

1.11 How to Celebrate Dia de los Muertos

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SPEAKERS

Jasmine Bradshaw, Catrina Gandara

- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:00
You're listening to the First Name Basis podcast, Episode 11: "How to celebrate Dia de los Muertos"
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:14
Welcome to First Name Basis, a community of parents committed to making the transformation from good intentions to confident action. Join us each week as we cover critical topics and answer the questions you've never felt comfortable asking. We'll use the lessons we learned to teach our children about race, religion and culture. I'm your host, Jasmine Bradshaw.
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:48
Hello First Name Basis fam. I am so glad you are here. So today as you heard in our title, we are talking about how to celebrate Dia de los Muertos. And I tried my darndest to think of a really good "Coco" pun to put in the title, but I could not think of anything; Carter told me that they were all too cheesy. So if you think of a good "Coco" pun, please send it my way.
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 01:14
But before I introduce our amazing guest who's going to teach us all about Dia de los Muertos, I wanted to share with you a couple of events that are going on this weekend in the Valley. So on October 26 and 27th — that's Saturday and Sunday — in Mesa, there's a Dia de los Muertos festival. It's at the Mesa Art Center, and it's totally free. There's food, crafts, family activities, and live performances. I haven't been yet but I've heard amazing things about it. And I think we'll be at that one. So if you are there, please find us then say hello. There are actually two Dia de los Muertos festivals happening on Saturday, the 27th. The other one is in Phoenix. That one is also totally free. And that one is more in the afternoon, from one to 7pm. And they said they will also have crafts and entertainment and a celebratory procession. So if you are in the

valley, be sure to check those out. But even if you are not I encourage you to go and try to find a Dia de los Muertos event near you. Because I think I'm pretty sure they have them all across the country. And if you need help finding one, shoot me a DM and I will love to help you.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 02:33

Okay, so the guest on the podcast today is my friend Catrina Gandara. And she is actually a fellow podcaster. She has a podcast called Create Joy podcast, and she helps moms create joy, passion and purpose in their motherhood. And the funny thing is we met in podcast class. So in order to start the First Name Basis podcast, I took an entire class on it, and I have the best mentors ever. And they created this community for people who are trying to start a podcast, and that's where I met Catrina. And I'm not kidding you, we clicked instantly. And I feel like you'll hear that in this episode. It kind of sounds like a conversation between two long-lost best friends. We were talking about that afterwards, because we just have this connection and I totally love her. We originally connected because we both share similar values. We both value culture and we value family.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 03:35

And Catrina is from Mexico, so I knew that when I was doing this Dia de los Muertos episode, I really wanted to ask someone who has been celebrating her whole life and really has continued that tradition on in her family so that she can share with us how we can celebrate with our own families. And Catrina shares more in the interview about her background, so I'll let her tell you about that.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 03:58

But I really wanted to just tell you a little bit about how Catrina's podcast really uplifted me when I was having a really hard time, feeling like I was in just kind of a dark place. So if you follow us on Instagram, you know that my daughter, Violet, has been having some health issues, and they came on really suddenly out of the blue. We recently found out that she has a really severe nut allergy. So we're, all of a sudden we are a family of EpiPen carriers and label checkers and it's just been kind of a shock. But even after that, she has been having episodes where the doctors think that she might be having seizures. So we feel like we are up to our eyeballs in appointments with allergists and neurologists and we're just feeling totally overwhelmed and confused.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 04:48

Right before all this happened. Violet turned to it was her birthday and she had "I kid you not" the best birthday, Like I feel like as a mom it is way more exciting paying for my kid to have a birthday than my own birthday. It was so much fun. I love celebrating her. And this was the first year that she really understood what was going on and loved every minute of it. And my husband and I had sat down that night of her birthday and talked about how amazing it was

and how fun it was. And we both kind of were talking about how we felt like it was almost dangerous to be this happy. Like, what if something bad happens? Will it hurt more, because we're coming off of such a high high of being so joyful and happy?

