UNTIL I FIND YOU - Episode 1\_ 🇬🇧 (English)

12/02/2023

#### 0. CONTENT WARNING NOTE

VICKY NARRATION

Hola I’m Vicky. Thank you for choosing to listen to this podcast. Before we begin there are a couple of things we’d like you to know.   
This podcast deals with the sensitive subject of forced disappearances. We use this phrase to refer to cases of persons who go missing and are believed to have been abducted, or forcibly disappeared as a result of trafficking, drug-related violence, gender-based violence, or state repression.

We conducted interviews for this podcast in Spanish, so

for this English-language version, we have worked with voice actors to translate the interviews. You can hear the original interviews in full in the Spanish language version of the podcast. Thank you for listening.

#### 1 INTRO 1

LINA (V.O ENG)

Mireya?... Ever since she was a baby, she's been playful and naughty.

She ran, I mean, she ran from here to there; She didn't crawl; she ran and ran and ran

She wanted to save the world. Very human, very caring, very affectionate. I remember her calling me "Señora Tranquilina" or grabbing me from the waist .. "Sen'ora Tranquilina, this and that... "

She thought I would get angry when she called me Sen'ora. I'm not a Sen'ora; I'm your mother!!

But her dream was... she said it like this. Can you imagine mom? Me getting out of a helicopter, helping people out of a flood or disaster. I mean, can you imagine mom?

VICKY NARRATION

This is Tranquilina Hernández Lagunas, or Lina, as her friends call her. Lina tells us about Mireya, the eldest of her two daughters, a fun and playful young woman who loves sports and is full of dreams. In September 2014, in the city of Cuernavaca. In the state of Morelos, Mexico. Mireya was forcibly disappeared.

#### 2 MIREYA DISAPPEARS 2

LINA (V.O ENG)

Mireya disappeared on the 13th of September, 2014. It was Saturday. She had a boyfriend. They had been in a relationship for about a year and a half, or a year and eight months... Mireya was 18, and he was 20, I think; they were about two years apart.

VICKY NARRATION

Lina recalls more details of that morning.

LINA (V.O ENG)

She had just woken up and was still groggy. I even remember telling her 'Mireya, get up now, your eyes are going to get stuck'.

VICKY NARRATION

That morning, Lina was preparing some tacos, and Mireya's boyfriend came to pick up her daughter.

LINA (V.O ENG)

When I went down, they both came to me, and Mireya said, 'Mom, can I go with him to take this school supplies list to his granny's house? I said yes, but don't be late, today is Saturday, and you are meant to take Ángeles to church for catechism.

VICKY NARRATION

Ángeles is Lina's youngest daughter.

LINA (V.O ENG)

And they left...

VICKY NARRATION

Time passed, and Mireya was taking a long time to get back home.

LINA (V.O ENG)

When I saw that 30 mins passed by... 40 mins, and so on, I thought... well.. she is not gonna make it back in time, so I grabbed my phone and started calling her, but it went straight to her voicemail, and then again voicemail and again... I thought, Ok .. she's got to be with him still; Mija doesn't have any other friends...

VICKY NARRATION

Lina had no choice but to take Ángeles to church herself. When she returned, she found Mireya's boyfriend on the street, by himself.

LINA (V.O ENG)

I approached him and asked, "Hey, and Mireya, where is she?” He said, “I don't know!” “But how? If she left the house with you, how come you don't know?” And he said “Oh, it's just that when we arrived at my granny's house, Mireya didn't want to go in and stayed outside. It only took me five minutes, and Mireya was gone when I came out again.”

VICKY NARRATION

Mireya still didn't answer the phone, so Lina decided to look for her at her grandparents' and father's house. And although everyone tells her she's probably with friends, Lina feels something is wrong. Her desperation grows, and there is no trace of Mireya anywhere.

That Saturday, Lina's life changed completely. And today, 14th of February, 2023,more than eight years later, Mireya hasn't returned home, and Lina hasn't stopped searching for her daughter.

Hello, my name is Vicky Araico, and this is UNTIL I FIND YOU, a two-part podcast where we will delve into the dramatic experiences of thousands of families of missing persons in Mexico. Thank you for listening.

#### 3 CONTEXT 3

The disappearance of Mireya, and Lina’s search for her, reflects the reality faced by many families throughout Mexico. According to a U.N. report, by 2021, 100,000 cases of forced disappearances were officially registered in Mexico.

The numbers have grown exponentially since the beginning of the war against drug trafficking cartels. And it is thought that due to the pattern of impunity and violence that has overtaken the country, the number of unregistered cases could be twice as high as the official figures.

