



## All Relative: Defining Diego

### Bonus Episode: Adoptee Voices

A Production of Somethin' Else and Sony Music Entertainment

**Diego:** There are more than 50,000 Guatemalan adoptees living all over the world. But it's not often we find ourselves in the same room. Until one weekend in March 2022, on a Saturday morning at 8 AM.

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

**Diego:** I was just barely awake but I was getting ready to walk into just that...

**Elevator voice:** Fifth floor, going down!  
**India:** Okay, have fun! See you in a little bit.  
**Elevator shuts and beeps.**

**Diego:** That's me and one of my producers, India Witkin. India and I traveled to an annual meet-up of Guatemalan adoptees. It was organized by this group called Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots.

They started doing these meet-ups in 2019. And I'd always been pretty ambivalent about going to something like this. Which is why I hadn't been before.

**Diego:** Okay, I think I found it. I'm about to walk in...  
**People chatting.**

**Diego:** The adoptees in the room were from all different parts of Guatemala. I believe the youngest was 17 and the oldest was in their forties. There were people from all over. Just outside D.C to folks from Kentucky, North Carolina and Canada.

**People chatting.**

**Diego:** It seemed like everyone knew each other. The way they broke off and chatted amongst themselves in a circle. It was pretty obvious it was my first time. Everyone else was wearing t-shirts and jeans, and me? I wore a fucking suit.

**MUSIC: Bright, uplifting, acoustic arpeggio with glistening bells begins.**

**Diego:** Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots was founded by five Guatemalan adoptees from the U.S. just three years ago.

As *one* of a handful of organizations built by — and for adoptees — they've helped adoptees access documents like birth certificates, or find their birth families.

They even met with the President of Guatemala to ask for citizenship for adoptees — and got him to approve it.

But their biggest and most ambitious goal is to create a community of Guatemalan adoptees *in the U.S.* A place where we can hear and share our stories and form connections. I had this feeling that it would be very *kumbaya* — or some kind of adoptee support group, and that was something I didn't feel I needed.

But it also felt special and kind of nice to blend in, and not really feel like an outsider for once.

We wandered around Capitol Hill and the White House, and saw the National Museum of the American Indian. and I was proudly wearing my jacket made by indigenous Guatemalans.

**India: It's really windy here...**

**Diego: I actually can't see anything. I struggled to have my eyes open.**

**Diego: I need a hair binder...**

**India: Yeah...**

**Diego:** In the evening, we went to this Asian restaurant in Arlington.

**Diego: We're at Zen Bistro, it's like this Asian-style restaurant, surrounded by like 25 Guatemalans...**

**Diego:** We swapped stories over pad thai and spring rolls. Laughing and opening up about our childhoods, birth families, and real adult lives. It felt kinda good to talk with people who have similar experiences to me.

**MUSIC: Bright, uplifting, acoustic arpeggio with glistening bells fades out.**

**Diego: I think we're going to go party later.**

**India: Yeah, we are.**

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

**Diego:** My story is just one of thousands. And in DC — and in my travels to Guatemala — I got to hear a few more. And I want you to hear them, too. The stories of adoptees, in their own words.

From Somethin' Else and Sony Music Entertainment, this is All Relative: Defining Aa Tiko'.  
Episode 10: Adoptee Voices.

**THEME MUSIC: Swells with intensity and then fades.**

## ACT ONE

**Diego:** The simplest and *most* difficult question to answer has always been: Where are you from. It's definitely an adoptee thing. Because, in some ways, we're from all over:

**Carlos:** I'm German, but I was born in Guatemala and grew up in Germany.

**Kerwin:** I live in Louisville, Kentucky.

**Diego:** This question of “where are you from” always makes us laugh. It's like bruh, do you want the short answer or the long answer?

**Kahleah:** Well, I was born in Guatemala, I'm actually from, grew up in Quebec and now I'm in Nova Scotia.

**Kerwin:** And then if they say, where are you really from? Um, then I'll explain that I was adopted from Guatemala.

**Rachel:** I've always been pretty proud to say I'm from Guatemala. It's always my fun fact that I'm adopted.

**Carlos:** These people have this image in mind that I cannot be German because I don't look like a typical German.

**Diego:** Over the past few months, I spoke to three Guatemalan adoptees who grew up and live in three different countries. They each have really unique experiences.

