



All Relative: Defining Diego

Episode Seven: What's on Paper

A Production of Somethin' Else and Sony Music Entertainment

MUSIC: Repetitive gentle plucking of acoustic guitars with sounds that are filled with innocent wonder begins.

Diego: Previously, on All Relative: Defining Diego...

Dan: So that must be very hard for you to feel like you have a family in Minnesota, but you also have a family here.

Eleven-year-old Diego: Um, not that hard.

Thirteen-year-old Diego: D-e-l-i-c-i-s-a-s.

Laurie: No, that's too short. That would be delisas. You wanna say deliciosas.

Diego yawns.

Dan: We just need another week. We just gotta get. There's just some paperwork problems. The lawyer tells me everything's going to be fine. And then, you know, a week would go by and it wouldn't be any different.

Seven year old Diego: Who's that?

Dan: That is your birth father.

MUSIC: Repetitive gentle plucking of an acoustic guitar with tones that are filled with innocent wonder ends.

Dan: Is it more complication than he can deal with, you know? Is it more complication than he should be dealing with?

Laurie: What do you think?

Dan: I think it probably is. And I think it's one of the consequences of coming back here.

Laurie: So Diego, this was from back in 2008. You were 10 and we were visiting your birth village with some other adoptive families.

And, you know, Dan and I haven't always agreed on whether visiting your birth village is a good idea. I think the more information you have about your roots, the better.

Diego: Yeah. But Dad's a worrier.

Dan: Besides being a lot of family stuff to dump on him, the truth is...is that all of our kids — all of our kids that were born in Guatemala and put up for adoption...they are a shameful secret in their families of origin. And when we come, you know, stumbling down here, and, uh, intruding on their lives...it's sort of like, we're, we're opening that secret and that can lead to all kinds of crap for them and for us and for our kids...

Laurie: There's one remaining secret that Dan and I actually agree on. For years, we agreed not to push for information about your birth father.

Diego: My whole life, I had always heard the same stories about Cristobal.

Laurie: Yeah, and because of those stories, I worried about you meeting him. I worried about what kind of doors we could open and not be able to close.

Diego: We had always heard claims that Cristobal drank too much and was abusive. But we never knew for sure. When my sister Julia died, Isabel told you guys she died from a sickness. But then some kids in the village told me a different story.

Seven-year-old Diego: I know how she died. She was sick and she stole a mango. And, um, her dad got really, um, out of control and he kicked her in the stomach and she died.

Diego: We may never know why Julia died. But really, both the things we heard could be true. Cristobal may have kicked her...and she might have had kidney disease, like I did.

THEME MUSIC: An uplifting and inspiring electronic beat begins with a strong guitar underneath begins softly.

Diego: The whole time I was a kid, I told myself that my birth father Cristobal was why bad things happened. In my mind, he was the reason I was adopted in the first place. I blamed him for Isabel being poor and having to relinquish her sons. He left her pregnant. He came and went as he pleased. And he didn't support the family.

I had this image of him as this out-of-control tough guy with a violent streak.

So when I had my own problems, Cristobal became my scapegoat.

Like when I was angry and destructive — which, you know, I was *a lot* when I was a teenager — I wondered if it was because I was his son.

Now that I'm grown, I don't care as much about whether I'm like him or not. I just want to meet him. I have some things I want to say to him *and* some things I want to ask him, one man to another.

THEME MUSIC: Swells and fades out.

Diego: I'm Diego Xicay Luke...

Laurie: I'm Laurie Stern...

Diego: And from Somethin' Else and Sony Music Entertainment, this is All Relative: Defining Diego. Episode 7: What's on Paper.

ACT ONE

Diego: I always believed Isabel relinquished me because she wanted to give me a better life...a life that I couldn't have had if I stayed in Guatemala. But I never knew what Cristobal knew about me.

Sixteen-year-old Diego: I'm excited. I want to meet my dad. But you guys think that's not a good idea...

Diego: That's me when I was sixteen, talking to you and Dad in Minnesota.

Laurie: What are your expectations?

Sixteen-year-old Diego: I don't know, I feel like honestly, he's a changed dude.

Laurie: From what to what?

