

A Q&A with Juliet Menéndez

Latinitas is such a stunning celebration and really the first book of its kind. What inspired you to create a book in this format?

Juliet: The idea for the book came to me in 2014 when I was working as an art teacher in Upper Manhattan. My students had families from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Mexico, but the posters on the walls of their schools showed figures like Benjamin Franklin, Einstein, and Dalí. I wanted to see some fresh faces that looked more like my students up on those walls.

I started researching Latinx history trying to come up with ideas for men and women to include, but I kept noticing that something very important was missing: women! And when I did find them, they were being relegated to footnotes. If there was anything that was going to bring out the feminist in me, it was that. So, I decided to dedicate this project to celebrating mis paisas: Latina women.

As I delved into the research, I couldn't believe all of the fascinating stories I was finding! I was beyond excited to learn about Latinas like Evelyn Miralles who was NASA's first virtual reality engineer and Victoria Santa Cruz who created her own theater to feature Black artists and musicians and directed, wrote, choreographed, AND composed the music for their shows. And, thanks to a lucky encounter with a little girl at the library who insisted I should include a forensic anthropologist because that's what she wants to be, I found out about Mercedes Doretti too, digging up the evidence of past war crimes to fight for justice. The more I found out, the more I realized that posters weren't going to be enough. I knew these stories needed to be told and that is when *Latinitas* became a book.

Why was it important to you to show these *Latinas* as children?

Juliet: I knew it was important to make these women relatable. I wanted children to see that, no matter how incredible these Latinas' accomplishments might be, they started out as little girls too--playing, making mistakes, finding themselves, and discovering their interests. I wanted children to be able to see themselves in these women and think: I could do that!

Were there any other *Latinitas* that you would have liked to have included in this book? If so, who and why?

Juliet: There are so many other Latinas I would love to illustrate and write about! Many of them are in the "More *Latinitas*" section. For example, I would have loved to have done a profile for Sara Gómez! My sister is a documentary filmmaker and I am definitely a film nerd, so her story particularly fascinates me. Unfortunately, it was very difficult finding information about her early life. It was important to me to make each Latina I included relatable to children and show the link between their childhood interests and what they later decided to be, so I had to make some hard choices. Luckily, I've been told that a new book is coming out about Sara Gómez this year and I am very much looking forward to it.

LATINITAS:
Celebrating 40 Big Dreamers

