

Lisa: Hello. And welcome to another episode of DEIB Outdoors. I'm your host, Lisa Kalner Williams, and today we have a very special guest joining us, Luisana Mendez from Huellas Latinas. Huellas Latinas was born to empower Latinx communities, to engage in outdoor recreation through year round inclusive and culturally responsive outdoor recreational activities, to promote well being and connections to nature, as well as to foster a sense of belonging and to strengthen community bonds.

Welcome to the podcast, Luisana.

Luisana: Thank you, Lisa.

Lisa: It's great to have you here. It's Friday night for both of us. Nice way to end the week. So tell me, how and when did Huellas Latinas begin?

Luisana: Yeah, well, I started more than two years ago when And they mean calm and I found myself a little lonely and I get the experience about anxiety to me in your indoor and I started to go out and take a small walk or short walk out of my neighborhood and go to the park is close to my house and I start feeling good and I think, "Oh, this feels better day by day." So I started going even twice a day, early in the morning and in the evening. And I feel I get the heal for what I am living in that moment. And I used to start meeting different parks around the cities.

Something I already did since I arrived in Minnesota in 2018, but now with more intention to meet the part or explore the part in hiking. So I start inviting my friends. A couple of my family here and I just feel this is good. I decide to be part of the different challenge. One of the thing is, well, the first one was a 52 Hike Challenge in 2021. And the other was the Hiking Club and the Passport Club for the State Parks of Minnesota. So I shared with my girlfriend, I said, "Oh, I started the challenge. I want to complete this, please help me." And, you know, for me in this challenge, because I never believe I will be able to complete that. So since then, all my meeting with my friends when we set out for hangout, it wasn't the park.

Okay, let's go to hike. Let's go to hike. That was all my invitation for everybody. So I started making connection with park. And you know, with St. Paul Parks and Recreation as a city where I live. We I applied for a program for being the Latino community to to meet the park for a walk, nature walk or hiking with families, Latino families, and they approved the program.

And I start, I remember was a program of six. A walk walk. So we go around different parts and family come with this with kids with all there's. It was beautiful. And when we end the program, everybody see each other. We just asked about now.

"Well, now what happened?" Yeah. And I, I just shared, "Well, I am hiking because I am doing this challenge.

What I will do, we can do a group, a chat group, and I will keep going and I will invite everybody who can come with me. Let's go together."

So, That is how everything starts. So I make the program for the activities. I mean, by people, people come all their parks. Tell me about the same initiative to development program for Latino community.

And I just say, "yes, let's go. Let's do it." Yeah, little by little talking with the community. We feel the the the curiosity to explore the park in different ways. So that's why we do. Also, we hike that, we do birding or we kayak, canoe, for camping during the winter for cross country ski, snowshoes, and I, you say, we learn together.

We exchange experience together. And that is how everything is coming.

Lisa: Amazing. So before the pandemic, did you have any outdoor experience? Like you mentioned snowshoeing, kayaking, all those outdoor activities.

Luisana: So, well, nothing, nothing, any experience with winter activities, because in my country, Venezuela and we don't have a snow .

I remember myself doing hiking, even when I don't have the knowledge was I am doing was hiking. So I just go for a park and take a walk and explore one lake go to the top of the mountain. Not very often because yeah, the situation in my country don't allow me that. But in a couple of times I did.

Yes, I was hiking there and I love being nature. I, I go out surrounded nature. I am from the Cordillera Andina in the middle of big two mountains and, and being the part of being surrounded by nature is a big part of my life. But yes, I don't have the knowledge. "Oh, I am doing this."

In Minnesota, when I arrived and I started going out, to see what's around me. I want to meet the city. And for me, what's the way I can recognize the place I am living right now and also feel I belong .

Lisa: That's great. And yeah, so it was probably inspiring for other people to see you like, Hey, I don't know anything about snowshoeing.

You know, it's any level, anybody can come and let's try to be a part of the community that we live in.

Luisana: Yeah, that is a key. I am immigrant, I experiment for first hand, all day, all day. Feeling about, I don't know, snow, I don't know, winter, I don't know, any kind of winter sports or even outdoor sports because different barrier language or knowledge or equipment or experience.

So that is why I invite everybody and say, let's go together. Let's learn together. We can find a way we can enjoy this and have a better time here.

Lisa: What's cool about your group is you already had a base of people from that program in the park because that ended and then they were saying now what? How has it grown since your official group began?

Luisana: Yeah, I've been in that moment. I, keep in touch with around 60 families, but remember, each one, the capacity for each one was just 10 families because COVID restriction. So, I know some families repeat a walk. I can see around 60 families because I just start promotion the hiking group, like way of being a hiking group and people start sign up and be in the chat group.