Sixteen-year-old Diego: From some hardass dude who fought in the war and stuff to just someone who is trying to survive the everyday life of the economy there...

Diego: I had that one picture of Cristobal — you know, the one Isabel gave me when I was little. It's a picture of a skinny teenager in a military uniform, holding an assault rifle. And I always wondered what he was doing.

So when we went to Guatemala when I was 16, I had the chance to ask Isabel.

Dolores: You can ask.

Sixteen-year-old Diego: What did Cristobal do during the war?

Dolores and Isabel: [Speaking in Tzutujil.] FADE UNDER

Diego: Isabel and Dolores told me the story. When Cristobal was 14 — two years younger than I was — he and his father were working in another town, and the Guatemalan Army picked him up. Literally. They threw him in the back of a truck. Then they took him up to a base in the mountains.

Dolores: Well, Cristobal...like, used to be...like a teenager. The Army, the soldiers, they just come. You want it or not, it's not volunteer, and to become a soldier that's what happened to him...

Diego: This kind of thing happened all the time in the civil war.

I mean, just imagine — you're a kid walking down the street, and a truckful of soldiers pulls up and tells you to get in. He was an indigenous boy like me, forced to fight for an army notorious for killing indigenous people: *our* people.

MUSIC: Sparse acoustic guitar filled with innocent wonder begins and ends.

Diego: For indigenous people, soldiers in the army were the bad guys. So when he returned to Santiago Atitlán years later, I can only imagine what kind of a welcome he received. I mean, it just makes me wonder, *What does that do to a man?*

Diego: When I heard this story as a sixteen-year-old, I started thinking. I was Cristobal's age — well, right around it. And I could put myself in his shoes. I wondered about the reasons for Cristobal's drinking and violent behavior that I had heard growing up.

Maybe the war broke him in some way.

I wanted to hear *his* side of the story.

MUSIC: Warm optimistic marimba loop begins.

Diego: So when we were planning our trip to Guatemala in 2022, I was feeling a sense of purpose. This trip wasn't like all the others. It was a mission...and I was searching for answers. I had three main things to accomplish.

Laurie: Number One.

Diego: Get a Guatemalan DPI...that's like a social security card. I needed *that* to get a Guatemalan passport. I plan to travel the world someday. And I want the freedom to travel as a Guatemalan *or* as a U.S. citizen. Because I'm both.

Laurie: Number Two.

Diego: Dig deeper into my birth family's stories. I wanted to know more about Isabel and all my relatives.

Laurie: Number Three.

Diego: Meet Cristobal. For the first time.

So in March 2022, we got on a plane to Guatemala. The last time I was there, I was a teenager — now, I was a man with a college degree and a job.

Laurie: And when we got there, you were the reporter, and Dan and I were along for the ride.

MUSIC: Warm optimistic marimba loop ends.

Diego: Stay with us.

AD BREAK

ACT TWO

Sounds outside the hotel.

Diego: Mission Number One: The Paper Trail.

Sounds of van door slamming, engine starting.

Mia: *Estoy bien aquí, gracias.*

Diego: So we got up the first morning and my producer Mia and I met our driver Oswaldo. He was this short, funny man from near Santiago Atitlán and he had a great head of black hair.

Diego: We're doing this to renew my passport — get my Guatemalan passport.

Diego: We were on our way to the Guatemalan National Registry of Persons — known as RENAP for short.

Guatemala has a ton of RENAP offices around the country, kind of like the DMV back home. The nearest one was only a 10-minute drive from our hotel. And I wanted to see if I could go back to the States with two passports in my pocket.

Mia: Why is this important to you?

Diego: Like, I've always been hesitant to call myself Guatemalan in a way. And I think this kind of validates who I am in a...that's kind of, not really a good way to judge yourself by a passport, but I think it'll, it'll help.

Diego: I mean, I've had a bunch of pieces of paper about me that I don't think, kind of, define me. Like, my report cards and my behavior reports and my medication chart and this felt so tangible. It was something I could bring home with me.

GPS: ...toward 78 Avenida...then turn toward 11 Calle. Then turn left onto 11 Calle.

