

TRANSCRIPT OF HABLEMOS AUTISMO EPISODE 4: MAXI FELIZ

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: Hello, my name is Tony Hernandez Pumarejo and welcome to a new episode of Hablemos Autismo podcast. The podcast that is on a mission to raise awareness, acceptance and most importantly, help individuals and families impacted by autism, especially in our Hispanic community.

And today I have the honor and privilege of interviewing a person who is a great friend, a fighter for our community, with a unique story and that I know is a story that you, especially if you are a mom or dad, will connect with. I have the honor and privilege of interviewing Mrs. Maxi Happy. She is Dominican and a lawyer.

She is the mother of a son with Autism. She was even recently recognized by the Telemundo network as an unstoppable woman and today we are going to be learning a little about her story, in which it is a story of overcoming, especially as the mother of an autistic loved one. So Maxi thank you for coming to my podcast Hablemos Autismo.

Maxi Feliz: Thank you very much for the invitation, for me it is an honor to be with you and with all the people who follow you, who are a lot and admire you, and for me it is an honor to be here with you today.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: Thanks to you, the honor is mine to have you on my podcast. Unstoppable woman, that award you received from Telemundo, that is, it is a summary of what your life has been, a fight for you. How do you define an unstoppable woman?

Maxi Feliz: Really since I was a child, I have been very persistent, a fighter. I don't give up so easily, I don't think I ever give up, I think that when a situation like that happens to me, I empower myself much more, it takes more strength. And that is an unstoppable woman, who is not afraid of anything that continues. Even I always use the slogan "woman who undertakes without fear". So, that is the idea of an unstoppable woman, a woman who does not get tired despite adversities and who fights despite all the bad things that arise at the time, but I have always said; God always has a purpose with the things they do.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: That is so and the purpose that God has with each one of us. I remember that as part of this process, we connected and got to know each other through social networks, Instagram; In other words, you contacted me about a situation, some very difficult circumstances, which we will talk about in a few moments, but I know that you are a very fighting person and that you are persistent in the face of adversity and going along that line, the topic continues to speak a little about your roots. Dominican. How and why did you come to the United States?

Maxi Feliz: I came to the United States the first time, because it was a trip to get to know, uh, my parents gave me the trip here for being a good student, for being a good daughter. And that's how he came to the United States and later, uh, I started a process to check for a health problem where I was diagnosed with pre-cancer and from there he came constantly until I fell in love. I got married and began to reside here in the United States, but it was because of that situation. I started how, As a walk. Then it was a health situation and then it became a circle of love.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: That's how it is. And as part of your story, I understand that you had an interest in the media, which is one of the things you are passionate about, that is, it motivated you to enter that field.

Maxi Feliz: Since I was a child I have always been like this. I remember that I have an uncle who recorded me singing and one of the songs was "mami para acá o papi pa acá" in which I sang that and he recorded me, imitating Gloria Trevi, I liked music, then my dad, uh, began to studying communication, it was one of his first careers. Hey, looks like it was genetic. I still have an aunt in my family environment, and she would put me in front of the mirror with a brush or with any or the television control she would make me sing or present. Then he was dabbling in various media in the Dominican Republic. In which I have already approximately at the age of 14 I managed to have my first radio program called Juventud en Acción. And from there my strength in communication really began, and after that I go to the city, because that was in the town where I grew up, Monte Cristi. And I ventured into other media until I got here to New York, when I started living here in New York.

I begin to look for spaces both in radio programs and in magazines, as in the Dominican Republic I participated in the media; for example, yes, recognized as a daily list, I participated in the section at that time generation the section life writing, doing interviews with artists and it was a very nice experience, but I had to leave that dream behind and I went to the University, even studying social communication, but after that certain things were appearing that I was abandoning what is the media to dedicate myself to the labor area there.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: Interesting and as you mentioned, you know about that process that you went through in life. There were changes that you did not expect in your life; The arrival of your child came to you, but not only did the arrival of your child come, but this happened just like many fathers and mothers, who receive the first news that their loved one, son or daughter, is different. You receive that news, I know that it happened to you, that when you received the news that your child was diagnosed with autism. That many of these questions, which I ask many fathers, many mothers; When you received that news, how did your outlook on life change? How did it impact you? How did you react to? Tell us a little about the challenges you face in this process, knowing that your child is different from other people.

