

Episode 19:
"Mama, I am Gay" Fuels A Second Act
(7/21/2018)

Segment	Who	Copy
Intro	Eva Levias Andino	What I heard was a story of loneliness, alienation, more loneliness, not having anyone to turn to when this baby at 10, 11, whatever time he figured that, "I'm not like the other boys," so alone. It was heart-wrenching. My heart broke, because I had made a career to be a mother. And I did everything. I baked chocolate chip cookies. I was a room mother, PTA president, you name any. But I was not there for my son.
		INTRO MUSIC
Podcast Overview	Andy Levine	Welcome to Second Act Stories, a podcast that looks at people who have made major career changes and are pursuing more rewarding lives in a second act. For today's story I traveled to Miami, Florida and visited with Eva Levias Andino. Eva is a big personality with a really interesting back story. We met in her apartment and I liked her warm and welcoming nature instantly. Eva grew up in Cuba and proudly counts herself as a 9 th generation Cuban. But at the age of 17 years old she left Cuba with her mother. Here's Eva's story.

	Eva	<p>There was a lot of things that were going on, Fidel Castro had taken power, and parents were very concerned about the fate of their children. So they were leaving in droves. So we ended up in Miami. Then we went to Puerto Rico. Then eventually some years passed and I got married. And then after I got married, my husband and I moved several times and the interesting thing is that everywhere we lived, we had a child.</p> <p>I was in my little Cuban cocoon of what is proper for a woman, and that's what I was doing. So that's, you know, my background.</p>
	Andy	Today's story focuses on Eva and her relationship and her son Paolo and how it led her to a new career/life.
	Eva	<p>Paolo is a third child. Paolo was born in Miami, conceived in California, or maybe that's too much information, and born in Miami. Even before he was born, he was enveloped in drama. I'm pregnant and about the time that the doctor said, "You're gonna have a baby," the entire family came over to meet the baby. But the baby wouldn't be born. No. Everybody left, went back home. And I'm still pregnant. And then one morning, I wake up and I said, "I'm having a baby."</p> <p>And it was all so fast that when we got to the hospital, in the hall, they put me in a stretcher, and in the hall, hallway, in the hallway, baby is going out. The doctor just arrived and the nurse says, "Don't push it." "What? What are you talking about? This kid is going out." And the doctor, he didn't have time to put in his white jacket on, whatever. And Paolo was born. And Paolo was like from the day he was born, he was like the light. He was surrounded by light. He cried more than anyone and he laughed more than anyone, very special kid.</p>
	Andy	So I want you to fast forward, Paolo was 20 years old. You're sitting down lunch with him and it was an important event in your life. So take me through that lunch and take me through that day.
	Eva	<p>Paolo says to me, "I'm gonna take you to lunch." And I said, "Oh, that's great. You wanna pay?" "Yeah," he said. "Okay. Let's go." So once I'm sitting down lifting the menu, he says to me, "Mama, I am gay."</p> <p>Looking back, I realized that was probably the single, most devastating moment of my life. Why was it so devastating? For me to have a gay child was such a monumentally horrendous thing because that didn't happen to people like me. I mean, we are good people. We're Roman Catholic. We're upper middle class. Everybody here goes to private schools. We're very decent. We have great friends. We are as Cubans say "familia conocida" a known family. This doesn't happen to us. This happens to all the people but not us. That was one thing.</p>