Diego: After some bad Spanglish on the GPS, we got to the office. And it really was like a DMV. Get a number, and wait until that number-and-letter combo shows up in bright lights above a window. People were standing in line, waiting for their numbers to be called.

[Oswaldo stamping his ticket.]

Diego: Necesito una identificación porque fui adoptado cuando...

RENAP oficial: [Unintelligible question in Spanish.]

Diego: ¿Qué? I can't understand...

Oswaldo and official chatting.

Diego: It took a minute — and some help from our driver Oswaldo — to explain my situation. That I'm adopted. And it was because I was adopted that I wanted to get my DPI or my identification.

I felt prepared walking in. Carrying a whole folder of documents. Isabel's photo was in one of them. So was her thumbprint, marking her relinquishment of me. It was all there.

But the guy behind the desk seemed totally bewildered...by my papers. By my situation. By me.

RENAP oficial: Es el primero que tengo ya acá en este. Por eso fui a consultar porque no vienen personas así...

Diego: He said this is the first time he'd met an adoptee. I don't usually get people like this, he said.

Honestly, I was shocked. Like, there are tens of thousands of Guatemalan adoptees. So how was it possible that he hadn't met one? Was my situation really that unique?

So Mia asked him — What do you think about it?

Mia: ¿Qué opina de esto?

RENAP official: Pues, realmente...está bien complicado.

Diego: He said, *It's...complicated*. Like, yeah. No shit.

MUSIC: A stripped down theme melody begins

Diego: After an hour at the RENAP office, I broke the news to you and Dan that we weren't going to be leaving with my DPI that day.

Sounds of restaurant: silverware and glasses clinking.

Laurie: Yeah, we were back by the hotel having breakfast.

Diego: Like, we just have to like go in like 15 days and be like, *Hey, you guys figure this out?*

Dan: Yeah. And I just want to, um, throw out the possibility that you go back in 15 days and they say, oh, sorry, we don't have it yet. But come back next week, which is basically what happened when you were born and we tried to bring you home.

Diego: Right, I know.

Laurie: It was the same time of year too. It was like, end of February, beginning of March. Delay after delay after delay.

Diego: I think it's, uh, probably a little more regulated now. It seems...like, he could've just been like, okay, *We'll just choose one and go with it*. You know what I mean?

Dan: Well, when you were born, it was the same...it was the same problem. It wasn't that it wasn't regulated. It was that someone was telling a lie and the, and the regulators were like, *No, wait, this is all fucked up. Something's not right here. So the regulators are trying to get it right.*

Diego: But I wasn't giving up yet. The most difficult missions are the ones that require a little more reconnaissance.

So after breakfast, Mia and I climbed back into the van. And we went to a different office. The RENAP *Central* Office.

Sounds of traffic.

Diego: It was on a busy street — taxis and chicken buses honking, vendors selling food, and exhaust fumes mixing with the smell of hot pavement.

And this time, I tried a different approach. Instead of handing over the whole folder, I just gave them *one* piece of paper. It was the birth certificate that said I was born in Escuintla — a coastal city in the south of Guatemala.

RENAP: ¿De que año es? Cuantos años tenés?

Diego: ¿Veintitrés?

RENAP: ¿Ventitrés? Por qué no has sacado tu DPI?

Diego: A couple hours later, back at the hotel, you and Dan and I went over the shenanigans again.

Laurie: What place are they registering as the place where you were born?

Diego: Escuintla, I think, yeah. So...

Laurie: That's not what you're, that's not what we waited nine months for the form to say.

Diego: I think there's always going to be a discrepancy and I don't think we're ever really going to know where I was actually born.

Dan and Laurie: Well, Isabel knows.

Diego: Yes, I know. We can ask her when we see her, like where was I actually born?

Laurie: I mean, for their record-keeping purposes, did they write down Escuintla?

Diego: I think so. I'm pretty sure they wrote down...

Laurie: Wow.

Dan: If only it had been that easy 23 years ago.

Laurie: No, it was, it was. I mean, there were two pieces of paper, one said Escuintla. One said Santiago Atitlán. The PGN wouldn't let you go until their records were reconciled. The new lawyer made sure that your birth certificate said Santiago Atitlán, and then we were out of there.

Diego: Yeah. I guess...

