UNTIL I FIND YOU - Episode 2\_🇬🇧 (English)

12/02/2023

#### 0. CONTENT WARNING NOTE

This episode contains references to suicidal thoughts. Discretion is advised.

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

ANGELES

I've felt alone... and although it has taken a lot of work, I am finally starting to find myself, which is a great help. I never had the chance to go to the movies on my own; it's my first time, and not being at home and being somewhere else makes me realise that I'm fun.

ANGELES

I am starting to leave home from time to time and I am realising that not everything outside is terrible. Also, I am learning there are safe spaces and that even Javier, his name is Javier, he is also my safe space.

VICKY

Allowing herself to live, recognising herself, finding safe spaces and trying to become a safe space for herself. The words of Ángeles, a young girl full of curiosity for simple, but so far out of reach experiences, are a small oasis in the middle of the desert.

VICKY

Do you remember the story of Lina and Mireya? Well, Ángeles is Lina's youngest daughter. She is 20 years old and studies psychology. When she was just 11 years old, she came face to face with the reality that her sister, who had been like a second mother to her, had gone missing, and that Lina, her mother, would involuntarily become another constant absence.

VICKY

Hello, my name is Vicky Araico, and this is UNTIL I fIND YOU, a two part-podcast in which we explore the experiences of thousands of families whose loved ones have been forcibly disappeared in Mexico. In our previous episode, we spoke about the context around these disappearances, and about the search groups set up to look for the disappeared. In this episode, we will dig a little deeper and try to understand the implications of this drama on the searchers and their families, and we will ask ourselves if and how we can collectively take action. Welcome back.

#### **2 HOW LIFE TRANSFORMS** 2

VICKY

The disappearance of a loved one creates disruptions on different levels and completely transforms everyday life. Let's go back to Ángeles for a bit. Although she is positive about her life now, getting to this point has not been easy. When Mireya disappears, Lina has no choice but to become a full-time searcher. Her whole life transforms into a continuous search for her eldest daughter and helping other families in her search. In addition to dealing with her sister's absence, this also dramatically changes Ángeles' life.

ANGELES

She looked after me, took me to school, fed me, and we divided the household tasks. She was like my main person, right?

And this has made me feel alone because it has been a process in which, first, my sister is not there, but this led to my mom not being there either, and I know it's been difficult,.. but I'm alone.

VICKY

 Ángeles has been through several losses; she lost her sister, her normal home life with her mother, her childhood, and even her own sense of self. She has started working with a therapist and is beginning to understand just how much the experience has shaped her.

ÁNGELES

This year I started to notice that since Mireya disappeared, first we had the uncertainty of not knowing what was happening and what was going to be done, right? And then my mom took on the role of " I'm gonna be out there, I'll do whatever is necessary, I'm going to learn if I don't know something". And I, on the other hand, took on the role of not causing her any more worries. And at first, this attitude of not causing trouble was ok, but actually, it's been affecting me. And now, out of nowhere, feelings come out that maybe didn't come out before and that perhaps I kept to myself, and I'm full of.. like... I feel like I'm exploding.

#### **3 FRACTURED FAMILIES** 3

VICKY

The build-up of emotions makes Ángeles feel alone. As a child, she tried to hide her feelings and not cause any trouble, but the pressure and pain of the last nine years has reached boiling point.

ANGELES

Basically, being alone depresses me, and because my sister was always there, I can't help but wonder what could be happening to her, or sometimes I even go into denial... I get this sadness, and this sudden realisation that it is real, that my sister isn't there anymore, and neither is my mom because she's out there looking for her.

And it's also hard for me to see my mom arriving late at night, tired, and she just wants to sleep. Because the years are going by and... I know she is strong; she feels she needs to stay strong so that she can look for her, but the truth is that her life is also running out.

VICKY

Ángeles is aware of everything that has happened to her mother. She worries about her and helps her in every way she can.

LINA

My girl is a warrior girl, strong and feisty. She is the love of my life; she is my engine and the reason why I am still here.

VICKY

You can hear from the way Lina talks about Ángeles that the love they have for each other is undeniable. However, the trauma they have been through has left deep wounds.

ÁNGELES

Well, it is true, I sometimes have this bitter sensation because I feel like I'm being neglected.

Like, seeing the attention my cousins get from my aunts, I'm like, wow, and I know it is not a big deal, right? But the fact that they are there kind of helps their upbringing, doesn't it? Yes, I sometimes feel annoyed when I see that I'm not worth it, like I don't have the same value, right?

