



Sunstorm Episode 3: How We Got Here: The Story of Alicia and Ai-jen

Alicia Garza: Welcome to Sunstorm, where we get real about what's happening in the world and what we're doing about it because we are the light in the storm.

Ai-jen Poo: Hi, I'm Ai-jen Poo.

Alicia Garza: And I'm Alicia Garza and I've just got to say, I am so excited to be here with you today.

Ai-jen Poo: I know I'm so happy and I'm so excited that Sunstorm is finally out in the world.

Alicia Garza: It's here.

Ai-jen Poo: It's so awesome that people love it.

Alicia Garza: I love it. I love it. I love it. So there's so much goodness to come. And as the notorious B-I-G used to say, "If you don't know, now you know." So today it's just going to be us two ladies on the pod and I'm really stoked about this actually because now that we have Sunstorm out in the world, we thought that it would be a good time, just get a little personal. A little one-on-one.

Ai-jen Poo: We're going to give you a sneak peek into our personal stories in a way that we've never really talked about them.

Alicia Garza: Yes, we are. So let's get it crack in. And I have a question for you. Ai-jen, which is, you're such an amazing adult. So what were you like as baby Ai-jen?

Ai-jen Poo: Oh, apparently I was really aggressive.

Alicia Garza: You were flipping tables.

Ai-jen Poo: I was flipping tables.

Alicia Garza: You know what? I love this.

Ai-jen Poo: My mom said that I could never get through a meal without throwing food all over the table.



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Alicia Garza: This is excellent.

Ai-jen Poo: All over everybody else. Like on the walls.

Alicia Garza: I can't-

Ai-jen Poo: I can't, I just-

Alicia Garza: I can't. That is so opposite of how you are.

Ai-jen Poo: I was an aggressive food thrower.

Alicia Garza: Okay. So was there a point that you remember when that shifted for you?

Ai-jen Poo: There's this story that my mom tells a lot about preschool. When she used to come pick me up from preschool, I was always so mad because she would come late and I would always be the last kid to get picked up from preschool.

Alicia Garza: Shout out to the last kids.

Ai-jen Poo: But I was a respectful Asian kid, raised by immigrants, who I couldn't be mad at my mom, but I would need to be mad. And usually it was at my teachers and usually about the fact that they just couldn't pronounce my name.

Alicia Garza: I can't. What did they call you?

Ai-jen Poo: Id-Jen. I-Yung.

Alicia Garza: Stop it.

Ai-jen Poo: Id-Jen and then the rest of the kids would be like Id-Jen the pigeon.

Alicia Garza: Oh no.

Ai-jen Poo: And it was just on and on. So every day she'd come and I'd be like pouting in the corner. Mad about my teacher's not saying my name right and everybody making fun of me.



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- Alicia Garza: In tears and you needed to go flip out too.
- Ai-jen Poo: Yeah, totally.
- Alicia Garza: Shout out to baby Ai-jen.
- Ai-jen Poo: Yeah. But I must have turned a corner on that because people still call me all kinds of stuff and it's okay. I'm actually, I'm good with it.
- Alicia Garza: You're like the most chill person I have ever met. You are like, just so even. So even, but then if you've really got to turn up and flip a table, it's on, but it's like well deserved. You know what I'm saying?
- Ai-jen Poo: I like to think that if I'm mad, there's a good reason.
- Alicia Garza: Well, my mom used to say that I was the baby from heaven. She said that I would sleep through the night, but I would wake up super early and she would wake up and I'd just be kicking it in my crib cooing and, which is kind of how I am now in the mornings. Like, Oh, I'm going to greet the day and I'm just happy piddling around doing whatever I got to do. And when Malachi gets up, I have done the laundry, I have done the dishes, I've made breakfast, I've already gone to workout, I've done yoga, and now I'm going to work. He's like, "What time is it?" I'm like, "It's 9:00."
- Ai-jen Poo: The morning is your friend.
- Alicia Garza: Totally.
- Ai-jen Poo: And it was your friend, his baby Alicia.
- Alicia Garza: It sure was. It sure was. I'm a morning person forever and ever through and through.
- Ai-jen Poo: Okay. Let's take it back to growing up.
- Alicia Garza: Yes.