Maxi Feliz: I honestly wouldn't use the word differently. Because we are all different, we are not all the same, I don't look like you, I don't look like your mom. Perhaps we have some of the same characteristics, but we are all different, there is something that we must clarify when I receive my son's diagnosis, it was during the pandemic. I did know a boy, whom I love and adore, who has the condition. He was the first child that I saw that I began to study, that I began to love that I began to accept, and after him his name is Fran Diel, he is a child that I love and I pray to God that his condition improves every day. What's happening? The problem here is that we all lack information on the condition in general, because we don't know when he can touch us and if you don't know something it's a lot of cante.

It is not the same as me seeing someone close to me live it day by day, then since I did not know, I knew small aspects, but not as deep as now of the condition. It was very shocking, it was very painful. Because of my health problem. They had told me that I could not have children. And my son is a blessing from God. So, when I receive, what does he say to me, Maxi, are you pregnant? and going through a process, a pregnancy that was not phenomenal because I had changes, I had gestational diabetes, I felt really

bad, that is, and being away from my family was a little deeper. But when he tells me, my son is born that I feel that little body on top of me. I mean, my life changed and I thanked God from the very beginning. When I get the diagnosis, it did hurt if I cried. If I complained to God because I didn't know and I told him, why me? YES, it was a number of things, so it is. It's painful, because you don't know the condition, everything that is the spectrum because there are things. Being unaware of this is going to hurt you, you're going to feel bad, but my best advice is to parents. That they read, that they investigate, that they do not give up, that they seek second opinions. This is for me, it's gratifying. Because you can't imagine, Tony, everything that I have learned from the condition and every day I see that it is something that God sent with a purpose.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: It's interesting how you mention it, with a purpose. Because, going along the same lines as I say, everything happens for a purpose in life, although it will be difficult, you know. When mothers and fathers receive this news, there are different reactions, sadness, uncertainty etc. But all these reactions have something in common: what will be the future of my son and daughter? And following that line, Maxi spoke a little about your son, if possible, not just about the challenges, because one of the things that I try to educate people is that autistic people have abilities, no matter what. level. They can contribute to life. That has always been part of my mission. With your child, tell us a little about him, not only his challenges, but also his abilities, what does he like to do with his hobbies?

Maxi Feliz: For example, Max is a child when he is diagnosed. It was a very strong regression because she stopped talking, she stopped making eye contact, she walked on tiptoes, she did many turns, that is, she had many stereotypes. After us, I did the nutritional approach. My son has changed. I mean, I don't give him medicine at all, it's all multivitamin supplements. If I have done the biomedical approach, gluten free food, that is, it does not say gluten free because I am learning every day on the packaging, even yesterday I saw processed, semi-processed and unprocessed foods. That's where you're learning and I learned a lot of things, so that's why he invited families to read a lot, not to stop, to investigate, to call, to bother. I say it doesn't matter, write to the people who are one step ahead of you, I make myself available.

For example, Max has had all this and recovered, nowadays at a technological level he loves technology, he loves letters, my son doesn't speak, I mean, I know he can, because sometimes he says a few words, but within the condition it has a retention that I say, you have to break that, my son, you have to speak, you have to express yourself, tell me, but it has something. Which is phenomenal. He writes me words in Creole, I don't know who taught him that. Honestly, he takes the words of the alphabet and writes, for example, one day I'm going to make an anecdote, I was very saturated with situations, and he is holding my hand as if I came to play with him and I don't, my son, no, please be calm mom she is tired apart from he has sleeping disorder.