ÁNGELES

There are some things I would not like to talk to my mom about because I don't know how they will affect her. Sometimes I play scenarios in my mind where I talk to her and imagine her reaction. And it's like, wow... I wouldn't want her to feel that way on top of everything she has on her back.

VICKY

The effects of forced disappearances differ from family to family, and bonds are challenged in different ways. In homes where there are children, the feeling of abandonment is common, and as they grow older, the disappearance shapes their lives. In other cases, when the searchers do not receive support from their family, that feeling of abandonment also exists. But in these situations, as in Jael's case, it's a matter of being left alone in the search. When her brother disappeared, her family turned away.

JAEL

For about two months, I didn't talk to my mom, sisters, sister-in-law, or even my other brother… no, I don't even talk to him. Because I can't believe he has never even come up to ask anything about our missing brother.

VICKY

Forced disappearance breaks down our most intrinsic bonds and relationships as a society. No matter how people react to losing a loved one, their lives will never be the same. Dr Deborah Ruiz Verduzco discusses how this affects the family unit.

DEBORAH

Some families manage to build solidarity and create a collective memory and in other families, the subject is not even discussed.

There are studies on transgenerational trauma, the studies about the Holocaust, for example, which talk about how trauma is transmitted across generations, not only socially but maybe even genetically as well.

#### **4 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS** 4

VICKY

In addition to the broken relationships, the families of missing persons also experience severe economic difficulties.

DEBORAH

Generally, the people who disappear are primarily poor, because when rich people disappear, there are consequences. And the fact that 100,000 people can disappear in a country means that most are poor. They already had an economic vulnerability, and on top of that, they get three more levels of economic vulnerability.

VICKY

First, the disappeared tend to be wage earners, so the family loses the income they brought in. Second and third, in many cases, the economic impact also affects the property and inheritance rights of the missing person and the family.

DEBORAH

If the person had a house, their family can't sell the house. If they had insurance, they can't access insurance because the person is not dead, so they can't claim life insurance. They can't claim the person's pension, or get a divorce and then remarry, nothing! Which is yet another economic impact...

But the search is also very expensive. You have to go to the prosecution courts, get taxis, and documents, take photocopies of the identification, come here and go there, hire a lawyer. Plan protests and stage sit-ins in front of the attorney general office! All of this is expensive!

VICKY

When people devote their life to the search, they become part of collectives and get involved in activism. Their time, efforts, and resources are fully dedicated to these activities. Because of this, the vast majority lose their jobs, and without other financial support, they must find a way to cover all of their expenses. Jael talks about how much one trip can cost.

JAEL

It depends on the distance, how many days, if it's a search or a public action, if we are checking documents. .. but I have spent up to 6,000 pesos.

VICKY

That’s around a month’s salary for somebody earning minimum wage in Mexico.

LINA

 Since I have dedicated myself to this, I even became a compulsive hoarder. I collect cardboard, newspaper, and cans and make crafts like jewellery boxes and desk organisers. Then I sell them and with that money I get by. Sometimes they call me and say "Lina, there is this job tomorrow"... But then I am like, ah... but tomorrow I'm going to accompany Mrs so, and so. Or I have to go to the prosecution offices. And so on. I just can't work, but doing all this doesn't leave me any money either.

VICKY

The decision to leave their jobs comes as a consequence of the urgent need to find their families. In their desperation and pain, nothing is more important.

DEBORAH

People can't go to work. I mean, I couldn't go to work! Imagine going to work when you have to look for your brother, and you don't know where he is. ..They can't work; they can't be productive. They can't operate in society, go to a party, or handle the supermarket. They can't even talk to the tomato guy because something happens, someone pushes them, and they fall apart. Each person deals with it and experiences it differently. Some with a lot of outward violence and others internalise it. But there's an anger there. They go through a lot of emotions all at the same time, from rage to anguish to anger again.

#### 5 MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL IMPACTS

VICKY

Dr Deborah Ruiz describes perhaps the most profound effect on the searchers. Right from the start, missing persons' families experience painful feelings that intensify over time and take a mental and physical toll. While the desire to find their loved one and the constant anxiety gives them the strength to get up every day, they also experience moments of collapse.

LINA

Of Mireya, I only remember her mocking smile, her eyes, and her way of eating, how she slapped me when playing and pulled my cheeks, but always playing. And it scares me... it scares me because ...it’s hard to answer your question, what is Mireya like?