#### 4 INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES 4

VICKY NARRATION

Despite these alarming statistics, Families who embark on the search for their loved ones first have to deal with obstacles such as institutional failures, a weakened state presence and the lack of transparency on the part of the authorities.

LINA (V.O ENG)

No, no, no, we have to go to report the case, I said... When we arrived at the police station, there were a lot of people.. and they were in a bad way. When I finally got my turn, they asked me, Did you bring a photograph? No. What time would she usually get home? Well, early, around eight or nine. What kind of friendships did she have? Did she drink alcohol? Did she use drugs? I mean things like that. I said No, nothing like that...

VICKY NARRATION

When Lina gets to the Police station, she is confronted with the apathy of the authorities and their lack of support. They tell her that she should wait 72 hours and bring her daughter's photo. They also tell her that before filing an official report, she must go herself to look for her daughter in hospitals, the Red Cross, and other institutions.

LINA (V.O ENG)

I was crying, and I left the station feeling bad. I didn't go anywhere. I mean, the only place I went to was, I remember, the hospital. But I was like, No!! They have to start looking for her. So, I went back to the police station. And again there were lots of people, and I had to queue again! In my head, I just couldn't take in everything that was happening.

VICKY NARRATION

In the middle of her distress and thanks to her persistence, Lina finally manages to report the case. In her account of the events, Lina mentions that the last known person who saw and was with Mireya was her boyfriend. Throughout this process, Mireya's boyfriend showed concern about finding her, but some of his actions made Lina suspicious.

LINA (V.O ENG)

I told the facts, everything, as it had happened. At about 1:00 in the morning, we left, but by then, this boy was messaging me asking where I was, and what I was doing. I'm here, reporting the case. and he kept asking, but how did you do it?

VICKY NARRATION

Mireya's boyfriend and his parents want to know the details of the police report. However, as a precaution, Lina does not let them see it.

LINA (V.O ENG)

But of course, when they ask you who was the last person who saw your daughter, who was she with…Him, right? He took her out of the house. I've always said it.

VICKY NARRATION

Lina stays close to Mireya's boyfriend and family for the next few days. The boy's father says he and his son will go in their car to look for Mireya. Lina wants to go too. At each place they go to look for Mireya, Lina waits in the car while they go down to gather information. When they return, they say they have spoken to people who have seen her. However, none of the places they mention help determine Mireya's whereabouts. On the contrary, the general attitude of the boy and his family increases Lina's distrust, so she decides to go to the police again.

LINA (V.O ENG)

I give my statement again, and I tell them what we heard, that she was seen in Civac. That she was seen here, there. At that moment, the police officer told me, “Let's go”. They took me to his house, the boys' house. And there the officer tells me that her boyfriend knows where the girl is, because otherwise he would be more worried about her, and he would not remember the names of the books he was asked to buy.

VICKY NARRATION

Mireya's boyfriend and his family always deny having information about her whereabouts. And despite their initial solidarity with Lina, some days later, they file a report against her for threats the boy claims he received. Lina can't get close to them anymore. Moreover, she recalls seeing unusual situations between that family and the police.

LINA (V.O ENG)

A week later, I saw that the officer carrying out my daughter's search received money from the boy's family. I mean... they were after the backhander, right? I thought, of course they won't… if it is like this, then I won't find my daughter.

VICKY NARRATION

When a person goes missing, every minute counts, every day that passes is a lost chance for the family to find them alive and an increase in distress and pain. Those looking for a loved one are confronted with a total lack of knowledge of the procedures that could facilitate the search. They go to the authorities hoping to get answers. Still, they bump into a negligent bureaucratic machine that fails to guide them; it's slow, unprepared, and rotten with corruption. However, the lack of preparation to deal with these cases is not exclusive to Mexico.

DEBORAH (V.O ENG)

Never in all my studies in the United States, Europe, and Mexico had anyone mentioned the topic of forced disappearance. As experts or as international jurists, we are not educated in the matter. The group of people who are supposed to know about this is tiny, and there isn't an international body of experts who understand this well.

VICKY NARRATION

This is Deborah Ruiz Verduzco, PhD in International Law. She has worked at the International Criminal Court, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and, more recently, the International Commission on Missing Persons.

DEBORAH (V.O ENG)

The Commission was created in the context of the Balkan wars. And it was an innovation in the topic of Missing Persons. Throughout history, people have disappeared in wars, migrations and so on, and the approach to deal with this has always been humanitarian.