		<p>The second thing is if people know that I have a gay son, they're not gonna be my friends anymore, because this is not a good thing. So people are gonna shun me. And then the third thing is that the realization, very sudden and very quickly it went away that I have had this inkling, this feeling, this thing in my heart that Paolo maybe is gay. But as I said so softly now is because I couldn't even entertain the idea that Paolo could possibly be this horrible thing.</p> <p>So I would take it away from my mind. But in that terrible moment, in the middle of that restaurant, everything became a reality for me. I couldn't no longer say, "This is not true. Put it aside." He's telling me that he is gay. That was pretty devastating for me. And I have no idea how to deal with it.</p>
	Andy	Just to put this in a historical perspective, what year are we talking here? This is...
	Eva	98, 1998.
	Andy	'98, 1998. And within the Cuban culture, having a gay son, having a gay child is shunned upon, is looked poorly upon? I mean, just help me understand that.
	Eva	<p>That's a very interesting question, because in the Cuban community like probably all the other communities, having a gay member of the family is something that you do not talk about. I don't care how they handle it from the door in, but you don't talk about in public. So that's how I thought that we dealt with this. You do not talk about it. You do not mention it. And for a long time I thought, I'm the only Cuban American mother with a gay child in Miami.</p> <p>And that was my burden, and that was my concern. My concern was never for Paolo or Paolo's well-being. My concern about was for Eva. What are people gonna say about me? What's gonna happen to me? I'm not gonna be popular. People aren't going to invite me to parties. That was my number one concern.</p>
	Andy	So Paolo eventually graduates from college and leaves Miami to go to graduate school in Kansas City. And then he moves to New York City to pursue a career in acting. And Eva loved the theatre – so she went to visit him in New York City. This is 8 years after the "Mama I'm gay" lunch in Miami.

	Eva	<p>He said, "Oh, there's this play. I want us to go see it." And the play was called "Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde." It was written Moisés Kaufman, a Venezuelan playwright, very talented. And basically, the play is all the writings, everything the transcripts from the three trials that the English Crown has against Oscar Wilde for being homosexual.</p> <p>So we saw the play. And I noticed that during the play, Paolo was very uncomfortable, you know, fidgeting. And then when the play end, that he just disappeared. So I went to the lobby and waited for him there like half an hour. And when he finally returned, you could tell that he have been crying. And so he gave me a big hug and he said to me, "100 years later and nothing has changed."</p> <p>Of course, I didn't understand. And I said, "Oh my god. Paolo, I'm sorry you're upset. But let's go next door." This was in the village. There's this, you know, really cute French restaurant. We ordered a bottle of wine. And at that moment, he was 28 years old, first time in his life that he shares with another human being what he went through growing up.</p> <p>And what I heard was a story of loneliness, alienation, more loneliness, not having anyone to turn to when this baby at 10, 11, whatever time he figured that, "I'm not like the other boys," so alone. It was heart-wrenching. My heart broke, because I had made a career to be a mother. And I did everything. I baked chocolate chip cookies. I was room mother, PTA president, you name any. But I was not there for my son. And later on I realized that I had not been there for my son because of my intense fear of this whole issue, of this whole topic. So after that, you know, I came back to Miami and I was so lost.</p>
	Andy	What was it you had felt you had failed as a mother?
	Eva	Yes, miserably, which I had never felt before even when he told me, "Mama, I'm gay." I hadn't done anything. Of course, I knew that I hadn't cost anything. But what I saw clearly is that I have not been there for my son. He had to do it alone.
	Andy	Eva went back to Miami. And she didn't know what to do. She talked a neighbor about her situation – a neighbor who happened to be gay. And she told him how terrible she felt.

	Eva	I started telling him what had happened. I started crying. He started crying. We're hugging each other crying. And then he says to me, "Today," it was a Thursday, I'll never forget it, "Today, this afternoon, you're coming with me to a meeting at an organization called YES Institute." And he said, "This organization wants to protect kids, wants to prevent kids from killing themselves precisely because of what you've told me. So let's go."
	Andy	So this was Eva's first contact with the Yes Institute.
	Eva	<p>They invited people from different organizations in the community. And they were invited together to this roundtable, sometimes 40 people, sometime 14, sometimes 20, and talk about the work of YES.</p> <p>And I thought wow. And then the thing that just struck me more than anything else is that when I came in, they still have a set of double doors that were painted sky blue. And when I opened those double doors and I came in, the way I was greeted was the first time and that I was in a place where I could be myself, the mother of four kids one of them gay and not feel guilty, not feel ashamed and I felt accepted. It was just the most liberating, amazing, extraordinary feeling.</p> <p>And so the community meeting went on, and what I heard was what these people are trying to do is be there for mothers like me. Mothers that have no clue what to do. And then I said I wanna be a volunteer here. So I started going there.</p> <p>They needed someone for the initiative in Spanish. And I translated. I'm an interpreter and all of those things. And I started and they hired me, at the same time I'm divorcing. Heavy duty divorce. So everything is happening at the same time.</p>
	Andy	So it sounds like your world just kind of exploded?
	Eva	<p>You got it. It was like a monumental explosion.</p> <p>Do you know what it means at the age of 55 asking yourself for the first time in your life, "Who am I?" That was big deal. Now I look back and I laugh. But it was a process for me of, you know, therapy, talking to people, experiencing things, putting myself in the middle, in the rollercoaster. I have to have the willingness to really dig deep into me. And it wasn't easy.</p>
	Andy	You became very, very deeply involved in the YES Institute.

