



MARIA ELENA SALINAS INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON THREE

Maria Elena Salinas, Broadcast Journalist & News Anchor
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Interviewed by: David Bender
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START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT: Life Stories Presents

MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

There are so many outstanding Latino Americans in this country and we have so much to be proud of. You know, whenever Hispanic Heritage Month comes around and mainstream media wants to do stories or they say, oh, we're going to cover the Latino community. And they go, let's do some immigration stories. And I think why is that the only issue that we are identified with when there are so many other issues? Yes, it's an important issue. And there are a lot of nuances to the immigration issue and they should all be covered, not just one, but they should be covered. But there's so much more to our community. There's so many outstanding people that are doing amazing things in our community, and I think we need more of those stories told.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Thread



ON SCREEN TEXT:

María Elena Salinas

Broadcast Journalist & News Anchor

A Voice for Her Community

00:01:10:00

MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

I am Maria Elena Salinas, I'm a Mexican American and I'm an independent journalist.

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INTERVIEWER:

Maria, welcome and thank you again very much for doing this. I would love for you to tell me how your parents immigrated, you were born here.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

Every immigrant has a story. My father was undocumented. My father and my mother migrated to the U.S. in the 40s, and at that time you came in, were welcomed with open arms and were signed up as residents of this country. My father immediately recruited to go to war, and he did not want to. I didn't really understand why until much later and after my father passed away, I found out a lot of things about his past and one of them is that he had been a Catholic priest. He was a man of peace, he didn't believe in war. And he briefly went back to Mexico, and at that time you lost your status if you left without



permission, not like now where you lose your status if you enter the country without permission. So he lost his status but still remained in the U.S. for many years and my sisters and I were born in Los Angeles, and eventually we were able, as citizens, to legalize him and to work on his documents like they say, fix his papers like they say. But he was a brilliant man, he was brilliant. And you know I didn't understand a lot of things about him. As I said before, my father had been a priest and he had a very different mentality.

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INTERVIEWER:

And he didn't talk about it, you learned after he passed.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

I learned after, I don't know why he didn't tell us. I imagine that he didn't want to burden us with that. I always thought that my life was like a novella, like a telenovela where the man from a good family marries a very humble, beautiful young girl and then is disowned by the family because she's not of the same social stature. My mother only studied up to the sixth grade and my father had a doctorate degree in philosophy, so I said okay that must be the story. And the story completely changed after I found out that my father had been a priest. I sort of took a journalistic dive into investigating my father's side of the family and try to understand what his life was like and why he left the priesthood. And at the end of the day I think it was a love story. I think he fell in love with my mother and decided that's what he wanted to do, raise a



family. My mother grew up in rural Mexico in the state of Sinaloa. And in Mexico the only demand was graduating from the sixth grade and that's what she did.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

And she was the eldest of eight brothers and sisters and her mother passed away when she was 18 and she had to take care of her father and her brothers and sister. She eventually moved to Mexico City, that's where she met my father and they both migrated to the U.S.. My mother was a seamstress all of her life. I have nothing but good memories of my parents. They were amazing human beings, very loving to each other. Very loving and supporting of us. My mom was like a magnet where everyone would come to the house. Every time there was any kind of holiday she would cook for everyone, whether it's cousins or extended family and friends. And it was just a very joyous home. And even though we were a low income family, they never made us feel like we were lacking anything. I never heard them complain about not having money or not having this or not that. Sometimes you wonder, like, where did I get these traits from? Why am I the way that I am?

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

And then you realize when you look back that you get it so much from your upbringing. And I think from my mother, I inherited her work ethic. And from my father, I inherit his social conscience. My mother was a very hard worker and she always told me, no matter what you do in life, try to be the best that



you can be. And from my father, I remember him telling me... You never stop learning. He used to walk for hours and he'd come back with a book. And I'd say, "Well, you're an older man. Why are you reading and studying?" He said, "Because you never stop learning and you never stop growing, and you never stop studying." And I think those things stuck with me so much that it turned me into, you know, a workhorse. I've never been afraid of work. I work, work, work, never complain about working too much.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you talk about when you started out, what journalism was for you?

