at it and reflecting on it.

Del Vecchio [in tape]: What is this one about?

Kaelah Serrano: Too stressed to be blessed. That one was about school and the stresses in our lives and stuff, and what do we do to-

Diego: Yo yo, what's up? You're listening to WLPN LP, Chicago 105.5 FM Lumpen Radio, and we broadcasting live from Studio B in Bridgeport. My name is Diego and I've got some beautiful people here with me, Denise, Kaelah, and...

Grace Del Vecchio: She walked around the sunlit gallery looking at the montage of videos, which featured interviews and performances from herself and her Yollocalli peers. She looked at photos and paintings and stood in front of the large artist statement and read it aloud.

Kaelah Serrano: During 2022, Yollocalli offered 29 different programs, including in-person virtual and hybrid options. Our intent was to be flexible for young people and our teaching artists while offering creative opportunities as we transitioned to a post pandemic world. That's actually beautiful. Whoever wrote that, I like the way they transitioned. Looking back on the year, we feel blessed to have provided the space and support for our youth to capture this time for themselves and are honor to be able to share their work as the class of 2022. That is so beautiful. For real. Everything that they put together was so real. I feel like I couldn't even explain it so much better than that.

Grace Del Vecchio: [in tape] Oh my God. Who wrote that?

Kaelah Serrano: No, for real. We need to figure that out.

Grace Del Vecchio: [in tape] Let us know.

This practice of empowering youth to create their own media and have autonomy over the representation is closely connected to queer culture and history. Intentional creation of third places like Yollocalli empowers artists like Kaelah, as does the kind of mentorship she experienced there.

Kaelah Serrano: I feel like they help me grow a lot and learn about myself, and they gave me the resources that I needed to learn about myself too, and I feel like Yollo, just them as mentors in general. I feel like all of them are really good to talk to people and connect with people and make people feel comfortable, and I think that's amazing. I feel like people are not going to want to work or create things if they don't have that level of feeling comfortable and feeling like they could talk about certain things.

Grace Del Vecchio: Queer scholars have argued media training [helps promote self-representation and expression](#). In particular, intentional youth centered spaces provide young people with the critical resources to [represent themselves](#). Kaelah found ways to make space that represented her when she couldn't find it at home or at school.

Lorena admires Yollocalli's commitment to building empowering and comfortable spaces where youth can exercise their autonomy, and notices how they make a point not to shy away from conversations about sexuality. Rather, they make it a normal part of their programming and connect youth to resources

at events. She says the organization is creating space for exactly what is needed most.

Lorena Garcia: Allowing young people to have more access to the ability and platforms to tell their own stories. That's so important. Even like, this podcast becomes such a powerful tool. So I think there's also something about providing and giving young people access to the types of technology that they need, the resources to tell their own stories. Because there's something that happens when someone has the ability to tell their own story, that's just the very thing that someone else needed to see and hear that makes a difference for that person. Versus just having to constantly wait for others to tell those stories. So I think there's something there. The power of storytelling is so important here.

Grace Del Vecchio: Kaelah talks often about how she feels more confident and sure of herself since joining Yollocalli. The community and support empowered her to find herself within the stories she tells and the art she creates. August hopes she continues on this journey.

August Abitang: I hope she never stops. I hope she never stops telling stories, taking photos. I think this decade has a lot in store for her. I manifest.

Grace Del Vecchio: After she graduated from high school, Kaelah's family moved to a suburb south of the city. Looking around her new neighborhood, Kaelah realized that for the first time in her life, most of the people on her block didn't look like her. That fall, she began attending Columbia College, a four-year private school in Chicago's downtown. She realized that it, too, was predominantly white. As she pursues a bachelor's degree in photojournalism, the photos she creates are extensions and explorations of her own bicultural and intersectional identity.

Since completing the radio programs at Yollocalli, she's moved on to showcasing her work in bigger spaces. In May 2023, Kaelah's work was in [an exhibit highlighting the work of women and non-binary artists](#) at Columbia College. The exhibit's opening night was a full house packed wall to wall. Chatter filled the room as the various creators discussed their work, sharing their artist statements. In a back left corner of the room, up a short ramp to the right hung Kaelah's photo spread.

Kaelah Serrano: And then my work here is called Mi Mundo, Mi Alma, and it means “my world, my soul”, and then...

Grace Del Vecchio: Her long wavy hair was dyed hot pink, accompanied by her signature makeup look, a thick winged eyeliner, polished off with a striped pink and black dress to match. She leaned against the wall, projecting her voice above the noise of the crowd so that she could explain the four photos that hung before her. Each one of the portraits demonstrated the biculturalism of its subjects' mixed Latino heritage. One of the photos was candid and dynamic, the subject standing tall through the sunroof of a moving car, waving a massive flag that's a patchwork of

the Mexican and Guatemalan flags. The subjects in the other three photos sat still and poised. Kaelah pointed up at a photo of her cousin, who's looking directly into the camera.

Kaelah Serrano: Yeah, this is my favorite photo because this is my blanket. You know, the older Mexican blankets with the animals and stuff? I really wanted to include that because she is Mexican too, and then add the Puerto Rican flag. And then this is the Puerto Rican flag in black and white, because Puerto Rico's in a revolution and stuff. And then this element of the rosario...

Grace Del Vecchio: She's navigating her religious background and fitting it into her adult life. Like Lorena says Latinas often do.

Kaelah Serrano: ...We just wanted to add that in there. Give that little cultural aspect because even though me and my cousin both, we don't consider ourselves religious or anything, we do think that religion plays an important part into it. So when I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do for projects or things I wanted to represent through photography, I noticed a common theme I would do is culture and family or something that represented yourself. So that's kind of why...

Grace Del Vecchio: So in college, Kaelah persists in crafting her own representation, even in places where she doesn't see herself reflected. Maybe this carving out a transformation of these spaces will allow for others to feel like they belong. She's doing it for herself, but also for the queer Latinas who will come after her.

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Kaelah Serrano and Grace Del Vecchio would like to dedicate this episode to the queer friends and family that come after us. And special thanks to August Abitang and Yollocalli for giving us permission to air clips from their radio shows.

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For more information, resources, photos, an annotated transcript of this episode, and a Spanish translation, visit 100LatinaBirthdays.com. That's the number 100, Latina Birthdays. And follow us on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook @100LatinaBirthdays. 100 Latina Birthdays is an open source podcast. We encourage you to use our episodes and supporting materials in your

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