	Eva	<p>Yes, when I started at YES, I wasn't looking it as a career. I was looking it as I wanna give back. I wanna do... In the beginning, I said, "I wanna do something for families." And then in the end it was I wanna be something for other families. I don't wanna do anything. I wanna be authentically real, open up. So in me they see themselves and their struggle and their fear. And then maybe in me they find also hope.</p>
	Andy	<p>So what do you do with YES? I mean, what was your role? I knew you had a number of different hats but talk me through that.</p>
	Eva	<p>Well, the first thing that have to happen with YES is that I have to work in me. And that wasn't easy, like I said to you before. I had to learn to communicate. And the interesting part of communication is that the most important component is listening.</p> <p>A Cuban mother doesn't have the concept of listening. You just tell everybody what to do because you know better than everybody else. So to me, listening was very difficult. And because I didn't know how to listen, I had humongous breakdowns in communication with probably everybody in my family.</p> <p>So in the beginning at YES, and I see this woman working with me, being so patient with me. It was like carving a statue, you know, carving something. And then along the way, I had other, how do you say it, things that I could do, things that I knew how to do, and things that I didn't know that I was good at. Like for instance, this initiative in Spanish I started going out into the community and talking to people, and I discovered that, "Hey, I love people." And I am very good at, you know, establishing a communication and a rapport and a relationship with you even if I just met you. Wow, that's awesome.</p> <p>And then one day, the person that was doing the fundraising left. So the director comes and says to me, "This person has left, now you're in charge."</p>
	Andy	<p>So Eva became the Yes Institute's Director of Development.</p>
	Eva	<p>So I started doing this and it was very enlightening for me to see that merely by sharing my story, people were inspired to support our work. And people started giving us money.</p> <p>And then one day, the person that did all the financial stuff, you know, QuickBooks in finances and the money in the bank and investments, everything left. And then I was told, "Well, now you're gonna do this, too."</p>
	Andy	<p>You would be the financial officer?</p>

	Eva	The CFO. Wow. So I'm director of development CFO and I'm visiting the community, talking to people, telling them about YES. It was a time that was very intense. It was very, very, very intense. So I fully dedicated myself to this. I can't call it work because to me it wasn't work. It was giving me so much, I don't even know how to say it, richness, it enriched my life. And the people that I met and the places where I went and the situations that I experienced, it was a gift, it was a gift.
	Andy	So you talked earlier about the importance of making a difference in that from your perspective, but it also seems like you were trying to help families, both the kids as well as the mothers, the parents not go through a pain that you went through. Am I reading you correctly, Eva?
	Eva	The mission is to prevent suicide and ensure the healthy development of all youth through powerful communication and education on gender and orientation. So what happens is that from day one I realized that the reason why I have not been there for my son is because I was afraid, and I was afraid because I had no information. And when you don't have information, you don't have education, you don't know what to do.
	Andy	You mentioned suicide prevention. Had your son, during that dark lonely period, ever considered suicide? And did he talk to you about that?
	Eva	Yes, he had talked to me about that. And he explains it much better than I do that, you know, his alienation and his loneliness made him feel that he wanted to die. And of course, when I first heard that, it was, wow, because once again, he was alone there. It was a long time for me to heal myself.
	Andy	To make this episode complete, I needed to talk to one other person: Eva's son Paolo. I asked for his perspective on his mother's decision to get involved with the Yes Institute after seeing the Oscar Wilde play in New York.
	Paolo Andino	It was important to me at that time to let her know that I didn't need any kind of reparations from her. I didn't need for her to do anything. Like I already felt that, I already felt, you know, the acceptance and that we were in a good place so I told her, "If you wanna do this work, I want you to do it because it's a calling for you to do it and help gay people but not because you have to do anything for me in particular. And so I think that sort freed her to sort of champion other gay people and to be there for others in a way that she wasn't able to be there for me because it was her own personal experience.