J Jasmine Bradshaw 05:36

And right after that, I listened to Catrina's podcast, and in one of the very first episodes, she talks about how feeling joy is such a vulnerable emotion. You're putting yourself out there and really experiencing true joy and true happiness, and that means that when you do get hurt, it hurts pretty bad. But Catrina shares that no matter what you do, whether you feel your joy, or you stifle your joy, pain is pain, and it's going to just hurt because it's painful. And she really encourages you not to buy into the lie that if you stifle or squash your joy, that pain will hurt less. So I had listened to that and it was fresh on my mind. And then Violet has her episode, she eats nuts and she goes into anaphylactic shock, we end up in the ER and it's pretty much every mom's nightmare. And I'm sitting in the ER, in this horrible situation. And I just have this thought come to my mind that, "Oh my gosh, I knew I shouldn't have been so happy. I knew I shouldn't have been so happy because if I wasn't, maybe this wouldn't be so sad." And as soon as I thought that I remembered Catrina's podcast and what she explained and how feeling my joy has absolutely nothing to do with whether or not I would be sad and hurt in this moment.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 06:57

Okay, Catrina explains it way better than me. So I encourage you to go listen to her podcast, but I just feel so grateful that she came on First Name Basis to talk about Dia de los Muertos and just share her light. She's so lovely, you guys. So so lovely. All right. I will be done now. Here is Catrina Gandara.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 07:16

Okay. Hi, Catrina.

C Catrina Gandara 07:18

Hi, how are you, Jasmine?

J Jasmine Bradshaw 07:20

I'm so good. How are you?

C Catrina Gandara 07:22

Great. Thanks.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 07:23

So for our listeners who aren't yet familiar with you, can you just tell us a little bit about yourself?

C Catrina Gandara 07:29

Of course. So I was born and raised in northern Mexico in the state of Chihuahua. My family lives in Mexico since...they've lived there since the 1870s. And my mom was actually born and raised in New Mexico. So she brought a lot of the American traditions with her to the country. So living there was an amazing experience because we were deeply ingrained in both the American and the Mexican culture. So after I got married, I moved to central Mexico with my husband. And after a few years there, we moved to the US, where we're now. We now have two children. We live in New England where things are a little bit colder, in more than one sense of the word, than Mexico.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 08:10

So I recently launched my own podcast called Create Joy Podcast where we explore experiences and ideas to help us create joy every day in our lives, even when things are tough. And it's been such a fun project to work on. And it's funny because I really didn't realize how much joy was missing out in my own life until I started finding ways to create more of it. So it's been really fun. And I do have to say, Jasmine, that watching your podcast grow has been so inspiring to me. And I love the way you how you approach your topics with so much knowledge and clarity, but also with so much compassion for all the parties involved. So thanks for that.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 08:52

Oh, my goodness, thank you. I am not kidding you. I sent you that message about how much your podcast really like affected me in a time of crisis. So I'm grateful for your podcast, too. And I encourage anybody who's listening to go check out Create Joy. It, it really like was there for me when I needed it. So thank you.

C Catrina Gandara 09:09

Oh, you're so sweet. And if this is one of the first episodes you've heard on Jasmine's podcast, if you missed Episode One, definitely go back and listen to that. And Episode Nine on Ruby Bridges was so beautiful too. So those are my top two. I love it.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 09:27

Thank you. Okay, so can you tell us a little bit about the history of Dia de los Muertos? Like who celebrates it? What is it?

C Catrina Gandara 09:37
Yeah, of course. So I'm super excited to talk about this. It's probably one of my favorite holidays. And while the movie "Coco" has helped bring a lot of exposure to the real meaning of it, I feel like there's still a lot of misunderstanding, so I'm super excited to get into this.

C Catrina Gandara 09:53
So traditionally, Dia de los Muertos is a day when families welcome back their deceased relatives for a brief reunion, and it includes food and drink and celebration, and it's a very joyous happy occasion. So it's evolved quite a few times until it became what it is today, starting all the way back some 3000 years ago to pre-Columbian Mesoamerica with the Aztecs.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 10:20
Wow.