It does not sleep me, that is, as it should. There are nights and weeks, perhaps, it wakes me up at dawn and that exhausts me a lot the next day. I have to do chores and responsibilities both as a mother and as a professional. And so! And I tell you that he writes to me in Creole. A trail of words. And I say. Today, what will this mean? And the translator comes in and I write it. And they tell me that they have to change from Creole to Spanish. And, when I changed it, it said mom. Be gentle. I stayed. Oh really? And then he wrote me other words in English. And I, I said. I believe in my son. From the first moment I know that Max has unique potential. And the only way you can develop that potential in your child is by helping him. Because we must prepare our children for tomorrow. For an independent life because we

don't know if we are going to continue, but our children can continue and I see the example in you. What I see. That you have an independent life, you are a professional, you live alone, that is, why not our young children? They can achieve what you achieved with your parents.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: That's right, you summed it up perfectly. That is the mission, how can we help these beings who have come here with a purpose, give them those tools, those supports. To be able to fulfill that life and be independent. You summed it up perfectly. Talking about the unique activities that your child has. And as you mentioned well, if not, calm down if you are reiterating education, the most important thing. Only that I always tell parents, education, get good advice. And be very proactive. For me to help, you are not only helping your autistic son and daughter, but yourself as a human being.

Because I also say that autism also impacts parents, even if the parents do not have an official diagnosis, it is necessary to see that autism goes beyond the person diagnosed. How can we help families in this process? And as part of this story, I remember when you found me, that is, as I mentioned at the beginning, through social networks. You contacted me for a very difficult situation. A situation in which you and your child were victims. Of an act of robbery. Correct? That one of the two subjects threatened you and your child. I can't imagine at that time that you and your son were in that situation. I don't know if it's possible, that is, if for perhaps the public or person who doesn't know what happened and then that, that is, that can give us a little more detail. But more important. How after this event, a year later, how your life and that of your child as this event impacted him and how more important of them because you know well, you and I have been in communication. Let him move on. Life. If you can know if it is possible to share this event.

Maxi Feliz: It is the first time that I speak about this and I am going to share it with you and all the viewers. So they can see that not everything is easy, it's not all pretty, but we can't give up. Yes as you say. 1 year ago we were the victim of a crime that they robbed us with an armed hand, they put the gun to my belly and my son's head, the subjects. Who, uh, wanted to rob me. What about that situation? It was very painful; it was full of uncertainty because I didn't know what was going to happen in that one. Moment and I only thought of my son. I didn't think of anything else, nothing material, they asked me to give me this, I gave him everything, I only thought of my son after that. It has not been easy. It was a change that we had to make to move, far away, to withdraw from our environment, to change our entire circle because regardless there is fear or there was fear at that moment. But I came back and reiterate. I have been through many things, and it is not to victimize myself because I never like to victimize myself. But I am a very believer in God. I know God and I know why God. Allow and you do things and from that moment I have taken from that horrible moment and excuse me because my eyes are drowning. From that horrible moment, I have gotten a lot of good things.

A very strong force has been born in me to protect my son, to protect the children and people and families within the condition. The Mamá Tolita Foundation is born, I graduated in law as a lawyer in the Dominican Republic. I do my first legal thesis, I give that to my country, but despite that I do not stop, I go on and on and on. In favor of the blue community, both in the Dominican Republic and wherever it is, there are people who have called me. From even Europe. Maxi, what do you think I can do with my son's approach? Maxi, do you think this therapy? Is my son doing well, yes or no? And I always huh? What and right here in New York, the system is different, in each state there are different programs, but there are family ones. I know that there are very difficult moments, this is a roller coaster, there are

things where we go down and feel like we are missing out, but likewise, since you see that after so many months of therapy, so many months of getting up, for example, my son does not eat nothing processed from the street.