LINA

 I try to get my girl out of my head because if I get my girl in my head, I won't make it. I try not to think about her because I got to the point where I feel like a pressure cooker. I avoid it and avoid it, and avoid it. And when I can't do it anymore, it comes out... And I'm working on it, but the moments when I explode, I feel like… I don't want it anymore. I don't want Mireya to be gone. I feel like she is going to come through the door anytime… It’s been eight years, and I feel like that time hasn't passed. I can't get my head around it. I don't understand that I may not find her alive anymore. Although I'm aware that it's eight years, my head and my heart don't want to accept that I may find her dead and that I may need to bury her, and that's it. But I can't accept it because I see her picture. Because I have her here, her words. It’s very hard to think that I won't see her again. I can't believe it. I live in a nightmare all the time.

LINA

I can't imagine not being able to hug her again. Thinking about that makes me feel like I don't want to continue, so I prefer to hide it; Put on that mask that I told you about, so that I don't look like that all the time because Ángeles can't see me like that.

ÁNGELES

It's complicated because we both need Mireya, but mom has made her life all around disappearances, right? And I've basically tried to get away from it all because it hurts me. There is something people tell me a lot. They say, "I don't know what I would do if I were in your place", Or "I don't know how I would act if my sister or anyone in my family disappeared," or “I just can't imagine myself in that situation", and it hits me, I realise that I haven't been able to process it yet, I haven't even understood that myself, that I'm going through this. I can't believe my sister isn't here anymore, and I don't know what to do. I don't even know how I'm still here but I am.

VICKY

Both Ángeles and Lina are going through a very complex depression, and the pain has reached an unsustainable point.

LINA

I'm finally admitting that I need help. I used to say, " Oh no, I'm not crazy, and no one is going to come and tell me what I need", right? But now, I am hitting rock bottom. I need help. Because I am having those thoughts... It's going to sound ugly, but I am... I'm trying to say it because I should express it. I'm having thoughts of taking my own life. Yesterday I wrote that on my social media status, but then people commented asking why... but why can't I write whatever the hell I want? It is my status… I wrote, "I have no desire to live, no desire to continue", Because that's how I felt when I woke up, and so it occurred to me to put it on my status, my feeling! but then I get messages, "no, Lina, you shouldn't think like that. think about Ángeles; how is she going to feel if she reads it?" I am tired of it, of them. I know that my girl understands me because we talk about it a lot. But putting other people before me is hurting me.

VICKY

Words play a fundamental part in human life. There is tremendous power in expressing ourselves through words, in naming what we feel and what we hold deep inside. It is precisely in those most difficult situations that speaking out and being heard can save lives. It’s not always easy, but this is one of the most essential tools for healing.

DEBORAH

I have a very special relationship with a mother whose 13-year-old daughter disappeared, and they haven't found her. She was in Holland because she won an award, so I met her here, but she's Mexican. We took her to the concert of Café Tacuba, who came to Amsterdam, and she was happy dancing and she said, "It cost me a lot of work. But I have to recover my ability to celebrate, to live. And it is because of my daughter that I have to be happy, because she no longer has the opportunity to be here, listening to music and enjoying it."

And I think that in the case of Graciela, she achieved it because she's had a lot of therapy, because she has the resources, but it is something that many other parents or relatives cannot do and they are left forever empty.

VICKY

Recovering the ability to be happy may seem unattainable for many searchers. However, Graciela's story can be seen as a symbol of inspiration and encouragement. It is difficult, but with support, searchers can learn to make space for happiness without it diminishing their grief and anger.

DEBORAH

Graciela did it, and she's working hard on herself. But it isn't easy because it's about more than just having the resources; it's also about having someone who knows how to deal with it, but there are only a few experts in the world. Sadly, it's not a very common profession. Plus, when you talk to the families and ask them how they are doing, you realise they have forgotten about themselves; they cease to exist. Their life revolves around the missing person. They carry the photo of their missing person on their chests and attend marches but forget about their own needs; they don't exist. They don't eat. They don’t feel the pain in their feet, and they don't sleep.

#### **6 LIMINAL BODIES** 6

VICKY

In addition to printing images of their missing persons on t-shirts and banners, to carry with them as they search, Lina has also chosen to make her daughters present on her body with tattoos.