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

When I was offered a job at Channel 34, I was working in radio. And I wasn't sure I wanted that job. I loved my radio job, but I had studied marketing. I was very much interested in the advertising industry that was just beginning with the Latino community. And I thought, oh, OK, going to work for the TV station might give me an opportunity to do just that. But no, I was hired as an anchor and as a reporter. And even though I had had a microphone in my hand many times. You know, I had radio hair, nice curly hair. I didn't have to worry about putting makeup on. And now I had to be in front of a camera. I was very shy, very, very shy and introverted. So when I first started, I got laryngitis, which is the medical term for I was petrified. And it took me a



couple of weeks in order to be able to start. I think I learned a lot on the job. I would go to the LA Press Club and you do one press conference after another.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

And I would observe the other reporters that were there. And then I would watch their newscast and watch their reports. I didn't raise my hand in the beginning. I was very afraid to raise my hand because I thought, what if I ask a stupid question and make a fool out of myself? And, you know, after about a year, I realized that, oh, they're asking the same questions I want to ask. So I started raising my hand and I haven't stopped raising my hands since. So, yes, I am self-taught. But, you know, what's interesting, I learned a lot about journalism, but I learned a lot about the role of Spanish language media, which I felt and I still feel is a little bit different from mainstream media in the sense that there's a social service component to it. At least in the beginning, there were 14 million Latinos in the U.S. when I first started. And I realized that my community, the one that I lived in, the one I was reporting to, they needed the information that we were providing. Even though there were many Latinos that were there for generations, there were a lot that were recently arrived immigrants.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

Out of everything that I did, the most popular thing was the public affairs program, because that's where we would tell them about a job fair or a health fair. And I would have people come up to me and tell me, "Oh, thanks to your show, my husband was able to get a job." "They detected glaucoma in my



mother thanks to the information you gave me.” So then I realized what my role was in TV. People are watching me, people recognize me, and people relate to the information that we’re giving them. We’re sort of like a lifeline to try to understand in your language a new society that you live in and you’re trying to adjust. That to me was something that was very important. It became my passion, and then it turned into my mission.

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INTERVIEWER:

You got to use your professional role to fulfill your personal passion.

MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

Exactly.

INTERVIEWER:

How did that happen? Talk about that.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

Well, I think it happened in the beginning of my career, and if there could be a turning point or one specific incident that I can point to, I think there was an election in Los Angeles. At that time, we were 25% — Latinos were 25% of the population, and we had no representation in City Hall, in the Board of Supervisors, in the board of education, zero Hispanics on that. And there was a special election, and there was an opportunity for Latinos to elect one of



their own that was running for city council. So I went out to do my story. I think I had been in the job less than a year. I was still learning the profession, and I did MOS's, Men on the Street interviews, and I came back and I told my boss, "I can't do the story." He said, "Why?" I said, "because I interviewed 16 people, and out of those 16 people 15 weren't voting." He says, "Why weren't they voting?" I said because some of them weren't citizens, some of them didn't know there was an election, some of them weren't registered. And he says, "Can't you see? The story is right there in front of you."

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

"Latinos — Latino voters feel disengaged from mainstream America, and therefore they're not participating. And as long as they don't participate, they're never gonna be able to have the representation they deserve." And it sort of like clicked. I said, "Oh, okay." Not only did I learn a journalistic lesson that day, which is to look a little deeper into the story and look at the backstory, the story behind the story, and I realized that I had a job to do, and my job was to empower Latinos, to inform them, and to encourage them. The Spanish language media in general really did help to empower Latinos by giving them the information that they needed to make it in what to some of them was their newly adopted country, to understand what their rights were and to understand what their responsibilities as citizens were. If you can vote and you don't, you don't have the moral authority to complain. Because it's your responsibility to vote. And it's your responsibility to understand what the issues are.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

And where the candidates stand on those issues. Not only has the Latino community grown from 14 million to over 60 million, Spanish language media has grown from those low power, low quality stations that nobody watched to a powerhouse that can compete in ratings with any other network. In the beginning, when I started covering politics and we would ask for an interview, they would say, "You're from Channel 30 what?" Like, we don't know that channel. We don't have anybody here that speaks Spanish. I said, "Well, don't worry, I speak English. I can translate whatever interview you do." And eventually, you know, we got to a point where politicians would knock on our door and offer us interviews. Where every major campaign, serious campaign would have someone on their staff to deal with Spanish language media and the Latino community. That's how much we've grown in importance.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

And I think I grew as a journalist and as a person during that time, too. I think we all grew holding hands together. We all grew together. And the Latino community now didn't just grow in numbers. They grew in sophistication. They're so much more politically savvy. They're much more demanding. They're more educated. And they've become a powerhouse. I mean, I feel

very proud when I see Latinos succeeding because I remember the challenges that there were then.