**Diego:** Okay, so first I'll say *hallo, Wie-ghets es dir*. Um, I'm trying to learn some German, uh, before this, so let us *sprechen dis keine deutsch*. Probably butchered it, but we'll see.

*Translation: Okay, so first I'll say hi how are you? Um, I'm trying to learn some German, uh, before this, so let us speak a little German.*

**Carlos: Hi Diego. Yes. Um, thank you so much for having me here and for even learning some phrases in German.**

**Diego:** That's Carlos Haas. I met him through Next Generation Guatemala, another adoptee organization that's more than ten years old now.

Carlos is 36 years old. And he was born in Huehuetenango, Guatemala. When he was just three months old, he was adopted by a German couple from Augsburg, a small city in the southern part of the country.

**Carlos: I'm a historian and teaching contemporary history of 19th, 20th and 21st century at the university of Munich.**

**Diego:** Carlos is a big history buff like me — but he's made a whole career of it as a professor.

Growing up, he never felt an urge to find his birth family. But *everything* changed for him in 2012.

**Carlos: The most intense experience in this way was to meet my, my son, when he was born. And I realized that in this very moment, um, that is my first blood relative I really got to know in person.**

**Diego:** Becoming a parent really shifted things. When Carlos' *second* child was born three years later, in 2015, the new father had a different kind of revelation.

**Carlos: The birth went very well and, uh, my wife put our son into her arms.**

**MUSIC: Dreamy and hypnotic melody of string begins.**

**Carlos: And of course, like every mother does, she looked at everything, like at his feet, at his arms, and his hands and things like that.**

**And then she mentioned something I I didn't see. Oh, look, Carlos. He has a sixth finger on each hand., which is not really like a 100% finger because it has no bone spot. It has a nail and things like that. So it's really like very special. And in this very moment, this was the perfect proof, um, that we are family, I mean, of course this, I, I already knew, but it's because I have scars on my fingers too. And when I was a child, I never knew why.**

**By getting to know him. I, um, got to know something about myself too, which before I couldn't. I had no contact. I had no knowledge about my biological family. And I had no connection with my own past.**

**Diego:** After the birth of his first child, Carlos wanted to learn more about the people who were biologically related to him.

He got in contact with a Guatemalan agency that works with adoptees searching for their birth families. The agency told Carlos it would take years to find someone. But in May 2017, a few short months later, he received an email from the agency.

**Carlos: They told me that they found my birth mother. Who has also a sixth finger on both of her hands. Uh, like many other family members do, but it's not the only thing obviously I found out.**

**I found out that her name is Victoriana and, um, where she's from, where she, where she grew up and where I was born. It was really, like, a new information because my passport says I am born in Guatemala City, but she told me, no, it's not true. It was Huehuetenango. It's kind of far away from Guatemala city. And it, also, like the birthday itself. It's not 28th of February, but the 22nd.**

**MUSIC: Dreamy and hypnotic melody of strings fades out.**

**Diego:** These basic facts about yourself define you in some way, so when you find out they aren't true, I think it can change the way you understand yourself.

In my case, I grew up my whole life thinking I was born in Santiago Atitlán, but at 23, I found out I was really born in Escuintla.

Carlos told me why his birth mother relinquished him.

**Carlos: And with regards to the circumstances of the adoption itself, um, it was like a very difficult, but in a way, typical Guatemalan story.**

**MUSIC: Delicate guitar arpeggio with melodic piano chords begins.**

**Carlos: So my mother grew up in a very rural area, uh, very poor. And, um, she, uh, got to marry a guy when she was 16 and they had several children. Um, but as you know, this was like the sixties, seventies, eighties — the time of the Guatemalan civil war. So in the eighties, he, as many, uh, people from the municipio, um, decided to go with the Guatemalan army and one day he didn't come back. So that's was a very difficult situation for my mother, as she was alone, a widow with four children.**

**So after, uh, two years, she met another man who was much younger than her, 11 years younger. They were not married. Um, but they fell in love and, uh, she got pregnant. Um, and that was me.**

**But once again, she was very unlucky and my father died during the pregnancy.**

**MUSIC: Delicate guitar arpeggio with melodic piano chords fades out.**

**Diego:** The taboo of having a child out of wedlock was an added challenge for Carlos' birth mom. The tradition is you get married, then you have children. Carlos' mom was a pregnant widow with a few kids. So she had to make a tough decision when Carlos was three months old.