C Catrina Gandara 10:20
So they would actually worship the queen of the underworld. So there's this whole history, and I'm not sure exactly because it was 3000 years ago, but yeah, the stories, right, that'd be nice to know. But there's this history where they would worship this queen of the underworld, and she would guard the bones of the dead, because they could create new life. So then, once a year, she would come and visit the earth. And that was part of the whole process. Like if she didn't do that, new life couldn't be created. So this was very special for the Aztecs, and they would celebrate her return to Earth to honor and protect the bones as well as seeking protection for their loved ones who had died. So they believed...

J Jasmine Bradshaw 11:07
Wow,

C Catrina Gandara 11:07
...it's cool, right?

J Jasmine Bradshaw 11:08
Yeah! Like how have I never heard this before?

C Catrina Gandara 11:12
So they believed in death as a natural, integral part of life, it wasn't something scary, it was just

something that happened, right. So their belief was that after death, a person could travel, they would have to travel to the land of the dead on their way to the final resting place. So this journey would take several years and they had to pass through, I think it was, nine different levels to get to their final destination. And so they loved their loved ones, and they didn't want to abandon them in this like time of solitude, right. So they really wanted to be able to help them through their difficult journey. So family members would build like altars and leave them food and drink to help them with sustenance on their way.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 11:54

And then at a similar time, in Europe, there were also pagan celebrations that would happen in the fall, and it was kind of the end of the harvest, and they would build bonfires and dancing and feasting. And then with the rise of the Catholic Church, they were eventually unofficially adopted into the All Saints' and All Souls' Day. So in Spain, people would bring wine and something called spirit bread to the graves of their loved ones on All Souls' Day. And then they would cover the grave with flowers and light candles to help their dead on their journey back. So these are two very similar traditions that are happening on opposite sides of the world.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 12:34

So then, in the 16th century, the Spanish conquistadores, they brought these European traditions over to the New World. And they started seeing well, the Indigenous people are doing this other thing, and we're doing this thing, and, of course, the Spanish went in and, you know, captured land and kind of took over and converted everyone to Catholicism. So then they said, "Alright, we're gonna change your tradition into our tradition." And so they merge these two celebrations. So that's how everything kind of came together. So the Spanish character of La Catrina, kind of that skeleton? That symbol?

J Jasmine Bradshaw 13:09

Yeah...

C Catrina Gandara 13:10

So she's Spanish merged into this, and she became the symbol for the queen of the underworld that the Aztecs used to celebrate. And that's kind of how it's evolved into what it is today. And it's just such a beautiful celebration, where we celebrate life and our loved ones. And it's a time of, you know, the colorful sugar skulls, the marigold flowers...Which are, the smell is said, you know, to help bring them back so they can find their way. There's altars, you visit the grave site, you decorate, you clean, there's traditional food and drink, and as most celebrations in Mexico it's just a beautiful occasion to get together as a family.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 13:54

Yeah. So do you feel like it's kind of cracked open the door for you to talk to your children about something as heavy as death?

something as heavy as death.

C Catrina Gandara 14:02

Oh, my gosh, totally. So my father-in-law passed away four years ago. And it was like, it didn't really faze them, right? He's been dead longer...that like, they've lived without him longer than they lived with him. But they still continue to create memories with him, which is beautiful. They celebrate him and they do things in his honor. So every year his birthday and his death day are, I think, like a month apart. And so we choose one of those days, and we do something in his honor. And it's just really a beautiful way to say you know, it's not a scary thing. It's something beautiful and it's something that's going to happen to all of us and we still get to be a part of their lives.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 14:49

Wow, that's really powerful because my husband and I have conversations about that all the time. Like this whole podcast is about talking to children about hard things but the death conversation I'm a little anxious about, because I'm so anxious about it myself, you know, right.