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INTERVIEWER:

The diversity of the community. And that's something I've heard you talk about. Can you talk about what it means in this era to be a Latina or Latino in the United States?

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

Well, to be a Latino or a Latina in this era, I think is sort of a challenge. There's a combination of being very proud of your cultural heritage, but then there's also the challenges that you have of still trying to show that you're a part of this country. Diversity has existed for always. I think right now, it's probably one of the most important times to understand that diversity within the Latino community because we're not just diverse ethnically, but also culturally and politically. And I think a lot of people need to understand that. Advertisers seem to have understood that. When you see a brand doing commercials of a certain product, they don't have the same commercial in Los Angeles that they do in New York, that they do in Miami, that they do in Texas. But politicians haven't caught on yet. I don't think they understand how diverse we are. You can't have a one size fits all for Latinos.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:



And now, you know, it's interesting, this whole thing with the labels, and are you a Latino? Are you Hispanic? Are you this? Are you that? Is Latinx the right word to use?

INTERVIEWER:

Is it, by the way?

MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

For me, it doesn't matter. You can call me a Chicana, you can call me Mexican-American, you can me Latina, Hispanic, Latinx, although I think Latinx is more for younger people. But, you know, as long as it relates to my cultural identity, labels don't matter to me. But labels do matter for a lot of Latinos. And you see in the census now that people are identifying not so much as Latino, Hispanic, or Latinx, but Mexican-American, Cuban-American Dominican-American. You know, Argentine-American people are beginning to be so proud of their roots.

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INTERVIEWER:

We're in a very interesting time. People are engaged. But they're engaged often in ways that seem to be perhaps not in the best interests of the Latino community. There seems to be this phenomenon of, you know, I'm here, we don't need anymore. Coming not from Caucasian people, but from Latinos to other Latinos. What's that about?

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

So let me see, where do I start? Let's start with directly with your question about what is happening with the Latino community, and why is it that we see anti-immigrant immigrants, anti-immigrant Latinos? And I think you hit it right on the nose when you say, we're here and we're struggling, but we don't want anymore. Right now, there's so much focus on the border. And the crisis at the border, and it is a crisis. And this is not the first crisis. There's been crisis at the border for decades now in different times and at different levels. But usually, immigration reform has been concentrated on why can't we try to find a way to legalize the millions of people who are here without documents in the country. And they've been here for decades, and they've established roots, and they have families, and they pay taxes. They have careers, they have businesses.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

When the focus turns to the border and people crossing the border right now in such large numbers, then immigrants say, no, we don't want that. What we want is to take care of the ones that are here. And even younger people, I'm worried about my uncle, or my aunt, or my grandfather, or my mother, or my father who have not been able to legalize their status. And we don't need this influx of immigrants to ruin that. They've lost sensitivity in understanding why immigrants come in the first place. Nobody wants immigration, not even immigrants want to immigrate. Immigrants want a better life. And if they leave their country, if they take such a huge risk, that very dangerous

trajectory to come to the U.S., it's because they must live in very desperate situations back home.

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INTERVIEWER:

And you've covered those places. You made a point of going to Central America, covering the government, seeing at points in the 80s and 90s, the turbulence is continuing now. And people literally are walking barefoot for a thousand miles.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

Right. It used to be mostly men. Now it's men, women, children, entire families. And I think people need to put themselves in their shoes and try to understand what is their life like? How bad could it be that they take these risks to come to this country? And don't treat them like they're criminals because they're not criminals. They're just people trying to find a better life. I mean, I understand we cannot allow everyone that wants to come into the country to come in, but we can't demonize them. And treat them as invaders and treat them as criminals. They are human beings who are suffering in their own country. So I think we're lacking empathy. And it's painful to see that some in the Latino community are going along with that. When people don't understand why so many immigrants are coming, what their stories are, and they see them as invaders, then they end up seeing the whole Latino community as foreigners. And that is something that I think is tragic.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