Dan: Well, if that all got cleared up, then why is it still a question now?

Diego: That *is* the question. Why is it not cleared up now? Why are there still multiple ones? I think that's one of the things we're looking at is probably someone got paid off. You're there to just look the other way and be like...

Dan: So they never corrected the record.

Diego: So they might not have actually corrected it.

Dan: Yeah, well, it's bureaucratic bullshit.

Laurie: It's just fascinating that when, you know, as an official Guatemalan, you'll be registered as having been born in Escuintla when all those nine months of waiting to leave here...it was about getting them to say you were born in Santiago Atitlán.

Diego: I want to ask you, does it feel like your nine months was just wasted? Like, what's your reaction to...is it just funny?

Laurie: No, it's not funny, honestly, I'm a little sad that you weren't born in Santiago Atitlán because it's Santiago Atitlán, which is a place we know and love. And also, um 'cause we waited nine months for the record to say you were, and now it turns out the record is going to say you were born somewhere else.

Dan: Yeah, but you know, it's, it's not real. It's just a record.

Laurie: Right. Intellectually...but...

Laurie: So you have no feelings one way or the other about it.

Diego: I'm not like Escuintla, go Escuintla, vamos Escuintla. I don't care. I'm still thinking Santiago Atitlán is my hometown. It's where I am from. Yeah, I'm still from Santiago Atitlán.

Dan: [Laughs.]

Laurie: You know, I think another thing that's going on for me is I can picture Escuintla and the people I talked to there. It has a very different vibe than Santiago Atitlán. And if you could choose a place to be from...

Diego: This doesn't change where I'm from, Laurie.

Laurie: I know, I know...

Diego: You're acting like this is the end of the fucking world.

Laurie: I'm not acting like...

Diego: It's not.

Laurie: It's the end of the fucking world.

Dan: What are you acting like?

Laurie: I'm just trying to be precise about what I'm thinking and feeling right now.

Dan: Yeah, okay. That's good.

Diego: The important thing is I don't care. And I know in my hearts, that Santiago Atitlán is my hometown. That's what matters.

Dan: He's a man of the lake.

Diego: Yeah, wherever, um, Lago Atitlán, that's my home. That lake, that area. I'm proud to be from there. And I know I'm Tzutujil. Like, that doesn't change that I'm Tzutujil. I think that's kind of the big thing is, like, Isabel is still my mother. Cristobal is still my father. They're from Santiago Atitlán. Therefore, I'm from Santiago Atitlán. Just 'cause I was born one other place and it says it on a piece of paper, it doesn't mean I'm actually, like, from there, right?

Laurie: You are *Aa Tiko*.

Diego: Yeah.

MUSIC: Delicate and anxious acoustic guitar begins.

Laurie: So Diego — can we go back to the Escuintla versus Santiago Atitlán thing for a second?

You know, about where you were born? I think the reason it bothers me so much is that it's like two different stories. I mean, you being from Santiago Atitlán, that's everything beautiful. Everything we've built — you know, our relationships with Isabel and Dolores, and how much we love the lake.

But Escuintla is like the opposite — it's hot and flat and industrial. And one of their industries used to be adoption.

It's where I met that 12-year-old girl, Marvin's birth mother. You know, Marvin would be a couple years younger than you. I've never stopped thinking about the two of them.

Our facilitator Rosa did a ton of business in Escuintla. And that's also where Isabel went to sell peanuts. It's where Rosa met her and convinced her to relinquish the baby she was going to have — you!

Diego: So you don't like me being connected to Escuintla. It's like you feel like Escuintla is the adoption racket and Santiago Atitlán is kind of beautiful and above all that.

But I *am* connected to Escuintla.

Laurie: Yeah, you are. I mean — you have your own story, and it's pretty wonderful. But we're also connected to the larger story — the story of international adoption, and all the sides of it. Including the ugly side.

MUSIC: Delicate and anxious acoustic guitar begins.

Diego: The night before we're heading to Santiago Atitlán, we get this call.

Laurie: Yeah, it was Dolores — our friend and translator. We were hoping she'd help you meet up with Cristobal, but she hadn't said yet whether it was going to happen or not.

