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Silvia Vasquez-Lavado

EXPLORES A NEW FRONTIER...THE WORLD OF STORYTELLING

BY ELIZABETH GRACE COYNE

With Zoom as our only chaperone, I took the better part of an hour to talk to Silvia Vasquez-Lavado, a bright-eyed and curly-headed mountaineer, explorer and now author. Her debut memoir “In The Shadow of the Mountain” had come out only the day before our introduction, and the cobalt blue dust jacket sat proudly on her bookshelf just within frame. This hardback object of her affection would serve as the nucleus of our conversation for the remaining time we spent together.

“Did you grab your copy yet?” Vasquez-Lavado yelled out to me, turning to grab her newest creation off the shelf.

“I’m picking it up this weekend!” I smiled back to her, ensuring my very own copy would soon be within my reach and on my bedside table. My decision was made then and there. I was desperately eager to consume more of Vasquez-Lavado’s energy through her own written words and vivid descriptions.

The cultural pioneer was more than happy to answer all my burning questions, while laughing and squirming in her seat with excitement. Vasquez-Lavado spared no details as she got candid about her life, career and journey to a peaceful existence.

Despite the acclaim for her new literary release, Vasquez-Lavado made her name known after being the first openly gay woman to climb the Seven Summits. When I asked the Peruvian-American powerhouse looking back at me to describe who she was, Vasquez-Lavado expectedly found it difficult to sum up so many adjectives into only one sentence.

“I’m an explorer. I’m now an author. I’m a social entrepreneur. I’m a searcher of things. I have this amazing, unique opportunity to bring this very powerful story to others,” she declared.

Already hooked, I dove in with my first set of questions, asking Vasquez-Lavado if writing a book was something she always wanted to do or if it all happened a bit more randomly. She responded saying, “I always felt like... just wow...how can I bring my story to others and share it? It was always there. I enjoy writing. I love the liquidity of sharing and of a great storyteller. There was always something about trying to do it.” Vasquez-Lavado continued saying the more mountains she climbed, the more she seriously considered sharing with others the imagery of the sights she experienced.

Despite her obvious passion for storytelling, I was surprised to find out that the push to get started came only after a severe biking accident, landing her in the ICU. It was there that a small brain tumor was discovered, forcing the mountaineer to stop and think about her life more seriously.

“So, for my first night in the ICU, I felt my mortality. I felt wow, I might not be here. I might have limited time.” She went on with her revelation saying, “That was a real call to action about you know, maybe I need to do this sooner than later. And that is what has led us here.”

After only a brief search, you would see that every popular news outlet has been giving Vasquez-Lavado’s inspiring memoir no less than five-star reviews. I asked her about this, wondering if all the positivity has gone to her head, like I admittedly imagined it would have for myself. However, I’ve never been so glad to be wrong, as Vasquez-Lavado seemed nothing but grateful and humbled by the whole experience.

“It’s a dream to be honest, it is a dream. I feel like every single positive review is almost like this warm blanket that people are giving me and it’s like a big hug. And so, I’m grateful. I’m almost like, wow, what’s going on? But yeah, it’s just been such, such an amazing dream,” Vasquez-Lavado revealed.

As a writer myself, I’m always curious as to what the writing process is like for new authors, especially for a project as long as Vasquez-Lavado’s over 300-page memoir.

“There were a lot of different scenes that couldn’t make it. And even within each scene, if every chapter is 20 to 25 pages, I probably wrote about 100-120 in each because there was so much detail and information. You just bring it all up. And then we start chopping it up and putting the pieces back together.” She continued saying, “But there was always the potential of what the message needed to be and who it was for and what it was we wanted to raise.”

Vasquez-Lavado gets pretty candid within the pages of her writing on personal details surrounding abuse, addiction and health. A bold choice that only seemed natural for her, as she wanted to share her story to help others still writing their own.