That grow, I believe more than 100 families. Right now, I think the final number for these three years is more than 800 families.

Lisa: Wow. Congratulations.

Luisana: Yeah. Thank you. It's super crazy when, yeah, when I see all of what I'm doing with Huellas Latinas, always I finish. What? I can't believe even this year I did more than 80 activities in one year.

Lisa: Wow. So more than once a week.

Luisana: Exactly. So I say, okay how this works? And then at the day, I feel so grateful for have this opportunity because I know each activity can impact in a better way for families or for people who are right in Minnesota. Just people can have and enjoy the activity, learn new skills, make new friends, or find something in the nature they are looking for.

Lisa: Yes, and they might not even realize what they're looking for or what they need to see, but yeah, it comes upon them, which is the beauty of nature. So, it's grown so much, which is wonderful. Extra wonderful, because you live in one of the coldest places in the United States. How do you encourage people to come out in the months, say, from December to March?

Luisana: Yeah, Minnesota. And it's pretty frustrating for expression for people is, oh my God, super cold. Yeah. Whatever call you think is worth.

I believe this is my first couple years here was super hard. My, yeah, my first winter, I don't drive. I just take a bus and I go in the, in the night shift. So for me was more about the challenge for survival, you know. But I learned how to dress properly.

And the things I can use to be safe, or what I can do to be safe in the cold, like crampons in my shoes, so I don't fall in the snow on the sidewalk, all this kind of thing. So, for me it was, okay, I can do this for survival, now I can do this for enjoy. So I learned about snowshoes, I learned about cross country skiing, and I just I love it.

And I start making the partnership with parks and bring community for that. So every time I say to the community, yes, here is winter, winter is long, winter is cold, winter is dark. We don't have too much light, natural light during the day. So I try to share my experience. This, this is what I do, have fun during the winter.

Mm-Hmm. I use Vitamin D, the LED lamp, artificial lamp. And I try to go out, I, I teach people how to dress appropriately and hands warming. When we start a hike before we start a hike, I make the inspection.

So this is not the right shoes. This is the right pants. I advise you to get these or I switch my initial plan for a hike, even if I were hike in the snow. I tried to take a problem in trail without snow because somebody are in a tennis shoe. So I, I tried to make all the accommodation. For get the good experience for people.

Lisa: That's great. So they can a still enjoy the trip, the, the walk and be then they are equipped with knowledge. So the next time they come, they'll get hand warmers or crampons or whatever they need to be safe.

Luisana: I think the challenge for all immigrants, besides the language, of course, most of the time we don't, yeah, I don't speak English five years, six years ago.

It's about, for example, navigation in the park. Here in Minnesota, because winter, all the trails change the youth. When, where we hide during the summer, now it's cross country ski, so we can hide there. So I don't know about before. I use. Take a walk with my friend. Let's go hiking. When we are in the middle of the trail, people use the skis, go on it, get off the trail, get off the path.

We are super scared, off the trail, trying to find the end the entry of the path. And wasn't it crazy, but we learned, oh, from the winter, we have to check the map. We have to learn what is the right trail for winter hiking. And so now I teach that.

Not only people come and share the, the activity with me is building the capacity they can go for themselves and for their friends or their family.

Lisa: Yes, absolutely. Yeah. So much learning by doing learning by making mistakes and almost getting run over by cross country skiers. But yeah, but then they can take the knowledge and do it on their own, which is great.

That's very empowering for people.

So, what are some of the hikes that you do? Tell me about some of the activities you do with the group you can use this year for an example of the types of things. And if you could, because people aren't familiar many with the Twin Cities, if you could explain like how big the parks are or like just give a little more context.

Luisana: Well, between the Twin Cities, St. Paul and Minneapolis, ,the we have 64 regional parks and we have also 75 state parks . We go out and between 15 and 20 minutes, we are already in a lake, or in a park. But most of the people don't have the information or the information is in English or we find different barriers. But yeah, I think the popular activities I do all this time is hiking. But year by year, we add new experience like we start doing camping, we start doing kayaking, ice fishing. I don't fish, but bring the ice fishing to the community and see how that works. It's just, it's just building the curiosity and, and get the first experience. Maybe people like, maybe don't like another couple activities, super good and very popular is the snowshoes and cross country ski.

And this year we started doing backpacking. We already did one experience with canoeing and camping. So we canoe like 10 miles camping in the spot and continuously the next day, six miles of canoeing.

We try to get experience with different things. For me, it's just get out, try everything and you will get in love with something.

Something new we are doing also is forest bathing experience.

Lisa: Oh, beautiful.

Luisana: Yeah, we have a couple last year and this year, two more, and now I am in the process of the certification for forest bathing. So that is something new for Huellas Latinas next year, share this experience with more people and also in Spanish, because the experience we get is in English.