Laurie: So you're ready for us tomorrow?

Dolores: Yeah, I'm ready. I just wanted to tell you...and what should we do tomorrow?

Laurie: What do we know about Cristobal?

Dolores: Cristobal, I think he...he's been drinking for a couple months now. He's not stopping. Yeah. I don't know if he's going to be there or not. Yeah.

Laurie: Have you talked to Cristobal or are you hearing this from Isabel or how do you know?

Dolores: No, I just, I just hear from Isabel.

Laurie: So, Diego, you could hear me on the phone with Dolores?

Diego: Yeah, I mean, I heard you talking about, like, what if there's a way to meet Cristobal without Isabel?

Laurie: And I'm glad you said something, because you set me straight about how you wanted it to go.

Diego: Okay, basically, I don't want to meet him if it puts anyone at risk. And if Isabel is so adamant that...you know, part of me doesn't believe he's on a drinking binge, just because that's kind of what she says all the time. And I think it's just her way of like, not wanting me to meet him.

MUSIC: A light yet unnerving piano and violin loop fades in.

Diego: At the end of the day, I think I respect her decision. Like I don't want to do it without her blessing. 'Cause I feel like she knows what's best. I get to go to — back to the U.S. I don't have to deal with any of the repercussions of what might happen. And it might, you know, the family already has a tough family life. And I think...me throwing a wrench in there could just make things harder. Um, it could make things easier. I mean, they might not have talked for a long time and now they get to talk again. I don't know.

MUSIC: A light yet unnerving piano and violin loop fades out.

Diego: After the break...Isabel. Stay with us.

AD BREAK

ACT THREE

Grunting and zippers.

Diego: Bruh bruh bruh. We are getting ready to meet my birth family. Everyone is scrambling — everyone is mad scrambling to go. Dad's getting the camera ready. Uh, Laurie and Mia are getting the microphones ready.

Laurie: The day came. Isabel and Dolores were on their way to our hotel. And we were trying to find a quiet space to meet with them.

Diego: Yeah, I told Dan not to cry so we don't hear his blubbering behind the camera.

Laurie: We found a grassy clearing, away from the bustle of the hotel restaurant. We dragged some chairs over, set up microphone stands. And then we sat down to wait. I was feeling nervous. We hadn't seen Isabel for seven years.

We saw Dolores first.

Laurie: Hello Dolores!

Dolores: Hello Laurie, buenos días. ¿Qué tal? Mucho gusto. Sí.

Dolores: Diego, ¿qué tal?

Laurie: Mucho gusto!

Diego: And then Isabel came down the path behind Dolores.

Laurie: Isabel! ¿Cómo estás?

Isabel: Buenos días. [Laughs.]

Laurie: Josefa?!

Diego: It seemed like Isabel had shrunk. I'm only five feet tall, but even I towered over her.

Laurie: Her face had more wrinkles than I remembered. I'm sure mine did, too. I mean, I'm 66 now, and she'd be in her late fifties. So much time had passed for both of us.

Isabel: [Speaking in Tzutujil.]

Laurie: She was trailed by a shy little boy who peeked out from behind her skirt. I thought, that must be a grandchild!

Diego: And then his mother — my sister Josefa — showed up too.

And she kept him busy while we talked to Isabel.

Dolores: Diego...

Diego: So — Mission Number Two: Family History. When I was sick, and doctors asked me for my family history, I didn't know it. Not really. But besides the medical part, there have always been gaps. Questions we haven't asked.

So when we sat down for the recording, we explained to Isabel what we're doing with the podcast. One of the things is to let people know more about her life. Not just the story of my adoption. So you asked her.

Laurie: Can you tell us what it was like to be a little girl here in the village?

Isabel: [Speaking Tzutujil.]

Dolores: Yeah, they used to go play. It's like, they were, like, playing how to do cooking or laundry...with other girls.

Laurie: I guess in the U.S. we would call it playing house.

Laurie: Isabel told us her mother died when she was only eight. After that, she worked with her father. They would walk hours to the coast to sell a home-made delicacy called *patin*.