**Carlos: And so she brought me to Guatemala City without telling anybody about it. And left me in the hands of an orphanage, who was run by a Guatemalan lawyer who organized international adoptions, especially to Europe.**

**And then she went back to her town and kept it as a secret, eh, until the very day when, uh, the NGO I mentioned contacted her for the first time.**

**Diego:** When Carlos traveled to Guatemala to meet his birth family in February 2018, he had no idea what to expect. Or what his birth mother would say.

**MUSIC: Soft acoustic guitar with intermittent piano chords begins.**

**Diego:** Carlos shared a video with us that a family member had taken of their reunion.

It was an early afternoon on February 15th that Carlos was told to meet the family at his biological brother's house in their hometown of Huehuetenango. As they approached the house, Carlos began to hear clapping in the distance.

**Clapping, marimba, firecrackers.**

**Diego:** They saw a huge gathering, balloons were hung up, firecrackers were going off, marimba music was playing, food and drinks spread out on tables, and about 50 people standing there and clapping...for him.

His mother, Victoriana, wore a long blue dress and slowly approached her son, who wore dark pants and a sweater. The two didn't spare a moment and embraced affectionately. She squeezed him tightly and he lifted her up in joy. The two didn't let go for about a minute or so, and then Carlos introduced her to her grandchildren for the very first time.

**Carlos: She was kind of a relieved from keeping all this a secret. Right. So just to mention that over 33 years, she had literally no one to talk about a child she, she lost...right?**

**It made me feel very, very happy, very kind of complete. A feeling of being very quiet finally, right? And to find some peace.**

**Diego:** I mean, in some ways, Carlos has a story that seems complete. He got the ending he never dreamed he'd have.

**MUSIC: Soft acoustic guitar with intermittent piano chords fades out.**

**Diego:** Today, Carlos and Victoriana Whatsapp almost daily. And his family of four is now a family of dozens.

Recently, his two kids applied for their Guatemalan passports at the Guatemalan Embassy in Berlin. And now they're recognized as dual citizens of Germany and Guatemala.

We'll be right back.

**AD BREAK**

**ACT TWO**

**AMBI: Kids playing, Kahleah talking.**

**Kahleah: And then we do have four, uh, four rooms here at El Amor. So this is our boys' room. We have a girls' room and then we have a toddler and then a baby room...**

**Diego:** That's Kahleah Guibault, who we heard in episode eight. We met her at El Amor de Patricia, a children's home in San Lucas, Guatemala.

Kahleah was crouching down to play with the babies and toddlers. She's the Guatemalan Director of El Amor. And interestingly, Kahleah is a Guatemalan adoptee herself. She wasn't at the meet-up in DC, but my mom Laurie and I met her on our last trip to Guatemala.

Kahleah was adopted when she was just five months old. She was raised in Quebec, Canada and she lives and works in Guatemala now, but there was a time she didn't even know Spanish.

**MUSIC: Slow piano melody over softly pulsing eclectic tones begins.**

**Diego:** When Kahleah was a child, her adoptive mom was curious about Kahleah's birth family. But as a kid, Kahleah didn't feel the same way. And she still has mixed feelings about meeting them.

Kahleah: I actually don't know my birth family and it has been something again, that, not for lack of my parents' interest. I almost think they might have more interest at this point than I do.

I think part of it is fear. I am 31 and I know that...um, many things can happen. You know, I don't know how I would feel if I was to find out my birth mother has passed away. I don't know how I'd feel if I find out she hadn't passed away. And I have a lot of siblings, I don't know how I'd feel about the responsibility of, um, I know I don't have to care for them, but I would, I know myself enough to know that I would want to, I think for me a question of, um, my mental health and, and being at peace with, um, my life.