VICKY NARRATION

The humanitarian approach in the context of conflicts refers to alleviating the pain or suffering of those involved, regardless of sides or ideologies and without direct intervention in the conflict. In terms of forced disappearances, this approach changed with the appearance of the International Commission on Missing Persons.

DEBORAH (v.O ENG)

So, the paradigm shift came with a shift in the responsibility of responding to and supporting the families. It went from a humanitarian actor, like NGOs, to the state.

So, it would be the Bosnian state who was responsible for searching for the missing people, identifying bodies, providing information and more. And that's a significant change. Because you no longer go to a charity, instead you go to the state, and the state is the one that has to help and protect your human rights. The other paradigm shift was the introduction of DNA tests to identify missing people. For the first time, genetics allowed us to go from looking at one specific case at a time to comparing the genetic information of all the bones found with the genetic information of all the families.

VICKY NARRATION

Currently, the search for missing persons in Mexico and worldwide follows these new guidelines. In theory, the state is responsible for investigating cases and finding missing persons using four pillars: science, data, institutions and, lastly, civil society. However, in the face of the forensic crisis experienced in Mexico and the state's inadequate response, the responsibility falls back on the shoulders of people like Lina.

#### 5 THE SEARCH 5

LINA (V.O ENG)

When Mireya disappeared, they kept calling me to go to work. But I let them down. I didn't go anymore. I lost my job because I focused on looking for Mireya. I collected money so that I could go to the federal authorities to report the case. I spent full days, and full weeks in the prosecution offices without eating so that they would listen to me and start looking for my daughter. And since then, well, I have become this, as they say, a searcher....

VICKY NARRATION

While searching for her daughter, Lina has also dedicated herself to helping others through the collective Unión de Familias Resilientes Buscando a Sus Corazones Desaparecidos: Resilient Families United, Searching For Their Missing Hearts.

LINA (V.O ENG)

They say that I am a human rights defender. I don't know, but they tell me that's who I am because I help families. Every time someone approaches me, well, the doors I open are open to them too, and I accompany them, like just now when I got a call and I am going to do a search. I don't know the family, but tomorrow we're going to meet to search.

VICKY NARRATION

The need for support and the solidarity between searching families has produced searching collectives throughout the country. They accompany each other in bureaucratic proceedings; they share their knowledge, their searching methods, their food; they protest, and they organize national search brigades. Their determined activism has provoked significant results.

PADRE ARTURO (v.O ENG)

It must be pointed out that many of the laws on the subject in Mexico as well as many federal and state institutions have been created as a result of the political mobilization of searching families. Last year, one of the results of the 6th Search Brigade in Morelos was the opening of a municipal office to search for missing persons.

VICKY NARRATION

Father Arturo, a priest of the Anglican Church, accompanies several groups, including the collective of which Lina is part, and has experienced up close the search work carried out by these women. The activities go beyond bureaucratic procedures and marches.

PADRE ARTURO (v.O ENG)

You have to do things that you never imagined you would have to do. Among those things, there are some activities that we hope no human being will have to do again. Right here, where we are right now, we have had osteology workshops, something very dark because forensic anthropology specialists come as volunteers to train families so that they learn to differentiate human from animal bones.

VICKY NARRATION

Out of necessity, Families have become experts in legal, institutional and even forensic issues.

PADRE ARTURO (v.O ENG)

In many cases, the families are the ones who teach the authorities how to do their jobs as if they were experts themselves. And that has happened. Families become experts in the field. Because of their need and accumulated experience, they are in a position to correct the authorities on how to do things.

VICKY NARRATION

As Father Arturo rightly says, the searchers on their journey do things that no one should ever have to do, but they do it because they do not lose hope of finding their loved ones.

PADRE ARTURO (V.O ENG)

And I have said loud and clear to these mothers that the truth is that they are my teachers in the faith. Because having faith in Arturo's shoes, in the sacristy, in the parish, that’s very comfortable and very easy. But having faith looking for a son, looking for a brother, for a father, looking for a sister, that goes beyond my own understanding of faith.

VICKY NARRATION

In the absence of an effective search and support mechanism provided by the state, these search groups often manage to find the whereabouts of some missing persons. And so, without the emotional and psychological support they should receive, they are the ones who hand over the found bodies of sons and daughters to other mothers.

Lina (v.O ENG)

...It's been about two years since we started as a collective. And we have already found three missing persons and passed on the bodies to their families. We found one on the Diez de Abril avenue, we found a body, requested a DNA test and everything, and yes, he was the son of a colleague. When the brigade came here to Cuernavaca, some graves were found in Mixtlalcingo; well, one of them was the son of another colleague. We observed the exhumations along with the forensic teams. We followed the case, claiming the family’s victim status until they handed him over. And we have also found people alive...