Dolores: Like a local food. It's wrapped in banana leaves. A little fish. Roasted fish. And soak 'em in tomato sauce. Sometimes people, they want it with chile, sometimes no chile. And then that's the kind of business they used to do to make a living. And she has a little basket she puts on her head. That's what she used to do when she was a young girl.

Diego: There's no escaping the sadness of her childhood during the civil war.

The military took Isabel's brother the same way they took Cristobal. But then they killed her brother. My uncle.

Dolores: Her mother died from sadness. She wanted to find her son, and then she was sad...she stopped eating, she starting to have, like, a stomach problem. She died slowly from sadness.

Diego: But...you know, there was just something different about Isabel this time. She seemed more comfortable with us.

Laurie: The whole tone was just lighter and easier. Even though we were asking some pretty heavy-duty questions — including about your messed-up birth certificate.

Diego: Where was I born, then?

Dolores: You were born in Escuintla, in a hospital of Escuintla.

Laurie: Yeah, so we were sitting there with Isabel, and all of a sudden you got up and went into the room.

Diego: I got up because I just thought, like, I wonder if she's ever seen my birth certificate. I went and grabbed the folder of paperwork that we had brought to RENAP. Because one of the pages was called my birth registration. Or registro civil de nacimiento.

Laurie: And, like, we hadn't even thought of that. You just thought of it, in the moment.

Diego: Yeah, I mean, I just pulled it out to showed it to Dolores and Isabel.

Isabel and Dolores: [Laughing.]

Dolores: I don't look good here in this picture, she say.

Diego: Has she ever seen these before?

Dolores and Isabel: [Speaking Tzutujil.]

Dolores: Yes, she has, because she sign it.

Diego: I think...one thing I think is very interesting in this...

Dolores and Isabel: [Speaking Tzutujil.]

Diego: Is she — it says she's not indigenous.

Dolores: Really?

Diego: Yes, it says not indigenous. No indigeno. But we are Tzutujil.

Dolores: Uh-huh.

Diego: So I don't know why they put this.

Diego: It was about halfway down on this piece of paper, in section D, where you're supposed to mark your ethnic group.

Isabel: [Speaking Tzutujil.]

Dolores: Yeah, sometimes if you don't read and write and you get nervous. When people, they speak Spanish, they ask questions, you say yes to everything. [Laughs.]

Isabel: [Speaking Tzutujil.]

Dolores: Yeah. She does not remember. It's been 23 years.

Diego: So if it wasn't Isabel's choice to check "not indigenous," who checked that box? Was it easier to market babies who were not indigenous?

Laurie: Yeah, that was something I hadn't noticed until you pointed it out. But Isabel didn't know who checked that box.

Diego: And there were other discrepancies between this paper and what Isabel was telling us.

For one, the paper said I was born at home, and a midwife was there. *Isabel* said I was born in a hospital. No midwife.

Another thing: it said Isabel worked as a domestic. That's not true. She was selling peanuts on the street.

Laurie: And she seemed to think this document was laughable. Like — why would anyone take it seriously?

Diego: Yeah.

Laurie: But, Diego, this was surreal. I mean, you wanting your official paperwork made us ask all these questions again.

Diego: Like who would've thought 23 years ago, when you were doing this, that when I wanted to go back and do something for myself, it would impact me?

Laurie: I know it, it was ironic, and it was also a reminder of everything that was wrong. There was one document that says you were born in Santiago Atitlán. That's the one we paid for the lawyer to fix. And the real one, that Isabel vouched for, says you were born in Escuintla.

MUSIC: A strong and serious acoustic guitar from theme song begins.

Diego: And there was Isabel telling us what the lawyer did was wrong.

Laurie: I know, it's exactly what human rights groups would call an irregularity. And the sort of thing that got international adoption shut down.

Diego: And it's why I couldn't complete Mission Paper Trail — and get my DPI in Guatemala City.

Isabel put her thumbprint on this piece of paper 23 years ago — it had my birthplace right, but it also had a lot of mistakes. And what really matters to me is that no one respected Isabel enough to care if what they wrote was true.

MUSIC: A strong and serious acoustic guitar from theme song ends.

Birds in Santiago Atitlán.

Diego: After the recording, we walked down to the hotel restaurant for lunch. It was a beautiful place — overlooking the lake. Noisy white birds in the bushes and wooden boats on the water.