C Catrina Gandara 15:05

Wow. Yeah, definitely.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 15:08

Okay, so Dia de los Muertos, we know that it's around the end of October, and so I feel like a lot of people get confused that it's similar to Halloween or that it has something to do with Halloween. Can you talk about that a little bit?

C Catrina Gandara 15:22

Yeah, of course. So I actually had to look this up, because I didn't really know what Halloween was about. We've lived in the U.S. now, I think, six years, and every year we go trick-or-treating, and I'm just super confused. Everyone else is doing this, so we'll keep going.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 15:44

That's hilarious!

C Catrina Gandara 15:45

So Halloween, it's funny because they actually come from very similar backgrounds. They come from...Halloween it stems from like the European pagan holidays, right. So they were a celebration of fall and then they have the celebration of the harvest season. But then it kind of

celebration of fall, and then they have the celebration of the harvest season. But then it kind of like took on this darker view of death during the Bubonic Plague. So people still believe that the dead would come and visit them during that time, but now death kind of became a scary thing because the plague was reckless, and people were legitimately afraid of death. So it was also believed that the dead had the chance to roam the earth one last time and gain revenge on their enemies before moving to the afterworld. So, because of this, people would dress up in costumes in order to hide from death. And they would use their harvest bonfires to prevent spirits from landing on Earth. So then trick or treating seemed to have originated in Scotland, Ireland and Wales, where people would dress up and go door to door asking for food with the promise of a blessing. And if it wasn't given to them, then mischief would be threatened. So that's where trick-or-treating came from. That was funny to learn.

C Catrina Gandara 15:59

So what I think what happened here is that there the break off point was these plagues in Europe, where this wasn't happening in Mesoamerica. So then, in Europe, it kind of became something to be scared of, where in Mesoamerica, it still became like a celebration. So it's similar in that both beliefs were that the dead would come that day, just one of them embraced it as something beautiful, and the other culture was still kind of scared of it.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 17:29

Oh, wow. Yes. Because, okay, so I go to Target and I'm, you know, wandering, of course, and I was looking at the Halloween section, and right next to it, they had the Dia de los Muertos decorations, and I was like, I feel like this is further confusing people to make them think that is the same thing, but I'm pretty sure it's not. So thank you for clarifying that. Maybe I should talk to somebody about that at Target.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 17:51

How does your family celebrate? Like, do you have any special traditions that you guys do every year? Or do you do something new something different every year? What do you guys do?

C Catrina Gandara 18:00

Yeah, so traditionally, there's a lot of things that happen, right, and it varies a lot by town. And in the north, it wasn't actually a holiday until...remembering...I think it was like 1960 in northern Mexico. So because it wasn't Mesoamerica, that's not where the Aztecs lived.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 18:26

So different towns celebrated different ways. Some of them do the big shows, some of them, I grew up just kind of going to the cemetery and you know, visiting my ancestors and maybe doing a little family dinner. But now that we're in the United States, there's really not anyone

else to celebrate it with. It's just like my little family, right? So it's kind of actually became become something more special, right? Like we kind of hold it dear to our hearts.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 18:57

So we make the pan de muerto, which is a traditional kind of... It's like a bread with a very distinct taste. And you like shape it with bones on the top. You have the Mexican hot chocolate, and then atole which is like a thicker hot chocolate and it can be different flavors.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 19:17

And sometimes we will "not on the actual holiday, we kind of hold that one special" but we'll invite friends over to kind of celebrate with us and we'll do the papel picado, which is those rectangular banners and kind of share experiences, or we'll talk about our dead and we'll just make it something beautiful.

C Catrina Gandara 19:36

But then when we actually bring it into our family, we do do different things. Sometimes we'll go, I don't know to Michael's or Target or something, and pick up those like skulls that you can color, or will do like the traditional sugar skulls but we always do the the traditional food, right? The activities will change depending on either how much time we have or how much I'm just feeling up to it that year. And how much the kids are wearing me out.