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Ai-jen Poo: So where did you grow up and who raised you?

Alicia Garza: Well, I was born in Carmel, California, and my mom was, she had been working in the prisons, actually in Monterey County. And we moved up to San Rafael and it was my mom and me and her twin brother who is like one of my favorite uncles. And my mom worked in a laundry mat. She did nails for a living. That's actually how she met my dad. And my mom also worked in the stock room at Macy's. So somehow I ended up like in these weird little fashion shows that Macy's would do for kids. Yeah.

Ai-jen Poo: What? Wait.

Alicia Garza: Yes. There's pictures. I'd be in these like random tulley dresses-

Ai-jen Poo: We must find these pictures.

Alicia Garza: Barrettes, bows, the whole thing. It was kind of pitiful.

Ai-jen Poo: Wow, you were a Macy's model? Child model.

Alicia Garza: I was a child Macy's model. What about you? Where did you grow up? Where were you born?

Ai-jen Poo: My mom came to this country for graduate school after she finished college in Taiwan.

Alicia Garza: Excellent. Which was he discipline?

Ai-jen Poo: She was in chemistry.

Alicia Garza: Come through moms.

Ai-jen Poo: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Chemistry at Carnegie Mellon. And my dad was also in graduate school, but he was in Baltimore.

Alicia Garza: Oh.



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- Ai-jen Poo: Yeah.
- Alicia Garza: Come through.
- Ai-jen Poo: So when she got pregnant with me, she was on her own. And so I grew up with stories about imagining my mom, right? In her 20s coming from a tropical island. Figuring out how to live in the cold and then getting pregnant with me. And I was born in February, so she was really pregnant in the thick of winter.
- Alicia Garza: No wonder you were grumpy.
- Ai-jen Poo: And then she actually sent me to Taiwan to live with my grandparents so that she could finish school and work and do all the things that she was doing. So I spent a lot of time ... I was potty trained by my grandparents, both my grandmothers in Taiwan and learned, my first words were in Mandarin because of them. And then when I was old enough for preschool, I came back and we lived in Southern California until I was 12 and then moved to Connecticut. In Irvine, most of my friends were the children of immigrants, like my parents. And then moving to Connecticut, it was an all white school. It was just me and Toya were the only non-white students in my class.
- Alicia Garza: Come through. Hey Toya if you're out there.
- Ai-jen Poo: Toya is a black girl. Yeah. And so it was a huge shift for me just having to adapt to such different environments and such different contexts.
- Alicia Garza: How did you figure out how to adapt in those kinds of environments?
- Ai-jen Poo: I remember feeling really alienated all of sixth grade and my teacher actually called my parents in for a parent teacher conference because they were worried about me.
- Alicia Garza: Not the PT conference.
- Ai-jen Poo: I think it happened maybe after I wrote my report on Don Johnson.
- Alicia Garza: Don Johnson, Ai-jen.



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Ai-jen Poo: I know.

Alicia Garza: Okay. So what class was this for? Under what circumstances were you writing reports about Don Johnson?

Ai-jen Poo: Well, it was in sixth grade and I think I was really into the show Miami Vice-

Alicia Garza: So was I, so.

Ai-jen Poo: At the time and I think I read a story in a magazine about him and his struggle with alcoholism and addiction. And I remember thinking like, "Wow, he went through a lot." And I was moved by it, so I wrote a paper about him.

Alicia Garza: That's amazing. That's amazing.

Ai-jen Poo: Yeah. And the teacher was like, of all the people that you could have chose, because you're supposed to write about somebody you admire.

Alicia Garza: Okay. You did.

Ai-jen Poo: Of all the people. Well what about you? What were some of the experiences or the moments that really defined your childhood growing up?