LINA

This one here is an infinity symbol. Mireya told me, mom, I like the infinity because it doesn't have a beginning or an end. So I got that one because my love for my daughters has no beginning or end. Then I added their names, Mireya and Ángeles. I got a feather because sometimes I want to fly like a feather. I dream of flying and being able to search for her everywhere, like a bird, take off from the ground, and go everywhere. I have a moon because Mireya used to sit by this window and watch the moon and the stars; she was mesmerised. And once we watched this movie called "Under the Same Moon" or something like that. With Kate del Castillo. And I remember she said she liked to see the moon, and now that movie makes sense to me, right? I mean, maybe if I watch the moon here, she is also watching the moon where she is, and I feel connected to her. That's why I have the moon and the stars. And well, here's another one, a heart with a heart rate. Because despite so much pain, my heart is still beating.

#### **7 EMPATHY AND SOLIDARITY - WHAT TO DO?** 7

VICKY

Searchers don't just carry their missing persons; they carry an entire society. The weight of their struggles is the weight of a whole country.

So a question arises. What can be done to lighten their burden?

As individuals, we have great potential if we understand ourselves as part of the whole, and understand that the reality of others is also our reality. Having empathy and supporting issues that surround us can make a big difference.

In the experience of the collectives, small expressions of solidarity have been essential to their work. For example, Father Arturo has created a peace mailbox in his church.

PADRE ARTURO

Initially, we put a cardboard box out, nothing special. We called it a peace mailbox, and we invited the community to post a message of encouragement, of hope, a prayer, a biblical quote, a message that they wanted to share with the searching families that could encourage them to persevere. But over time, this mailbox has given us classified information. As well as all kinds of generous messages, including banknotes and things like that, we have also received the location of clandestine graves or sites where missing people can be found. And we realised that this tool allows the informant to be anonymous and protects their integrity, so this peace mailbox has been very valuable.

It is strange to think that something as dark as the map to locate a clandestine grave can be a tool for peace. But that's how it is, because it allows some family to find their missing loved one. And that brings a little peace to the family.

#### **8 MAKE THEIR STORIES VISIBLE** 8

VICKY

Tools for peace are probably the missing pieces of this puzzle. And just like the peace mailbox, other peace tools may seem very simple, but can have a powerful and lasting effect. Listening, for example, is basic and yet essential to raise community awareness on the subject.

PADRE ARTURO

When people hear the testimonies of the families, when a mother, a sister, or a daughter tells their story, shares what their missing person used to do for a living; whether they are a worker or student; if they have children waiting for their return; how much time has passed; the conditions of the disappearance… When those stories are shared, society becomes a little more empathetic. People are moved when they hear the stories aloud and face to face, and then they listen. That is a precious tool. Listening, face to face.

#### **9 HEALING** 9

VICKY

Every wound caused by forced disappearance is a wound in the fabric of society. The depth of the damage caused by violence in Mexico cuts through not just the victims, but all of us. If we felt that we were part of a society, of a community, we would understand that when someone goes missing, a part of us goes missing too. Understanding this can lead us to action, to question not only the role of the state but our own role. Our role in healing this society. Healing isn't something that will come overnight. It’s a long and challenging process. Just as disappearances create wounds at different levels, healing may require actions at different levels.

Starting with the state, for example, Dr. Déborah Ruiz tells us:

DEBORAH

On the one hand, the state must have a technical and scientific strategy to identify missing persons and, on the other hand, a strategy to stop disappearances altogether and deal with the problem of violence. But that is a huge subject because in Mexico, organised crime, weapons, and violence are interconnected, and disappearances are embedded in the violence we live in, so it is huge... and of course, there are also those who have already disappeared; we have to find them! We have to heal that and that will enable the state to say ok, we did it.

VICKY

At the level of individual actions, it is interesting how Father Arturo has guided the searching mothers who come to him towards self-care.

PADRE ARTURO

I found some similarities between civil protection and the Gospel. On the plane, they tell you, if we have an emergency, first, put on your own oxygen mask, and then you help someone else, only if you know how to do it and it's within your reach, right? Or in an earthquake, the same thing. First, get yourself safe. This is elemental; the Gospel says it poetically - love your neighbour as yourself. And yes, it is challenging, but these are words that I have used with several moms. I know it's hard, but you must sleep at least eight hours a day. I know you are not in the mood, but you must try to eat three times a day. It takes work, but after five days of activities, try to rest for two or as much as possible. The correlation here is fundamental. If you, as a searching mom, are physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy, that is also looking for your daughter. That is also searching for your missing loved one.