C Catrina Gandara 20:05

Yeah, but um, something really cool that we're doing this year, we finally evolved to the point where my kids are super passionate about family history, almost to the point that it's an obsession. So they want to know all about their ancestors. And we're lucky enough to actually have been able to go and visit like some places that they lived. So they are each researching a family name. And I have this, this worksheet that they're filling out all about who, who their person is, right? And they're just really getting to know them. And then on actually on Dia de los Muertos they're going to, you know, we're going to celebrate our kind of new-found family all together.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 20:51

Wow, that's so powerful! We have just recently gotten into family history too, and I feel like excited and overwhelmed all at the same time. So it's inspiring to me that your kids are doing it, because I'm like, "Okay, I can do this if kids can do it."

C Catrina Gandara 21:04

It's so fun. And it's all about just enjoying it, right? Like if you do it because it's something you

have to do, then you kind of lose the whole purpose. And I have so much of my family histories already done, right? So I'm there for the stories. I just get in and learn about the stories.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 21:21

I love that. I was wondering, so is your family still in Mexico? Or do they live here in the United States?

C Catrina Gandara 21:28

We're about half and half. So my parents are still in Mexico. All my husband's family is in Mexico. And then I have some siblings in the U.S.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 21:36

Oh, wow. How often do you get back there?

C Catrina Gandara 21:39

Maybe about once a year.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 21:41

Oh, that's great. So they get to see their grandparents and, good. That's awesome. So the families who come to celebrate with you, do you have them like prepare anything special? Or do you just invite them say, you know, "Come," or "Bring a family name?" Or how does that work?

C Catrina Gandara 21:57

Yeah, so we've done it both ways. We recently moved to a new town, so we didn't really know people well enough this time to, you know, because it's super intimate when you get into these conversations, but we did at a previous house. I just had a bunch of girlfriends over and it was like 20 of us. And we all just got together and did some activities. And then we shared experiences about people who we love who had passed away and how they were continuing to influence our lives and it was so powerful.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 22:29

Wow. Okay, I'm like dying to do that now. Um, are there, so how would you recommend parents introducing Dia de los Muertos to their children? Are there like books or resources that you would share with other parents?

J Jasmine Bradshaw 22:29

Yeah, definitely. So I actually reached out to a friend, my friend Vanessa, she does Sol Book Box, who's like an expert on all things literature, and she knows all the best books about everything. So she sent me a list of books that she loves, and I'll send those to you. The really cute ones that I love are "Funny Bones." There's one called "La Catrina," "La Catrina," if you're an English speaker, with a C, and "The Day of the Dead," there's a couple of them just title "The Day of the Dead." I also love the movies, "Coco," one that's really well known, and there's one that's not so well known but we like it even better, it's "The Book of Life." It came out I think in 2017.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 23:14

And then I've also made like a page of resources for the Day of the Dead, where you can go and find all of these, including recipes and links to books and movies. You can find like that Family Forum I was talking about, there's so much that's so foreign, I feel like to American culture, so I want to just give you a visual so you can see what all of this is because it's so cool.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 23:32

That's amazing. Okay, is that on your website?

C Catrina Gandara 23:32

Yeah. So it's at createjoypodcast.com/dayofdead.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 23:34

Okay, awesome. And I'll put that in the show notes too. And you said it was called Sol Book Box?

C Catrina Gandara 24:10

Mmm hmm.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 24:11

Okay, that sounds so cool. I'm like, Yes, I need that. In my life.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 24:15

Yeah, yeah. No, she's amazing. And she does like Spanish education. Right? So she sends you

out a book a month, um, a children's book that you can, like, you know, incorporate Latin American culture to your, to your kids. So cool.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 24:31

Yeah, that's awesome. I know that, in some instances, celebrating other people's holidays can be considered cultural appropriation, you know, like, like, taking someone's culture without asking or compensating them. So is there a way that families can join in the celebration that is respectful and appreciates the culture but doesn't appropriate?