Alicia Garza: You know, I was a really nerdy kid, so I loved to read. My mom used to say she would lose me in the house. She'd look up and be like, "Where is she?" And I would actually be sitting on the toilet reading books. That was me. I was clumsy. I was nerdy as I grew up. I was like angsty also, I had a lot of angst. You may know that my soundtracks as a kid included like, it wasn't metal. I wasn't into hardcore metal but I was into that like soft rocker metal.

Ai-jen Poo: What's soft rocker metal?

Alicia Garza: You know like the Def Leppard, but like the slow songs. You know what I mean? The two slow songs they would have on the album. I'd be like yes.

Ai-jen Poo: With the lighter like.



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- Alicia Garza: Totally. And I still actually do those for karaoke.
- Ai-jen Poo: I know you do. I've seen this. I'm a witness.
- Alicia Garza: I also was really obsessed with dressing myself and I used to drive my mom crazy. One phase that I can remember is, do you remember that show? Beverly Hills 90210?
- Ai-jen Poo: Yes, of course.
- Alicia Garza: Okay. So I was obsessed with Shannen Doherty, and they had this little style back then where you had like the chokers-
- Ai-jen Poo: I remember that.
- Alicia Garza: And then they would wear the baby tees under like some slip. You know what I'm saying? So I thought that was really cute. And I went to my mom's lingerie drawer and got a slip and put on like a little baby tee underneath it and tried to leave my house in the morning. And my mother, I never saw her so mad. First of all, she was like, "Get out of my stuff." Second of all, "You're not going to wear underwear outside." I was like, "Mom, everybody's doing it." She was like, "You're not doing it." And I totally remember my dad was like, "It's fine. Just let her go. If she wants to look crazy, she can look crazy." And my mom was like, "Steven, shut up." Right. So then they were like kind of arguing. But basically my mom did a direct action on me and she was like, "I'm not driving you to school wearing what you're wearing." So we had like a little impasse, but me being the nerd I was like, "I'm late and I have to go." So I changed.
- Ai-jen Poo: You caved.
- Alicia Garza: Yeah.
- Ai-jen Poo: She won.
- Alicia Garza: Mom might've taught me my first escalating tactic.



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- Ai-jen Poo: Speaking of, what do you think are some of those moments that shaped your activism and how you think about the work you do right now?
- Alicia Garza: You know, I think for me it's people like my mother, honestly. I know I've talked about her a hundred times-
- Ai-jen Poo: No, no, no, not so.
- Alicia Garza: But she super shaped the way I see the world. My mom, she left Toledo because she felt like she was too weird for her Midwestern town and her pretty conservative family and her twin was like, "Cool, I'll go too." And so my mom, it was hard for her. It was hard for her to be in a new place. When she got pregnant with me, she was with my dad who decided he wasn't really trying to be a dad and so she went from being in a relationship and talking about the future to trying to figure out what am I going to do as a 20 something year old that now is going to have a baby on my own and all the things that my mom did to make things okay is what drives me. Right?
- Alicia Garza: When I think about women like my, I'm like, "Yeah, you're up in the middle of the night and you're trying to figure out the bills and everybody else is asleep, but you're still trying to figure out how am I going to make this work?" And during the day you're spending your time hustling, trying to get money. Trying to make sure your kids are okay. Trying to make sure your kids have more than you had. Right? There's that whole thing. And there's not really time to pursue what it is that feeds you. So for me, what really drives me is this idea that everybody should be able to do the things that feed them when they're awake and not just when everybody else is asleep.
- Alicia Garza: My mom also had a very clear sense of, it wasn't like morality, right and wrong. It was like, I get what people got to do to get by. Right? And so I got no judgment on anybody. And the first time I ever got involved in activism was around condoms, if you can believe it.
- Ai-jen Poo: Condoms.
- Alicia Garza: Yeah. So my school district was having this whole debate about whether or not there should be contraception in schools. And it was at that time when it was like George Bush was president, the first one. And there was all this stuff about



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family values, which was actually Christian values and this whole focus on the family thing, and they were totally obsessed with women's bodies and super obsessed with teen pregnancy and super obsessed with talking about sex or talking about abortion. They actually passed a law that year, that was the global gag rule that basically said nobody would get federal funding if they even talked about abortion. So I got super politicized around that because-

Ai-jen Poo: How old were you?