VICKY NARRATION

Yes, it is women, mothers and sisters who go through the process of claiming their victim status, a recognition that grants them state support but that can take years to get. They too go to dangerous areas, search for missing persons, exhume bodies and hand them over to other mothers, as hurt and desperate as they are. These search groups are mostly made up of women. And in sight of these terrible tasks, a question arises: Where are the men?

PADRE ARTURO (V.O ENG)

... that is a critical question.. judging from the few men I have found in these search tasks,the vast majority have some kind of financial stability - pensioners or business owners who can afford to be absent from work.There are some women in the search groups who recognise men's absence and incapacity. And they say it is because of the tremendous pain that they feel - because it seems that the vast majority of men would not cry out of pride, fear, or sexism. On the contrary, women embrace each other without judgement. And in their tears and embraces, they encourage each other while men sometimes cannot even hug each other, let alone cry. And I'd say that sexism is a limitation that affects men's willingness to search.

VICKY NARRATION

In their embrace, they strengthen each other and continue their search. They repeatedly declare, "If I don't look for them, who is going to?" They devote their lives to searching for them until they are found.

Meanwhile, the number of disappearances continues to grow, and institutions continue to turn a blind eye. It is then that another question comes up, perhaps a more urgent one...where is the state?

#### 6 A BROKEN SOCIAL CONTRACT 6

DEBORAH (V.O ENG)

But how can I interact with the state, pay taxes, take out my rubbish,vote, if when I go to the police to say that my daughter is missing, the police do nothing?

VICKY NARRATION

Dr Deborah Ruiz Verdusco.

What relationship does this create with the state? There is a complete degradation, a total collapse of the trust, of the expectation of protection that justifies the state's existence. ... Why does a state exist? Because we have a societal contract in which we tell the state, OK, you can have police and use weapons and I will pay you taxes, because you're going to protect me. You're going to make sure there's water. You're going to help us get organized. And if anything happens to me, you will protect my human rights.

VICKY NARRATION

The staggering levels of impunity in Mexico show a severe rupture in the social contract between citizens and the state.

DEBORAH

Disappearances are part of this rupture. I mean, if they can forcibly disappear me and the police won't do anything, my neighbour can get angry because I parked at his place and he can kill me. It doesn't matter. Who is going to investigate it? And then you have an acceleration of violence and chaos where the state is powerless and irrelevant.

#### 7 CRIMINALIZATION OF THE VICTIMS 7

PADRE ARTURO (v.O ENG)

We should remember the theory of the state classics, which says “State is the name of the coldest of all cold monsters.”  
Institutionality has been misunderstood. It must serve society and, in this case, the victims. Instead, it has become an end in and of itself.

VICKY NARRATION

In a failed state that does not recognise its responsibility in this fatal drama, making victims invisible has also become an effective tool for impunity.

PADRE ARTURO

There is an important sector of society, and also within the churches, that go as far as to express that the disappearance of a person is a consequence of their actions, and even that they deserve it. For instance, there are cruel authorities who, although responsible for clarifying and investigating all this, treat searching families with contempt. And that is perhaps the biggest challenge.

DEBORAH

Not only do I go to the police and the police do nothing, but for many years in Mexico, people thought that the missing person had just left - they left with a lover, or they were out partying, or they didn't want to pay taxes. And I have even heard that from diplomats. "They left because they don't want to pay taxes, they have to be somewhere" ... What?! It is the state, the state has an obligation to protect us.

VICKY NARRATION

A cold and heartless state will produce cold and heartless individuals. Driven by the desire to distance themselves from the darker parts of their society, people are swept up in a culture of criminalising, rather than supporting, victims.

JAEL (V.O ENG)

Absolutely insensitive. I see the comments on social media, and they say, "It is because he did something wrong; that's why they took him. That's why they would kill him", and when it comes to women, it’s the same... "Well, she shouldn't be out partying... I'm sure she was hanging out with bad people. Serves them right for getting high and drunk.” I mean… first, they judge; second, and third, they keep judging because they never put themselves in the other person's shoes until it happens to them.

VICKY NARRATION

This is Jaheni Jael Jacobo Lugo. She is part of the same search collective as Lina. Her story is marked not only by the disappearance of her brother, whom she has been looking for since 12th March 2022, but also by being a survivor of forced disappearance herself.

JAEL (V.O ENG)

One day. When leaving the hospital. I left late because I was a surgical nurse, and we tended to leave late…

VICKY NARRATION

That night, she was approached by a van.