But now I feel that I will be able to offer in Spanish and I'm super super excited for that.

Lisa: That's great. Yeah, I have interviewed someone on this podcast. I'll leave a link in the show notes to someone. Yeah, once you get certification, we can meet up because maybe there's opportunity to walk with them and do a Spanish translation, you know, or something like that. It could be fun. .

There's so many benefits to forest bathing about self discovery. So you're just constantly adding different activities to what you offer.

Luisana: My idea is show people they can connect when get the connection with themselves or with nature in different ways.

We offer the outdoor photographic workshop. So we focus and learn how to take photos and nature for nature. So we teach that is the way you can connect with with the nature because, you know, hiking go out with no goal in a specific place and come back, like boring for some of people, but try to add a different component.

People feel more curious and we learn together and we learn together. When we learn more things, we add more things. Like if we did programs with a, I dunno the word really, the poll Poly for bees .

Lisa: Pollinators. Yeah. The pollinators.

Luisana: Yes. Yes. Thank you. So now when we are hiking and we see the bees, now I can say, oh, this is a bumblebee, this is a carpenter bee.

The same for flowers or kind of grass or, or, also for for mushroom. So there's too much we can learn outdoor and yeah, we it's just add things and I, I continue to say pushing the curiosity of the people.

Lisa: And you're, you're encouraging them to maybe push their, you mentioned families, push their kids and, you know, future generations and just always be curious and always and always think.

Luisana: Yeah, there are many elements you can add for the, with the, or through the photography. And also learn about the animals. They live in the, in the parks. Recently, we did a program for learn, learn about turkeys. And I was turkeys? I don't know, let's go. Let's see how this works. And it was super fun. And I was surprised how much I enjoyed the activity you've learned about the, the physical as well as aspects about turkeys and the interesting animal they are and also the beautiful they are.

Lisa: They live amongst us. We live amongst them. So it's great to know what we're all a part of. So you have done so much with Huellas Latinas, but I know from reading about you that you have done a lot for yourself that recently you did a thru-hike on the Superior Hiking Trail.

Can you tell people a little bit about the trail and especially if they're not from your area and what was your adventure?

Luisana: Yeah, this is a big project. So that is why I say when you go out, you never know where this experience will take you. I start with short walks and now I, I am trying to do thru-hiking.

The Superior Hiking Trail is just one portion of the North Country Trail. The North country countries are going through North Dakota, I believe, through New York, maybe all different, I think. In the north side of the state. They are 4,800 miles, all the north country. The bigger, the longer one in the country and the Superior Hiking Trail is just one section in Minnesota. They have 310 miles. You can hike even in southbound or northbound. And I just start from the south to the north. That is right before the city, Duluth, I don't have this kind of experience before.

I never backpacking, I even through hiking Never alone and and but I did a very good program with the community and with my family. The original plan. I will hire a couple of days with my niece. Next, I will meet the community in a campaign the next a couple of days. I will hike with another member of the community weekend by weekend.

Some families, we will go and sit with me and spend time with me. That is the original plan. Of course, I try to be. Ready physical because it's a hard hiking even more because. I don't see this just flat and that part is a little more rocky, broken a more elevation. And also because you are carrying more than 30 or 40 pounds in your bag.

And also mentally, because being in the wild alone it can be scary for women, especially, I don't know, for me. And I plan where I will sleep, where I will eat, all these kind of things, the planning I can do. I plan to hike 23 days. But you know, everything doesn't work for the original plan. And my second day, my stuff is broken.

I don't eat nothing in the second day. Just snacks. Until I can, I get the replacement of the stuff. I meet beautiful people. I have beautiful angels. That is amazing.

You have to accommodate for whatever you are living in the moment. You never you plan in paper will be the reality.

And also, I get a deeper connection with nature. Like, in one moment, I think I was listening to trees. I was listening to the nature, what the nature has to tell me. Most of all, my towns in the moment was about, I think, a lot of immigrants.

I think a lot about Venezuelan people and other immigrants. Right now are walking cross the Darien jungle to cross Colombia to Panama. That is a million, a million of people without experience doing that, without equipment, without safe, unless safe, you know, I was safe because I can go out easily from the trail and go to the city, but there, so that made me think be more grateful and appreciate what we have.

Unfortunately, day five, I injured my left ankle. So my couple last days, I start hiking with a lot of pain.

Because yeah, my health and, and my ankle, I don't want to go for worst situation, I just hike 7 days. I complete 70 miles and yeah, I see back and say, oh, my God, how I did that? It was crazy. I, when I see the photos and I saw myself climbing this peak.