I was sitting in the middle of the table — my biological family to my right, my adoptive family to my left.

Waiter: Coca-cola, hay limonada...

Diego: There was a lot of ribbing and joking in Tzutujil and English.

Josefa's son making noise.

Diego: And then the waiter came to take our order.

Laurie: And there was a funny moment when Dolores explained to him in Tzutujil who we were and why we were there.

Dolores: [Speaking in Tzutujil.]

Waiter: Mucho gusto, Diego, mucho gusto. Qué gran placer...two families. It's amazing. I am so glad to receive you. And we are here to serve you.

Diego: Muchas gracias.

Waiter: Es un placer. I'm so glad to know that! Yes! It's a pleasure. It's a pleasure.

[Laughter.]

Diego: Es genial.

Waiter: Bienvenidos. Welcome. Welcome.

Diego: Gracias. Gracias.

Waiter: ¿Algo más necesitan?

Diego: The waiter said he was amazed to see two such different families. I thanked him. And then I considered his words.

That was what we were — two families, together as one.

Laurie: And then later that night...

Diego: We sat down and talked about it.

Laurie: So amazing to me that we just kind of randomly started recording this shit 23 years ago.

Diego: It's pretty cool. I mean, it's...yeah, I think it's wonderful. And I think one of the things, like, after the interview with Isabel and Josefa, we went and got food. And just sitting with two families, it was just something, like, we've done before, um, but I was young or I was sick and this just felt, like...looking out over the lake from Santiago Atitlán, looking at this beautiful place surrounded by my adoptive family and my birth family was just like, this is so unique. This is so cool.

Laurie: It was joyful. It was kind of amazing that these worlds were sitting at the table, sharing a meal and laughing and having a good time and relaxed. And I'm like, I looked at you and I'm like, *That's you. You made this happen.*

Diego: Like sitting next to my birth family and sitting next to my adoptive family. And cracking jokes with you, Laurie, and then Isabel taps my shoulder and is talking to me and I have no idea what she's saying...like, she just talked to me even when Dolores wasn't translating. I was like...I was trying to understand but she was just talking to me like I was part of the family, one of her kids and it really — I really felt accepted. And I think hearing her say, *You're my son...* I think this was a big affirmation that I am Tzutujil. I'm part of this family. This is my home. I belong here.

Diego: This was kind of the first time I will say where I felt like she talked to me as my mother. We talked about Cristobal. It was very open. It was talking with me. It wasn't through someone else. I think we really just really made the relationship much better than it's ever been.

Dan: She seemed so much happier today than she ever has in the past. She's laughing and, you know, making jokes.

Diego: And hearing Tzutujil just being spoken, like it's no big deal...was just so fucking cool. I mean, it's in a way, very, um, relieving for me, I think. Because I've carried a lot of guilt knowing I don't speak Tzutujil and like, I'm probably not going to marry a Tzutujil woman, have Tzutujil kids. And like, how am I, like, my legacy is not

going to be Tzutujil. And then I always remember, I have family here. They're going to carry on that tradition. Like, it doesn't end with me. And I think...the Tzutujil people, indigenous people have been oppressed for so long, you know, for hundreds of years. And then I'm born and I go to the U.S. And the irony is like, I oppress my indigenous identity. I want to do everything I can to be American. Why was I doing that to myself? Like, that was just so...

Laurie: Well, I also think it's, like, for you, it's a changing thing. Like you were a rebellious adolescent with an extra heaping of problems and challenges. And like...that's just part of growing up. And now you're grown and it's going to feel different.

Diego: Yeah. I mean, I've finally gotten through everything, all of this shit I've gone through. And I'm kind of, like, at peace. I feel comfortable with myself and, like, with who I am. I'm still working on that, but it's not something that, like, I'm having to battle, like, cancer and kidney disease and simultaneously work on, like, my identity and adoption. So it's kind of like, I can just be in the moment, be free.

Diego: I was thinking, like, all of this started just like...I was so thankful, like wanting to thank you guys, um, for, like, trying to do all these things for me. Like, but I'm sure at some times, even you, Laurie, and you, Dan, both questioned what you were doing.