**MUSIC: Slow piano melody over somber pulsing rhythms fades out.**

**Diego:** Kahleah gave us a tour of El Amor.

**Diego: So like, from my understanding, you're working with domestic adoption. And how did you end up here?**

**Kahleah: I was always aware of children's homes and orphanages and I visited many and some of them are very institutional, and I remember walking through the doors here at El Amor and instantly feeling the joy, the family setting, the love that like togetherness.**

**Diego:** She guided us through the school — greeting teachers, nannies, and children. The kids and caretakers at El Amor, *they* make up her Guatemalan family.

**Sound of a TV show.**

**Kahleah: Hola!**

**MUSIC: Warm acoustic guitar begins.**

**Kahleah: And I often am able to be the person who goes upstairs and holds this baby who's about to meet their forever family and walk down the stairs and introduce them to his or her family. And like I said, just that full circle kind of moment. Um, I cry every time and it's just so filling, so fulfilling.**

**Diego:** You know, I learned something seeing the process of adoption from Kahleah's perspective. I realized that it's not *just* the birth mothers and children that go through the emotional trauma and heartache. It's everyone who cares for them.



**Kahleah: Hola! [Baby cooing.]**

**Diego:** We'll be right back.

**MUSIC:** Warm acoustic guitar fades out.

**AD BREAK**

**ACT THREE**

**Rachel: When I like go to some of my workplaces, people just assume I speak Spanish. So it's like very uncomfortable for me to tell them like, no I don't and then I get the judgment.**

**Diego:** That's Rachel Suissa. I met her at the Adoptees with Guatemalan Roots meet-up in DC. And she's talking about an assumption I know *really* well.

**Rachel: Like, why don't you speak Spanish? And it's like, well, you're adopted. So, like, you should speak Spanish.**

**Diego:** Rachel grew up in Bethesda, Maryland. She was giddy telling me about her college acceptances. She was just a few weeks from turning 18.

She was elated about her future. But there was so much that Rachel didn't know about her past.

**MUSIC:** Melancholic and cyclical guitar solo begins.

**Rachel: I came with a big burn and my parents had like, no idea, like where that could have come from. And I still have a scar to show for it.**

**Diego:** Rachel was adopted when she was 14 months old, and like many adoptees, she's moved through life with a lot of baggage from it, and struggles with why she was adopted.

For as long as Rachel can remember she's been in therapy — she's digging for those answers and unlearning certain patterns. She has found regular trauma therapy works best for her and through it, she's been able to unlock memories. Rachel learned how she got the large dark thick scar on the back of her left leg as a baby.

**Rachel: They sat me on top of...like a flattening iron or like a, um, wrinkle iron. When I came to the States, my legs were slightly bowed. So the doctor thinks that they left me in the crib a lot. So, um, I had to like, even for years, I, like, didn't know how to explain, like there's a giant scar on my body. Like, how do I tell people? Like, oh,**

**when I was a baby, like I was literally sat on a hot iron. So that was really hard for me to comprehend and take in.**

**MUSIC: melancholic and cyclical guitar solo fades out.**

**Diego:** In middle school, Rachel was curious to learn about her birth family. But her adoptive family was a little cautious of how their daughter would handle it.

**Rachel: The only hesitation they have is like, wanting to know that I'm going to be okay with answers or not having answers. And they want to make sure that I'm going to be in a stable place to understand all of that.**

**Diego:** Rachel's never been back to Guatemala. Her parents want to take her and her 16-year-old brother one day. But she doesn't know when the time will feel right.

**Rachel: It takes time for, like, the searchers to find things. And sometimes what they find. Isn't always what you want to hear. So I don't want to, um, find out something that's going to, like, stop me and my track. So I won't be able to, like, continue the rest of, like, my education and career in life.**

**Diego:** Rachel grew up in a diverse part of Maryland with a sibling who's also a Guatemalan adoptee, so she never felt alone in that sense. But when she was 13 and went to high school, things started to feel different.

**Rachel: I go to a predominantly white high school and I'm, like, one of, like, the fewer minority kids. And then when I got there, I just kinda felt like, *Oh, like, I don't look like everyone.* And I don't know. Then I started to question, like, *Who am I? Like, why don't I look like everyone? Like, what can I do to look like everyone?* And like, I even contemplated, like, dying my hair to look like everyone around me.**

**Diego:** I mean, in a way, I relate to this. I grew up around a lot of white kids, playing hockey. And I was always the only person of color on the team. I loved the sport and wanted to fit in. But everyone kept reminding me that I didn't.