VICKY

 Another fundamental task is to heal future generations; our children, our childhood.

DEBORAH

I think there is a whole curriculum for peace education. It can include learning English, dancing, and acting. Art that can cure. Also, since they are a disadvantaged population, promoting their personal, professional and economic development is key to help healing. And, of course, educating them as the citizens who will have to carry on with everything that we cannot solve now. Including finding their parents. Giving them the tools and setting the path so they don't become a violent generation, cynical and weary of the state and its institutions. Which they have every right to be.

VICKY

The complexity of a crime as atrocious as forced disappearance can lead victims’ families or community members to choose a path of violence. They may see this as the only way to respond to the lack of justice and impunity on the part of the State. This generates cycles of violence that have no end. So how can we forgive to achieve true healing?

PADRE ARTURO

The big problem is understanding forgiveness and healing from a purely legal perspective. Yes, the legal aspect is vital. Still, we also need the human factor of forgiveness, of reconciliation. Then this will give us a basis for healing. So that we can free ourselves from resentment. Free ourselves from revenge. We need to aim for a transitional justice model that enables dialogue between victims and perpetrators. Because although it may seem romantic, the perpetrators themselves are indeed victims of the system. We would have to ask ourselves, as a society, what did we do, or what did we stop doing, so that there is this response from organised crime? Where did we lose them, and what is our responsibility as a society to bring them back? It sounds romantic, but it's a reality.

VICKY

 The dialogue between victims and perpetrators has been part of the models of transitional justice used in South Africa, Colombia, Guatemala, and other peace processes around the world. These models propose actions to search for truth and reparation, and stop the repetition of conflicts. This, however, can only happen with the cooperation of all parts of society. To create new realities, we must accept that we are all responsible for this situation and must all act accordingly.

PADRE ARTURO

It's not enough to pray. It is important for people of faith, but there's also something else we can and should do. The Gospel reminded us of Lazarus and the rich. Epulón, the rich man, lived and dressed in luxury. And at the door of his house was a beggar who lived on what he threw away. This rich man never harmed him, ever, nor spoke ill of him. He didn't do anything wrong. The big problem was that he didn't do him any good either. And that is the problem that Desmond Tutu also posed. If in a situation of injustice, we declare ourselves neutral, we are taking the side of the oppressor. So we need to take sides.

VICKY

Taking sides, as Father Arturo says, is crucial. The structures of violence that have been installed in the country for so many years are powerful and organised. If those of us outside of these structures remain quiet and divided, we are leaving the path open for these systems to perpetuate and grow stronger.

DEBORAH

Why is that? Because we were taught not to collaborate with others. And we don't know how to collaborate, work together, or work as a team. And that has been happening on purpose because if we were united and well-organised, the country would be very different, wouldn't it? And it's the same when it comes to disappearances. For the system, it's very convenient to keep groups divided.

VICKY

The individualistic thinking we have learned sustains an economic and political model that divides us and sees us only as consumers. It encapsulates us in fear, causing us to focus on ourselves and no one else. It teaches us that the pain of the other is not my pain, and that the violence another person experiences does not go through me. So, we then focus our efforts towards building higher walls, installing security cameras and panic buttons and, ultimately, leaving us paralysed inside our homes. What for? We must understand that the chain of violence has already reached all of us, so we must start acting.

PADRE ARTURO

 We need to claim back the streets. We need to overcome fear. We are not candid or deluded. We know that there are real risk factors, but precisely because we recognise them, we have to respond with much more creativity, much more intelligence, and, I say, with much more love to challenges.

#### **10 CLOSING** 10

VICKY

The challenges are big and frightening, but if we don't act now, they will be more difficult in the future. It’s time to take a step towards action. Shifting from individualism to recognising ourselves as part of this society will allow us to support the struggles of the seventy plus search groups in Mexico. How can you do it? You can locate the search groups in your State and accompany the demonstrations, searches, and brigades. Help amplify their voices through your social networks, and make donations of money, food and tools and utensils for work. And if you’re not in Mexico? Follow and support collectives on social media, and use your online presence to support them and spread the word. And wherever or whoever you are, the simplest and easiest thing to do is to pass on what you’ve heard. Tell somebody who doesn’t know about the disappeared. Ask one, two, or three friends to listen to this podcast. Speak out. Create awareness to provoke positive action. We can all help.

#### 11 CREDITS

VICKY

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.