Alicia Garza: I was 12, and in my house we talked about everything-

Ai-jen Poo: Baby.

Alicia Garza: And we did not mince words. My mom didn't use code words for your body parts. She was like, that's your vagina. Okay, it's not your wee-wee, it's not any of that. Right? She was very about it and I didn't get stork stories. I didn't get any of those, when two people love each other. She was like, "No, check this out. Basically sex makes babies and babies are expensive. So if you're not ready to pay for a baby, don't have sex." And I was like, "That's pretty logical."

Ai-jen Poo: It's pretty simple.

Alicia Garza: Right. So then of course when you're having this debate about should there be condoms in a school nurse's office for somebody who is having sex, but maybe can't talk to their parents about it, wouldn't it just makes sense to have it there so they can be safe rather than encouraging them to take more risks that are more dangerous and that might end up in the thing that you say you're trying to prevent? It seemed like a no brainer to me. So I was all about it and we won by the way. There were eventually condoms in school nurses offices.

Ai-jen Poo: Yay.

Alicia Garza: Represent.

Ai-jen Poo: That was your first victory?

Alicia Garza: That was my first. What about yours?



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Ai-jen Poo: I think my first victory was in college. Actually when I got to college I wanted to be an ethnic studies major.

Alicia Garza: Excellent.

Ai-jen Poo: I wanted to study the history of my community and how we helped to shape the culture and politics in this country. And there was no way for me to study ethnic studies at Columbia really. There were a few classes. I think there are only like two Asian-American studies classes at the time. And of course I took them both the first chance I got, and they were taught by adjunct professors who weren't even, permanent faculty. And there were a whole bunch of us. I mean Columbia where I went to college is in a city that at the time was 72% people of color. Columbia prides itself on being about the experience of being in the city and yet all of us who are on that campus, students of color couldn't even study our own histories, our own literature, just even know what part of the American story was ours.

Ai-jen Poo: So we formed an ethnic studies coalition and we launched a campaign to get an ethnic studies department on campus so that you could major in Asian-American studies or Latino studies or ethnic studies. There was already an African-American studies program, but we wanted more and especially in the programs that didn't exist and more resources. We wanted permanent faculty lines and the ability to major and minor and all of the things that any other legitimate academic discipline would have.

Ai-jen Poo: It was an awesome experience because it was multiracial coalition building. It was like people coming together, and then we launched this campaign and we took actions like we took over the library, and we took over Hamilton Hall, which is the English building for days. The Latino students did a hunger strike for 14 days.

Alicia Garza: Nice. Wow.

Ai-jen Poo: Yeah, they slept out in tents in front of the library. Students came from all over the country to support us.

Alicia Garza: Yeah, that's awesome.



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Ai-jen Poo: It as a whole thing. It was amazing. And we actually won.

Alicia Garza: That's what's up.

Ai-jen Poo: We forced the administration to at least engage with us. And what ended up was the creation of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race-

Alicia Garza: Come through.

Ai-jen Poo: At Columbia.

Alicia Garza: Okay, but wait. So people were getting arrested, hunger, striking. You're taking over buildings. You slept in a building for a couple days, right?

Ai-jen Poo: Yep.

Alicia Garza: Y'all did shifts or however it happens.

Ai-jen Poo: Yep. Yep.

Alicia Garza: What were your parents doing? When your parents like, "go Ai-jen", or were they like, "Bring your ass home. What are you doing?"

Ai-jen Poo: Well, they didn't know about it until got a letter that I was on probation and if I did another thing-

Alicia Garza: Because you won though.

Ai-jen Poo: No, at that point we were still in the thick of it.

Alicia Garza: Oh. Oh shoot.