Every day you must get up, I have to get up, make your breakfast, make your food. If we go out for a walk, I must take my little lunch box with everything because I can't give him anything and he will say, and it would be easier for me and others. Let me buy. Worth the redundancy of a McDonald's or giving the promotion, but no. Because I have to prepare my son for tomorrow. To grandparents, to uncles. They support families who are in the process. That maybe today it's going to be strong. But we don't know what will happen tomorrow, the important thing is to do it well. So that the result is good, because if we do not do it well, we are not going to have a good result. As I tell them. I am a single mother. Which is a bit more difficult, my family doesn't live here, which is more difficult. And even so I have not abandoned my son, I am not going to do it. And to all the mothers and fathers who need support and support.

I'm at your service. Hey, don't give up if they tell you, for example, when you're at the IEP meeting. Do not give up. If you know that your child needs more therapy time, for example, speech during the week. If they tell you two, no? And it goes on and on, maybe they will last for years because I have gone through that process. I even had to seek legal support. To reach an agreement with my son's school district and from that legal support, today we managed to have my son undergo independent evaluations, not from the district, which the district has to pay for.

For my son to go to a better school, many people are against ABA therapies. For me it's therapies, that is, applied behavior analysis therapy. What are repetitions and repetitions when your son. You tell her 500 times, mom, mom, mom, there will come a time when she tells you mom. So this is it. Constant, these therapies are important in the life of a child with the condition. Let's eat natural things when we talk about natural things, our grandparents planted cassava, sweet potatoes, bananas in the patio. And none of this happened. So, we are going to feed ourselves in that more natural way. So much here the approach is made for my son, but I also eat like this because I am not going to cook two meals and how the same thing that my son eats there comes a time when I do say, Ah, I want to eat a restaurant, I will go like, but one day of each year.

At the level of therapists, if you see that you are not convinced by the therapy, the therapist who goes to your house or the center that you take. If your parental instinct tells you this is not going to work, change it. Don't stay there. Change it. I have seen 10 therapists and none of them work. Maybe number 11 is the one that will work for you. And it is the one that will take advantage. So don't give up if they tell you I want to talk to the district superintendent, look for the superintendent, knock on the door. If you are in early intervention, look for the regional knock on the door and tell them These are my son's skills. These are the delays of my son me. I do not. Either my son needs or my daughter needs. And, this is the moment for me to be able to help what is small

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: Your story, I really appreciate you sharing it with us. Now yes, of difficult circumstances, how have you proposed to move forward? Be persevering. Be very proactive. What is the most important. This story called autism is in this adventure. Because many parents give up to see if in the. Current or not they are well advised. Or they don't do what they have to do. He understands me so he can help. To his autistic son and daughter. And if this is a story that should serve everyone, especially our fathers and mothers in our community. That no matter the circumstances. You mentioned it, you

are a single mother, you have faced not having your close family and despite that, you have gone forward for your son, and it is not easy. It is a process today, today or has done it and thank God it is doing so. That you are an example. Of great improvement and perseverance. And because of that we need more in this community.

Maxi Feliz: No and really thank you Tony and like you said. It's not easy, because I'm not going to paint it pretty, because when you don't know every day you're learning here. I tell you that last night I went to bed super late watching some videos of a mother. She lives in Panama, Miriam and I follow them constantly and I see how her daughter has improved. And he leads a normal life. In other words, within the condition it is a girl who dances who does everything on TikToks, that is, she expresses herself and all that, so seeing those advances one must take. A little bit of each. So I implemented it at home and I watched those videos and I said, regarding food, oh my God, I bought that product and it has so many ingredients, wow, no, I'm not going to buy it anymore.

So one is learning more every day, for example, such a therapy. There are many parents who disagree, as I said about ABA therapy. But it works for me, it has worked for me and I recommend it to everyone, to all the mothers and fathers who. They are all around me. To work with the therapies. In the aspect of not sleeping, which is part of the condition, there are changes, we still have neurotypical changes. There are days for certain circumstances of level of stress or concern. Sometimes we cannot sleep the same, that is, as we said at the beginning, we are all different. And I have always said. As I said at the beginning, God has a purpose in everything that he allows in our lives. No lose faith.