At this day and age, we are still being treated — With the deep roots that we have in this country. We're still being treated as if we were foreigners in our own country. And then we act as if we were foreign in our country.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you think this is because, if you ask Americans, polling suggests that everyone should speak English. That we are a one language country.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

I hate to say it, but I think it's racism. Because right now, the majority, almost 80% of Hispanic Americans are bilingual. In fact, 60% are US citizens, born in the US. Another 20% are naturalized citizens. So the great majority of Hispanic Americans are American. Citizens. And they have every right to be in this country. I mean, we forget that Spanish was spoken before English in the US. The Spaniards and the Mexicans were here before the Pilgrims were. I don't know if it's so much the language. I think there's so much value in being bilingual, twi-lingual, speaking four languages. We see that in Europe where people just naturally speak so many languages. And in this country, we're so afraid of more languages. Well, we are a country of immigrants.

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INTERVIEWER:

And part of your job as a journalist, you've always described it as telling the truth. These are facts. Now, we're in an era where facts aren't necessarily what people are believing, no matter how much data you give them.

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

I think it's tragic, and I think it's dangerous. I think that it's very dangerous for people to undermine the media. I mean, we're called the fourth power for something, for a reason. I think the media is a pillar of democracy in this country. And people need to be informed. Our job as journalists is to seek the truth and to tell the truth, and to denounce corruption and injustice. An uninformed or misinformed society is vulnerable to the abuse of those in power. And we're basically the only filter between the people and those in power. We're the only ones that can be there to fact check, to put things into perspective. And with the growth of media, there's good things and bad things. It's a double-edged sword. It's wonderful that we have access to so much media now. But I think it all started with cable news. Although it was wonderful for us not to have to wait every day till the 6:30 news to find out what's going on, –

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

–people started blurring the lines between what is a journalist and what is a commentator. It was giving you their opinion. That is one of the first things that I think started affecting people's belief system. And then they looked for



people that were like-minded. And I wanna listen to this person because this person is telling me what I wanna hear because that's what I believe. Instead of the truth, instead of the facts. And then you add social media to it and you add now different medias being divided into left and right. I have covered, I think it's 11, presidential elections, another 11 midterm elections. And I have never seen the country so divided. Not just Congress divided, not just politicians divided, but the country is so divided, stuck in their own little corners and become so aggressive. It's affecting families, it's dividing families, it's affecting friendships. It becomes something very dangerous, you know, where people are willing to take drastic measures in order to get their way.

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INTERVIEWER:

How would you suggest we move back towards civility, decency and a respect for information, not disinformation?

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

Um, I don't know if we need to go back to it or if we need to go forward and find it again in a different way. Because in the past we were still an intolerant community. We don't want that intolerance. We want to progress in a way where we respect everyone, where we expect people's choices, where we inspect people's backgrounds, where we respect people's differences, where people shouldn't be judged by the color of their skin or their texture in their hair or the accent in their voice. No, we're all human beings. You know, I grew



up bilingual, bicultural, and we celebrated holidays where there were American holidays or Mexican holidays. And if we had to put some salsa in our turkey, let that be, but we still celebrated Thanksgiving and we celebrated 4th of July. So I'm very proud of that duality that I have. The fact that we're so diverse and we can learn so much from each other and we bring so much to the table to each other, we're losing that.

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INTERVIEWER:

What gives you hope now? In this dark time, what gives you hope?

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MARIA ELENA SALINAS:

What gives me hope right now is this young generation, young people. Yes, it's the young people that give me hope because they're the ones that are making a difference. It's not them that are dividing us. I think they are the ones who are trying to unite us. And when you see some of these major issues that we're dealing with, you know, who are the ones that are really standing up and making things happen? It's the young people. It's the young people, the climate activists, it's the young people that are marching for gun control, it's the young dreamers that are marching and lobbying in Congress for the Dream Act. And, you know, they're unafraid, unapologetic. They are willing to do whatever it takes to save their world. And I don't see the same racism and homophobia that I see in older Americans. I see them so much more

accepting of each other. So our generation, our young generation is what gives me hope.

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