Ai-jen Poo: Yeah, they got a letter. A few of us were put on probation and basically it said if you did another thing like this you wouldn't graduate. And my mom was not happy. She was like, "What do you"-

Alicia Garza: Get your ass back in those classes.



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Ai-jen Poo: "Do you have any idea the sacrifices." So yeah.

Alicia Garza: That is so funny. I can hear her-

Ai-jen Poo: So that was ... but I graduated.

Alicia Garza: Talking to you through clenched teeth. I feel like that's like a universal mom thing. That's when you really pissed them off.

Ai-jen Poo: I mean she's really supportive of the activism in general, but education is number one and always has been. So that was just a major, major violation. And then-

Alicia Garza: But then you won. Was she like, "I'm really proud of you."

Ai-jen Poo: I don't know if she said those words, but I think I felt that.

Alicia Garza: You think she felt it?

Ai-jen Poo: For sure.

Alicia Garza: Okay. So my fandom on you actually started when we were at the U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta, Georgia. And everybody was in this room and there was ... I just remember I was wearing translation equipment. Actually I think you guys had just won the bill of rights and I mean I knew you, but like from meetings and stuff. And I walked in this room and you know people that you read about, they're like larger than life in your mind. And I walked in this room and I was like, "She's regular AF and I love her." That's literally what I thought. 100% and I believe I even told our mutual friend Marissa about this, I was like, "Dude, she's a bad ass and she's like us." Like regs. AF.

Ai-jen Poo: I remember hearing stories about the organizing you were doing in San Francisco-

Alicia Garza: In Hunters Point.



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Ai-jen Poo: In Bayview-Hunters Point to protect and preserve the last black community in San Francisco. [crosstalk 00:20:16] And the incredible work you were doing building with anyone and everyone you had to. It was like the churches and the Nation of Islam and the block association that you were building and the teachers. And just building this incredible coalition. And I remember thinking that is so bad ass. Then next thing I know it's like you're running an organization and you're like 30 or something like that. In school getting your degree, graduate degree.

Alicia Garza: That's right. That's right.

Ai-jen Poo: Teaching all the things.

Alicia Garza: Yeah, what was I doing?

Ai-jen Poo: You were doing so many things. I was like, "How was she pulling all this off?" That is so bad ass.

Alicia Garza: What was I doing?

Ai-jen Poo: And I was like, "How amazing would it be if she came and worked with us? What if she was on this team?"

Alicia Garza: Yes, and then you hollered at me. I loved it. I loved it. I was so excited.

Ai-jen Poo: I kind of was like, "If you ever want to come work with us." Open door.

Alicia Garza: Dude, you did? And I was like, she's a boss for that. I did-

Ai-jen Poo: I was totally courting you for years before.

Alicia Garza: You were so good. We were in a hotel in D.C. and somehow you had gotten me to come out there and do some training for the members around multiracial solidarity. So I had come in the night before because the workshop was early in the morning and I remember it was some Congress or something for NDWA. So there was domestic workers everywhere. The hotel was going bonkers and I saw you and you were like, "Hey." And we caught each other outside and you were



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just so slick and sly and excellent, and you were like, "What do you envision for your future?"

Ai-jen Poo: Did I really say that phrase?

Alicia Garza: You did.

Ai-jen Poo: Oh man.

Alicia Garza: You were like, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" And I was like, "Oh my God." I'd never really thought about that. That is so good. It was so good. This dear listeners is why Ai-jen is the organizer.

Ai-jen Poo: I was like, "I got a vision for you."

Alicia Garza: Yeah. And then you were like, "I mean, we're just here trying to build power for women of color and our team is all women of color and just trying to make us awesome. That's just what we're up to. So when you're ready"-

Ai-jen Poo: And we're basically missing you.

Alicia Garza: Dude, you literally said, "When you're ready, there's a place for you." I was like, "She can't be serious." But I kind of played it off, I was like, "Yeah, yeah, I can't do that right now. But, I'll holler."

Ai-jen Poo: That's winning. That is winning. The fact that you came and joined the team.