C Catrina Gandara 24:54

Right. So I asked my husband about this because I was having a hard time finding an answer. And he brought up the point that this is just such a time of fun and excitement. And even there's mocking, there's, I forgot to tell you, there's these poems that you make that are like, they're called calaveras, that are poems where you really just like roast your teachers and friends, it's all about death. So it's just very, it is a little offensive. And it's a little just fun. And if you notice, anytime, like the poor, any president of Mexico or anyone in any political standing, can't do anything wrong, because there'll be memes about him within five minutes, like, hundreds of memes. It's just a very funny mocking culture, right? Yeah. So it would be kind of hard to actually be offensive to Mexicans, because we do it all to ourselves all the time.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 25:49

But, and as my husband pointed out, we love people to love our cultures. So if you want to celebrate, and if you want to wear your sombrero, and you want to paint your face, like it's an honor to us that you love our culture enough to be a part of it. Having said that, it's such an amazing celebration of life and love. So I would just say that if you're planning on celebrating, it would be so much more meaningful if you celebrate it for the real reason and the real meaning and treat death with the respect that it deserves, that we believe that it deserves. And if you do want to make it morbid or scary, there's like, a day on the 31st that you can do this, right? There's a for that date for that, and it's not too far away.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 26:35

Oh, that's awesome. Thank you. I was really, really wondering about that. So it's okay for people to join in the celebration if they're respecting and honoring the true meaning. Right? Yeah. And not like embracing caricatures and things like that.

C Catrina Gandara 26:51

Right. Hmm hmm.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 26:52

J Jasmine Bradshaw 20:52

Okay, love that. Okay, are there any last things that you like? If you could tell somebody one thing about Dia de los Muertos, what would you want them to know? What would you want them to take away?

C Catrina Gandara 27:05

I would want them to know that you don't have to be afraid of death. But yes, the act of dying is super scary, but I love the way that we celebrate it as a culture, that it's something beautiful. And I felt it in my life that you really can feel close to your ancestors. My grandfather passed away when I was about a month old. So I never had a relationship with him. But I always felt close to him. And I remember just kind of talking to him all the time and being like, "Hey, grandpa, maybe helped me out with this situation." And I think that's I think that's the key here that our ancestors are there, and they love us. And it's, it's weird, and I don't really know how to explain it, but, but it is real, like they're there. And they love us and we can be a part of their lives. And I bet they're kind of just waiting for us to ask them, you know, invite them in.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 28:08

Yes. I love how you kind of separated it as like the act of dying is scary but death is not necessarily scary. I've never thought about it in that way.

C Catrina Gandara 28:19

Right. And it's something that is going to happen to all of us, like, like your, your podcast points out a lot, how there's so many differences, right? And we need to celebrate those differences, and we need to respect them. But something that we every single one of us has in common is that we're all gonna die. We're all gonna be born and we're all gonna die. So we can celebrate that.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 28:38

Yes. And is that how you introduce it to your children? Like it's okay to be afraid of the act of death, but death in itself is beautiful.

C Catrina Gandara 28:48

I don't know that we've ever actually talked about the act of death, you know? We've never talked about death as being a scary thing.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 28:57

Okay. Yeah. This is just mom-to-mom. I'm like, "What do I do?" Thank you.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 29:04

Oh, well, thank you so much for coming on the podcast. We're so grateful for your knowledge, and I'm so grateful for your friendship.

C Catrina Gandara 29:10

Oh, thank you so much, Jasmine, your're...I'm so happy to know you. You're an inspiration. For sure. Thank you.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 29:18

Thank you so much for listening to this episode and being committed to building a community of inclusion. I can't even tell you how happy it makes me when I hear from you guys on Instagram. If you're not yet part of the First Name Basis family. Please find us on social media at [firstname.basis](https://www.firstname.basis). Send us your questions. Send us your comments, send us your experiences. We want to hear it all. If you feel more comfortable sending in an email. You can email us at hello@firstnamebasis.org And everything that I talked about in this episode books, podcasts articles, I will make sure to link in the show notes. Okie dokie. I'll talk to you next week.