It's a rock, tiny rock with a 40 pounds in my back. The weather was perfect, the view, the, you know, all I found in the, in my experience was, was perfect and was beautiful. And I am just super excited for next year, the snow melting and

keep doing, because yeah, my plan is, is keep doing and finish the trail and get a similar experience in another part of the country.

Lisa: I feel like you could, did you blog about your experience? Because I feel like there's a book in there.

Luisana: Not yet. In my website, I am doing a couple videos about experience and learning day by day. I have all the material to share because that is one of my goals. I want to, yes, hike for myself to get the experience, but also explain the voice. We are here, Latinos are here, Latinos love outdoor activities and we want more opportunities to do this. Backpacking trip is expensive. Super expensive. I already asked for help in my community, and thank you for everybody who helped me to get my equipment to go there.

So we want, or ask to the parks and all these agencies, create, let's go create together these programs.

And also for women. We can try. Let's do something.. Everybody, what I say in the first couple months when I spray the voice, I will do this. Are you going alone? Are you bringing a gun with you? I say, yes, I will go alone. I, that will be fine. That will be safe.

Lisa: Even if you are scared and you still do it, that, you know, that is I think always a sign of bravery that Yeah, yeah. In spite of being scared or realizing, you know, this isn't the safest that you still do it. ,

Luisana: I was super scared and I bring, I don't know, I think 20 items. Regarding safety, like the bear spray, the fire alarm, there's something to put in front of it.

I bring many things to felt safe.

Lisa: I'm always thinking about those kinds of things. But yeah, if you're prepared, which you've given examples of being prepared for the cold. So, of course, you would be being prepared for your own personal safety. And yes, it might add an extra five pounds to your backpack, but yeah, but it's, it's worth having for sure.

Luisana: Yeah, it's another good to keep in mind is be prepared emotionally and mentally, because when you be out or your home, everything can happen I will be exposed in the hike, like a fall, broken something, be lost, or get an experience with a bear or something like that.

And I think my injury was the least, the easiest thing can happen to me. And I feel grateful for that. I don't feel like I quit my hike or quit my journey. I just care about myself and I show self love. That is why I take my, my rest time now for recovery. My, my ankle.

And that is important to keep in mind. It's no, you know, about the goal or the finish something is, it's more about the journey and the experience you were, you are getting doing something.

Lisa: Wow. You have a lot of inspiration. It's true. So how is your ankle now, a few months after?

Luisana: I still feel a little funny when I hike more than two hikes, two miles, I still feel funny, but yeah, I think the tendons recovery takes time.

I will be better next year. And that is why I say I will keep doing even when I can't be there for one week, but also I will try to be there most of the time I can where my ankle allows me.

Lisa: You're just going to have more adventures. Like you said, it's, it's, it's just your, your journey. So, how can people find out about that? Everything that we just talked about related to the thru-hike. So they're prepared for next year. And how can people find out about the activities?

Luisana: Everybody can find the activities right in the website, huellaslatinas dot com. Also Instagram, and everybody's welcome, even when they don't speak Spanish. This is a good place for learn, practice, or get a new experience. The only requirement is. Yes, come if you love Latino community, if you love our food or a culture, because that is where we are.

We're just talking about food, about parties, about all these kind of things. And we love kids and hugging people. So that is the only thing different. Yes, hugging is required.

And we talk a lot that we don't we don't think about personal space. We want to know the name of your grandma.

Lisa: That's perfect. Yes. So everyone understands the ground rules. It sounds like a very open, warm environment in a very cold environment outside of it. That's great. Well, Luisana, are you ready for a few lightning round questions?

Luisana: Okay.

Lisa: Okay, cool.

If someone wanted to start a group of their own bringing diverse groups in to outdoor recreation, what is one tip you would give them?

Luisana: The first thing is listen to the community, what they want, what they, they would like to do and be kind, be empathized with people.

I really believe all, all people, each person bring different experience to the group and that is important.

Lisa: Empathy is very important. Okay, great. Now, the final question deals with paying it forward. That's the reason I have my blog is to shine light on people like you who are, you know, Bringing diversity and belonging to outdoor recreation, who are some people or groups that you would like to give a shout out to who have been doing some wonderful things, bringing diverse groups out.

Luisana: I shared time this year with Latino Outdoors. They did a National Campout for the 10 years anniversary was my first experience with them. And it was wonderful. I think they are doing amazing job across the country.

Lisa: Awesome. Yeah, they have a branch here in Boston. Yeah, I'll give a link to them. Well, it was a pleasure to hear about how everything came about how you just were hiking without knowing you were hiking in Venezuela to going 70 miles and 7 days in just a few years.

It's absolutely incredible. And inspirational, and I hope everyone gets a lot out of this. So thank you very much for taking time out.

Luisana: Thank you. It was my pleasure to be here. I am very, very honored to be and explain this time with you.

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