Something that made Rachel feel especially different was her scar. This physical marker of trauma on her body was a clear sign that there was more to unpack and a lot of inner work to do. And it wasn't just the physical marks that became more noticeable. It was the emotional scars of being adopted as well.

**Rachel: As I got older in my relationships, I noticed there was, like, a pattern of me feeling, like, really disconnected. So when I went to treatment, we dove into attachment and attachment disorders, and I learned that when you are separated from your birth mom, that impacts a lot of your other relationships. Like I know my parents have so much love for me and my extended family too, but still like when I see**

**them, I just feel I need to put up a wall. I just feel really disconnected. And like, I want to, like, reciprocate all of that, like, emotion, but I...there's just still, like, some sort of blockage in me and like in my heart.**

**Diego:** I feel the same way sometimes. I often put a wall up to people I meet and even to loved ones. The amount of trauma we've experienced as adoptees makes trusting people and building relationships more difficult. There's just something about adoption that makes the feeling of belonging a hard thing to find.

**MUSIC: A melodic, acoustic, stripped version of the theme music.**

**Diego:** Rachel had never been to an adoptee meetup before. I could see how much it meant to her.

**Rachel: I feel like it is a family and it's not just like a bunch of, like, people that are adopted from Guatemala coming together. Like, I feel like this is, like, the spirituality and, like, the emotion of, like, having a family and having a support group. This is a moment where I felt very connected to everyone.**

**Diego:** Just being in a room full of people — with questions, problems, and stories like mine — was something I'd never experienced. And to my surprise, I really liked it.

**MUSIC: A melodic, acoustic, stripped version of the theme music fades out.**

**Diego:** When I arrived in D.C, I didn't have the highest expectations for the meet-up. I didn't feel like I needed this community the same way the others did. The reality is that a lot of them are just starting their journeys, understanding their place in the world as an adoptee, searching and connecting with their birth families, and learning how to balance those relationships. I did those things when I was a kid.

But I realized that I was wrong to dismiss it so quickly. The more I sat and listened, the more I realized how traumatic adoption can be. Adoption to me had lived in the shadows of all my health issues. I had never gone through the pain of not knowing my birth family or wondering where I came from. I can hit rewind and fast forward on my entire childhood. As weird as that is, it's also a privilege. So the meet-up was sort of illuminating for me in a lot of ways and humbling. And as much as I hate to admit it, I had a lot of fun.

**MUSIC: Gentle acoustic guitar with light electric guitar with pulsing synths.**

**Diego:** These questions, where are you from? Who are you? When you're an adoptee, they're never easy to answer. Growing up, I would say "Well, I am from Guatemala, but I'm adopted." Like I would always stipulate and feel this need to explain myself. I don't always want to explain. I can be American and Guatemalan.

I realized that my experience — you know, growing up doing all these documentaries, radio shows, and podcasts — I couldn't avoid it or not talk about adoption. And because of that, I feel

a bit like an expert. I think I can be a resource for other people dealing with these issues. And their traumas.

**MUSIC: Gentle acoustic guitar with light electric guitar with pulsing synths fades out.**

**Diego:** I want adoptees out there to know our stories matter. They're important even if they don't have that sweet unification story or the resolution we'd imagined.

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

**Diego:** For a long time, we've had our stories written by other people. And now it's time to write our own.

**Diego: Signing off as Guatemelon, you've been listening to NPR news. Live from Washington, I'm Jack Speer.**

**India: I think you're going to have a long career in radio.**

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

It's hosted by me — Diego Xicay Luke. This episode was written and produced by India Witkin. Senior producer is Mia Warren. Associate producer is Kyra Assibey-Bonsu.

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

Lizzie Jacobs was our editor. Production management help from Ike Egbetola and Lily Hambly.

This episode was engineered by Sam Bair. Our theme song was composed by Gautam Srikishan. Our adoptee consultant is Erik Mohn.

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To all the Guatemalan adoptees who shared their inspiring stories with us, we thank you from the bottom of our heart.

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

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