You should never lose faith, quite the contrary, in everything you do. Eh put God first. I started with my son, for example, giving him cabbage juice in the morning on an empty stomach. I saw it on the internet and since it's something natural, I'm doing it, he didn't like it, but I already found a way to give it to him. I put YouTube on him, he disconnects. And he concentrates on that and I give it to him and I say it in the name of dad God, dad, God is going to improve this condition.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: And what is important Maxi, trust in God. That I can continue with the purpose. What does it have for each of us? It is done well, we are all different. The most important thing in this process. And in that line of your story, if you can, if you can talk a little bit, you did the first thesis on autism in the Dominican Republic. If I can talk to you briefly about an interesting thesis, what is the name of the thesis? And what was the objective that you were to discover in your investigation?

Maxi Feliz: When I received my son's first diagnosis, I went to the Dominican Republic to my country where I was born. To seek a second opinion, in that second opinion I see the lack of protection of the fundamental rights of people with the condition. At that time I lasted 3 months between therapies, analysis and studies. doctors and so on. And I spent a fortune. And I said. But if that's me who has the money, what will it be? The people who don't have the money? To give. What your son or daughter needs, then I began to study. I already read in other countries that there were laws to protect people with the condition. And I start my re-registration process in the middle of the pandemic to study again. Eh And I'm signing up for a law degree. But my purpose was to draft a law, but the University tells me no, you have to do a thesis. They told me no that autism is a social issue, I say it is not a social issue, because in other countries there are laws, for example, in the United States there is the law, ADA. That protects us, so I began to investigate. And I realize all the lack of protection that in the Dominican Republic we are in diapers and he developed the first legal thesis called the rights of people with the

condition of the autism spectrum, attending to the need for differentiated equality. Why do I mean? Differentiated equality because there is a condition.

So you can't treat a neurotypical or someone who has the same condition because... You don't have the same needs that I have, so that's why I do my first legal thesis. I get very involved with the law that. And it is currently in which if we can improve it there are many. Things to improve. I am proposing public policies in favor of people with the condition to be already included in modifications to the law that is being approved, that we are waiting for the law to be enacted. And that it does not remain on paper, that it is given, that is, a material, practical effectiveness to people with the condition at a legal level. We are talking about the protection of the rights to health. To education. To a decent job. to sport. To all the rights we have, all people, even if we are different.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo Exactly, so it is very important. Of these laws, not only that I know that the laws are approved, one thing that the laws are approved, and the law is followed.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: But also, to be approved and something else that is not only approved and if the law is not respected. Since this is in action, we must work because the issue of Autism, a societal issue, is an issue that impacts only one community, it is not an issue that impacts society.

Maxi Feliz: It is that it is normal, general in general, if you realize, for example, even a friend. Or an acquaintance has someone with the condition, so I have always said not to wait for you to do your job. If you are, if you are in Congress, if you are in the state, in the government. Don't expect it to touch you and yet that doesn't have to be in the government if you're outside. Like me, we are going to do work, we are going to unite because when we unite our voices multiply, triple, and thus they can reach their destination and achieve what we want.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: Exacto, y tú y tú eso en la comunidad ha estado bien activa estas cosas.

Maxi Feliz: And I am not going to rest.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: With your story, rest does not exist. Maxi, if possible, I understand that you have your own foundation, which is called Mamá Tolita, tell us a little about that foundation where the name comes from and what is the mission you have with the Foundation?

Maxi Feliz: The Mama Tolita Foundation was born in honor of my grandmother. My grandmother was practically the one who raised me, the one who taught me the love of God. The one who took me to church, the one who, despite not reaching a very high course, sat down with me to read the Bible and teach me about our creator God. And my grandmother, may she rest in peace, she's gone. She was a very feisty woman. He put today I woke up with her in the head. Because I know that if she were alive in body and soul here with us. I would contribute much more to this cause. And when I see my grandmother who went to the fields to bring food to the children, that I accompanied her, that she preached the word of God, then I feel that I am the same as her because perhaps I am not preaching the word of God, but I'm carrying God's message. From this condition, that is, that we cannot give up on the fact that we have to love our loved ones, regardless of any condition or difference they may have, we must love them the same and accept them as such and include them in our society.