Dan: Every day.

Diego: [Chuckles.]

Laurie: Well, you know, I, I always, I always acted sure, but I was never sure, but I'm really curious what Dan, who always acted worried — what he, what his reaction to this particular trip is.

Dan: Well, I'm, I'm really...[chokes up.] I'm really proud of you. I'm so proud of...of how you're handling this and what you, how you've come through all the shit that you've come through. Fuck me.

Diego and Laurie: [Laughter.]

Dan: Like, I always, I always knew that, you know, when we adopted you, it was, uh...it was a temporary thing. You know, you were, you were going to be ours temporarily, and we were going to raise you. And then we were going to send you out into the world and you were going to be your own person. And I am just so happy to see that, you know, you are embracing this...we have led you here and you have embraced it. And I am really, really happy about that.

Diego: So at the end of the day, everything seemed like a happy ending.

But I still had one more mission to complete.

And that had come up when I asked Isabel if she had any questions for me.

Isabel and Dolores: [Speaking Tzutujil.]

Dolores: She says she's proud of you. Like, you're the son of Isabel and you feel this feeling of community as an indigenous person. She's happy about it...but her question, what do you think about Cristobal as a father? He drinks all the time.

Diego: I guess...um...I'm very interested to meet him because I think he deserves to have his story told as well. His side of the story. That's why I'm very — want to meet him so much. Because I feel like not knowing him, I'm sort of missing a piece of me.

Diego: Isabel told me that Cristobal knew I was in town. But she couldn't promise he would be in any shape to meet me.

Diego: I think we go try to.

Dolores: When you have time, yeah.

Diego: And you can tell her please that I will not meet him without, uh, her blessing.

THEME MUSIC: An uplifting and inspiring electronic beat begins with a strong guitar underneath begins softly.

Diego: We didn't know what would happen with Cristobal, but it seemed like Isabel was okay with us meeting. It was more like she just didn't know if he would show.

THEME MUSIC: Swells with intensity and fades.

MUSIC: Bright piano and guitar with synths pulsing with discovery begin.

Diego: Next time, on All Relative: Defining Diego...

Diego: What if he meets us outside?

Laurie: 'Cause why?

Diego: What if he meets us outside? I just want to be ready.

Laurie: It's what I was trying to tell you back in 1999, when Diego was a little tiny baby.

Kahleah: I think it really also has filled a bit of, of that kind of void, I would say, um, being part of the daily, all the traditions, speaking the language now.

Diego: People might ask me, Where you get this name from? And I can explain to them, this is from my father.

MUSIC: Bright piano and guitar with synths pulsing with discovery ends.

THEME MUSIC: A soft, acoustic, stripped down version of the theme begins.

Diego: All Relative: Defining Diego is a production of Somethin' Else and Sony Music Entertainment.

Laurie: It's written and hosted by me, Laurie Stern.

Diego: And me — Diego Xicay Luke.

Laurie: Mia Warren is our senior producer.

Diego: Associate producers are India Witkin and Kyra Assibey-Bonsu.

Laurie: Executive producers are Lizzie Jacobs, Jude Kampfner, and Tom Koenig.

Diego: Lizzie Jacobs is our editor.

Laurie: Production management help from Ike Egbetola and Lily Hambly.

Diego: Dara Hirsch is our engineer. And we had additional mixing by Sam Bair.

Our theme song was composed by Gautam Srikishan.

Laurie: Fact-checking by Natsumi Ajisaka.

Diego: Translation by Dolores Ratzan and Alex Petzey. No relation.

Laurie: Erik Mohn is our adoptee consultant.

Diego: And a special thanks to my dad, Dan Luke. Thank you for being my dad.

If you loved the show, follow us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts.

THEME MUSIC: A soft, acoustic, stripped down version of the theme ends.

CITATION

Stern, Laurie and Luke, Diego Xicay. "What's on Paper." *All Relative: Defining Diego*, Somethin' Else and Sony Music Entertainment. www.sonymusic.com/podcasts

Produced by Sony Music Entertainment and Somethin' Else



All Relative: Defining Diego, Episode Seven: What's on Paper

SONY MUSIC