	Andy	You mentioned the difficult period in your life from the age of 11 to the age of 20. Do you wish there was a Yes Institute when you were growing up?
	Paolo	Oh, my God, absolutely. I wish there was so many things when I was growing up. I wish there was a "Will and Grace" and an "Ellen" even. Any kind of something I could have looked at and said, "Oh, there I am." I had nothing of that and, oh my gosh, if there had been a Yes Institute where...a place that would have been teaching people how to deal with gay kids and saying that you may not like what they are but you love them, it would have been very different.
	Andy	So to close out today's interview, I asked Eva a familiar question to anyone who has listened to this podcast before.
	Andy	What advice would you give to other women who maybe have spent a life focusing on raising a family? It don't have to be a woman, it could be a man, too. And wanna do something else, wanna make a change like what you did, what advice would you give them about change or a second act?
	Eva	<p>Well, I wouldn't even dream of giving advice to anyone, because, hey, I can advise myself. But what I have noticed in my life is that what you have to do is be awake. At any age, don't fall asleep, not literally sleeping but emotionally, spiritually, and mentally asleep. Be awake and be aware of everything around you. Where is the need? Where do you live? I mean, there's so much that is needed. And I do believe that the work of non-profits and volunteers is of monumental importance has always been in the love of our country.</p> <p>Be awake and look what's going on around you, and decide on something that interests you.</p>
	Andy	The final question I wanna ask you is how has your relationship with Paolo changed since that lunch and following the Oscar Wilde play that you saw together?
	Eva	<p>I cannot think of a word or a phrase that would convey that monumental shift in a relationship. And that shift is all because when I met with him that day, I didn't know what it was to be authentic. Now, we're both authentic with each other.</p> <p>So every time we talk on the phone. Every time we meet, our conversations are very meaningful. We may talk about the theater. We may talk about movie. We may talk about makeup, whatever. But it's always in a very authentic way. We are very real to each other.</p> <p>So it was a shift of...the San Andreas Fault shift.</p>

	Andy	<p>When I asked Paolo to describe his mother to me, he came up with three words: "Grand...Intelligent and Heart." Having spent an hour with her, that's a pretty accurate description.</p> <p>Today Eva Levias Andino is 75 years old and has retired from her full-time position at the Yes Institute (although she still volunteers there regularly).</p> <p>And she tells me she is now thinking about what her third act might be. I can't wait to hear about it.</p>
		<p>OUTGOING MUSIC (Let's use Paul Simon's "Mother and Child Reunion"; Start Thank You>Show Credits after first verse.)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>No I would not give no false hope On this strange and mournful day But the mother and child reunion Is only a motion away</i></p>
Thank-You and Show Credits	Andy	<p>Yes, I thought it might be cool to close out today's episode with Paul Simon's "Mother and Child Reunion."</p> <p>Of course, we want to thank Eva Levias Andino and her son Paolo Andino for being a part of today's podcast. As the proud parent of a gay son myself, it was a real pleasure to profile their story.</p> <p>If you want learn more about the Yes Institute, I'd encourage you to visit their website at www.YesInstitue.org. They are an amazing organization that is doing amazing work.</p> <p>Know of a "Second Act Story" we should profile? Contact me that's Andy Levine and my email is SecondActStories@gmail.com. I'd love to hear from you.</p> <p>And if you are thinking of starting your own second act, we hope Eva's story – and those of the others that we've profiled on Second Act Stories – will help you find a new path.</p> <p>We hope you'll keep listening. A new "Second Act Story" is just around the corner.</p>