Alicia Garza: You were so good.

Ai-jen Poo: I feel like that was one of my biggest victories-

Alicia Garza: Dude you know-

Ai-jen Poo: We're so lucky that you made that choice.

Alicia Garza: I'm lucky.



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Ai-jen Poo: And it's all about the squad. It's all about the team and the community.

Alicia Garza: It is.

Ai-jen Poo: And the sisterhood.

Alicia Garza: It is. I mean, but you were doing the exact same thing trying to accomplish what had not been done in the country and going at it over and over and over again. Had you ever passed a statewide bill before?

Ai-jen Poo: No, I had no idea how to do that [inaudible 00:23:30] in Albany.

Alicia Garza: How long did it take again?

Ai-jen Poo: Seven years.

Alicia Garza: And each time you went back, like "We're now here. We're going to do it again."

Ai-jen Poo: Oh, man and we got raked over the coals every year.

Alicia Garza: Look, I'll tell you from across the country, the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights fight was like literally the hallmark for what we were all trying to do. So even though it felt like, you know how sometimes we talk about crawling towards the light on your hands and knees and there's gravel in your palms and the knee meat is down to the white meat. Right?

Ai-jen Poo: Oh yeah and it's bloody.

Alicia Garza: So we knew it was bad, but that fight was all of our fight. We were cheering you guys on every single step of the way being like, "Yo, they are moving legislation on the state level. We're just trying to pass ordinances in these cities and deal with these crooks and you all are really taking on power." And then when you won, literally when you won, we were like "that's huge," one. But also it felt like our whole movement had won you know?

Ai-jen Poo: Well it too the whole movement from California and Massachusetts and Texas even. People came from everywhere to lobby with us, to do the domestic slide,



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our version of the electric slide in front of the State Capitol building. And year after year, the way we stayed in, it was all of that support from people all over the country. And it's so fun to reflect on it now because it's been 10 years, right?

Alicia Garza: Yes it has.

Ai-jen Poo: The bill passed the first one in New York passed in 2010.

Alicia Garza: That's amazing.

Ai-jen Poo: And here we are in 2020.

Alicia Garza: And how many bills have passed now?

Ai-jen Poo: We have nine states total plus shout out to Seattle and Philly.

Alicia Garza: Represent. That's like a bill a year. I mean if you really want to break it down, right?

Ai-jen Poo: Yeah, it's pretty good.

Alicia Garza: So it's, okay, it took seven years to win the first one and then it's just multiplying like wildfire all over the country. Bad ass.

Ai-jen Poo: We've got lots of states to go.

Alicia Garza: Oh yeah.

Alicia Garza: So here's the deal listeners, you got to hear a little bit about me and my homegirl, and we want to hear about you. Where did you come from? Where were you born? What were you like?

Ai-jen Poo: Who raised you?

Alicia Garza: Who were you as a baby?

Ai-jen Poo: When was the first time you won something?



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Alicia Garza: We want to know, hit us up. I am Alicia Garza.

Ai-jen Poo: And I'm Ai-jen Poo.

Alicia Garza: And you can follow us at Sunstorm pod and of course subscribe and tell all your friends to subscribe. You can find us anywhere you can find podcasts, which includes Apple podcasts. It includes Google, it includes Spotify and the best part, it's Free99.

Ai-jen Poo: Free99.

Alicia Garza: That's my fav.

Ai-jen Poo: Sunstorm is a project of the National Domestic Workers Alliance in collaboration with Participant. Sunstorm is executive produced by Alicia Garza, Ai-jen Poo, Kristina Mevs-Apgar, and Jess Morales Rocketto. Sunstorm is produced by Amy S. Choi and Rebecca Lehrer of the Mash-Up Americans. Producers are Jocelyn Gonzales, Shelby Sandlin, Mary Phillips-Sandy and Mia Warren. Original music composed by Jen Kwok and Jody Shelton.

Alicia Garza: And what were your first words?

Ai-jen Poo: Maybe egg roll.

Alicia Garza: Yes.