JAEL (V.O ENG)

This man came down and told me: "Get in, or I'll get you in." So I understood that I was in danger and thought I'd rather do as he said, or else he will make me do it.

VICKY NARRATION

They take her to a house to give medical attention to a man with severe health conditions. Her task is to save his life and to be there until the man recovers. In addition to taking care of the man's health, Jael must clean, wash, iron, and cook for him.

JAEL (V.O ENG)

After about seven months, I told him; well, it seems you are good now. You look good, and you can do things on your own. Could you send me back to my house now? Because I had my oldest son and wanted to see him... This man asked me to wait for an answer because he was going out. When he returned, he came back with musicians and people that I didn't know, and he told me, “You're not going to go anywhere because I want you to marry me.” I was like, “I can't marry you because I'm already married…”

VICKY NARRATION

Jael is forced to stay, get married, and even have a child with the man who kidnapped her. She never stops thinking about the life that has been taken from her. And when she has the opportunity, she escapes along with her youngest son, thanks to the help of someone close to the man who held her captive.

When she returns, she finds out that her family was not looking for her.

JAEL (V.O ENG)

When I got back with my family. They said, "You left because you wanted to." Of course not! How could I go and leave my son and my job? And so that’s how we started to break apart.

VICKY NARRATION

She has to rebuild her life, carrying the trauma of her experience whilst facing people's judgements and doubts.

JAEL (V.O ENG)

The only person who always stood by my side was my brother. He always said, “Sis, I'm going to be with you. I don't care what people say." And so then I finally started to work on my own life again.

VICKY NARRATION

Three years later, like an episode of terror that returns to her life. Pablo Chezama Capistrán Lugo, Jael's brother, goes missing.

JAEL (V.O ENG)

He is considered to have disappeared on the 12th of March because it was the last time anyone saw him...

VICKY NARRATION

At the time, Jael was travelling, but she kept in contact with her brother, Cheza, as she calls him. They chat on WhatsApp and exchange affectionate messages. In Jael's final message, she promises to call him the next day. This last text message didn't reach him anymore. Jael receives a call from his sister. They can't find Cheza.

Now, on this side of the drama, Jaél is determined to ensure that her brother's case doesn't pass by like many others. She goes through the painful process of institutions, tests, the endless days. She finds solidarity in the embrace of other women looking for their loved ones. But, once again, she faces insensitive questions and judgements.

JAEL (v.O ENG)

“Why would you be looking for him if you don't know what he was up to?”, they said.And I was like, “I don't want to start investigating what he was up to.” All I know is that he's my brother, and he came into my life when I was 15 years old and awakened my maternal instinct. I love him. And if he was up to no good or not, I don't care; he's my brother and I'm going to look for him, and I'm going to search for him until I find him. I don't know if it will take me a year or two, five, ten, fifteen; I don't care. I don't want to find culprits; I'm not interested. I believe more in the justice of God than the justice of men.

VICKY NARRATION

Jael's words very clearly describe the daily reality for the searchers, who continually experience judgements and accusations that seek to justify the disappearance of their relatives. But the thing is, no victim should ever be judged guilty of their own tragedy.

Despite the pain caused to them, they are not always looking for culprits or revenge. Their struggle is to find all of them, the disappeared, so no one else has to go through what they have experienced. On this path, they support each other, share their knowledge and rely on collective action. The strength of women like Lina, who, despite their own pain, choose to be supportive and fight back, is inspiring and can give us clues on how to begin to heal a country so broken and hurt by violence.

LINA (V.O ENG)

I do it because I wish someone had been there to help me. After all, if someone had helped me, I'm convinced I would have found my daughter. Because there was a lot of information, there was plenty. However, eight years have passed. And now ... there's nothing.

#### 8 CLOSING 8

VICKY NARRATION

Thank you for listening to this first episode of our podcast. Your time and attention are a gesture of goodwill and bring us a step closer to the thousands of families still looking for their loved ones today.

We invite you to continue being part of this search. If you want to know more about the collective that Lina and Jael are part of, you can find them on their Facebook page, Unión de Familias Resilientes Buscando a Sus Corazones Desaparecidos. Check out the link in the description of this podcast.

And remember to join us in the second episode of “Until I Find You”, where we will learn more about the families of the disappeared and ask ourselves about the possibilities of action and collective healing.

#### 9 CREDITS

VICKY NARRATION

UNTIL I FIND YOU is produced by UMBA and written and edited by Mildred Torres Umba and Miguel Hernando Torres Umba.

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My name is Vicky Araico. Gracias por escuchar.