Then the Mamá Tolita Foundation was born in honor of her to the entire blue community. But it is meant to support the condition. So, when we talk, it will support you, the condition is in all aspects, in

workshops, in training, psychological support, moral support, legal support, first of all. And we have many plans that we are going to share with you later, in favor of the blue community, both in the Dominican Republic. As in the whole world, because I am not going to stop only my country or in the space that I am now, we are going to continue advancing to make the population aware of the condition, if you learn from day 1, but do not simply enter Google. And look for Autism, don't stop at that definition, keep looking, because if you keep looking you will learn much more and you will clear up many misconceptions yourself and at the time of seeing a doctor perhaps in quotes, because there is a lot They know of the condition, but it is not so.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: It is so. As you mentioned well, this mission does not stay in one place or the other. And that each one is good, perhaps we think differently. In other words, each one has a requirement as a reference. In addition to thinking, but that each one can contribute to that vision, it is the most important thing that does not impact. To all of us. Although you may not have a family member who has the condition, you know a friend, a co-worker who is impacted by the autism condition.

Education, Community. The community is very well done and important having parents, autistic adults, professionals, the whole world together to be able to fulfill that mission, because it is all quality of life is the most important thing.

Truly, Maxi, your story has been one of my own, I am honored to listen to you and that I have shared this story with you that I know will be a great blessing in our community, precisely for our family. Before concluding our interview, if you want to give one last message. Especially to those fathers and mothers who are facing, even if they have gone through what you went through. What message did you want to say?

Maxi Feliz: As I have told you. There are difficult moments, there are moments of pain, there are moments of sadness because when you tell us you are going to bring. To a boy a girl to the world, eh? We think everything is going to be perfect huh? Nothing in life is perfect. And yes I can tell you and I'm 100% sure. That when they call you your son. He has the condition of autism. You say wow, my God, why are you punishing me? God blessed you. God blessed you. Because God doesn't give something to someone who can't bear it and that strength, even if you don't believe it, you have it inside, so don't give up. Support your son or daughter. Support your family. Read, study, investigate.

There comes a time, you become a professional without a degree, but in practice. Don't give up despite adversity, because you don't know what fate has in store for you tomorrow or what God has in store for you, because if God gave you a person, he gave me a child, I couldn't have children. Supposedly the doctors gave me a son with the condition and look where I am despite everything, where I am now and where I am going to continue. Because I'm not going to stop here then to you, dad. To you, mom, I really do. Don't give up. Help that boy help that girl. Help that young man. Be a teenager be an adult, because they. Even if it's a small thing that you see it that way, they have skills that only need you. Together with developmental therapists. We are going to develop those skills, we are going to be part of changing this world and accepting that people with autism. They are beings that God has sent Angels, that God has sent with the purpose of changing society for the better.

So let's unite. I'm in order Maxi Happy. My Instagram is MaxiFet. That they can follow me around here, they can ask me questions. And unconditional. I will be there to give you any kind of advice and real support. Don't give up on me.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: That's how it is. You can't give up, never give up and I'm going to put the information from your social networks, from Maxi Feliz, from everyone who can contact you if they have any doubts or questions, because everything is a community. And your willingness to help and make a difference. This our community is something that is valuable and that is why I am honored and privileged to have you here in this episode today. so Maxi, your story is one of overcoming. Of perseverance. but most important of many blessings. I know that God has a purpose for your son that he has a purpose for you, that I know that God is using you to make a great blessing of many lives that is our community, always in order here in your house, when you want to come back . And thanks to you for sharing this story and very honored.

Maxi Feliz: Thank you. To the parents who write to me. That we are going to add all these ideas and multiply them because it is what our community needs. Thanks for the invitation Tony, we are always available.

Tony Hernandez Pumarejo: Thanks to you Maxi.