"I didn't want to hold anything back. I just wanted to be as up-front and honest as I could because that is actually what had been one of the biggest challenges in my life. There was so much secrecy and don't say this, don't say that and it had caused so much pain. So, my goal was to be as open and as transparent as possible so that people could see what had been going on for me." She went on saying, "I'm so honored and grateful that people are being so welcoming to me because I've spent the last three years in this process being so vulnerable and open, almost naked."

I immediately asked if she was nervous to share so much about herself to a new audience, worried about judgment or the pressure to please.

"I definitely was nervous. I've never gotten to the level of detail even when I spoke about my views. When getting into the heart of it, I thought what is this book for? What's the purpose of the book? And from the very beginning, with my agent, my editors, we always had a mission that we wanted this book to bring a

light to the shame that comes with sexual abuse." Vasquez-Lavado continued nodding her head as she went along, "We don't need to hide anything. We don't need to brush over anything. For me, it was interesting because it was very personal...I literally put my therapy sessions in the book. I would go into my therapy sessions and be like, hey, first five minutes, let's go over the bullshit!"

It seemed to me like Vasquez-Lavado's story wasn't as much for herself as it was for others. Her goals were aligned to help those around her by shedding light on her experience. When I shared this thought with her, she beamed in agreement.

"It's no longer my story. And that's why I love what you just said, you know, once I sit down, it's no longer your story, it's out to the world."

I complimented her on her openness, and without skipping a beat Vasquez-Lavado replied that vulnerability is one of the most powerful tools at one's disposal.

"At the end of the day, I'm human, we're all human...I have been drinking for close to 40 years. It's my biggest relationship with anything. My relationship with alcohol was longer than any relationship with a human. I think it's been really a different journey."

Although "In The Shadow of The Mountain" was born on paper, the rights to the project were purchased with intent for the big screen even before the memoir hit shelves. Accredited actress Selena Gomez will not only produce the biopic but portray Vasquez-Lavado on-screen. Other producers signed to the project include the esteemed Donna Gigliotti, Scott Budnick, Lara Love Hardin and Vasquez-Lavado herself. The script, in collaboration with Vasquez-Lavado, will be written by Elgin James.

Giddy talking about all of her talent at her disposal, Vasquez-Lavado credits the strength of the film being a product only of collaboration. "The film is a team effort...we have this opportunity, of showing inspiration, of showing the strength and resilient courage that we all have. So, that's more than what makes me excited."

I went on to ask Vasquez-Lavado, laughing as I admitted to possibly asking this too soon, if she would be interested in writing another story. To my surprise, she confessed that her agent had been asking her the same thing, ready to get started as soon as possible.

Sharing her perspective for what life is like once you climb down the mountain, Vasquez-Lavado wants her second book to start right where the first left off. She describes it saying, "I would love a second book to actually be about my sobriety and pick there. This book has been about climbing the tallest mountain in the world. And I think I want my second book to be about what it's like climbing the tallest inner mountain which is what got my sobriety going. I think that could be really a different taste of it."

Additionally, I was glad to hear my secret wish of seeing Vasquez-Lavado write a children's book was also on her mind. Perfectly animated, she described her dream children's story with, "Little Silvia with a curly head and a little gay flag on her backpack! Just having her explore around the world!"

Writing isn't the only thing Vasquez-Lavado is prepared to do. "Maybe a TV show could be the making. I mean, there's a lot of different opportunities so now it's like I'm just here to be of service." Vasquez-Lavado continued saying, "I'm ready to go and see what is gonna pull me and I'm open to multiple possibilities."

When I think of Vasquez-Lavado and the brief time we spent chatting, my mind goes back to her passionate voice, strong character and most distinctly her beautiful soul. Full of spirit and tenderness, Vasquez-Lavado is one of those who is truly kind.

Happiest when exploring, Vasquez-Lavado answered my final question with total seriousness. Where will you climb next?

"I would love to climb the tallest mountain in the universe, which is Olympus Mons on Mars. Yet, the only caveat is you lose your eyesight and I'll be blind if I do that." Laughing and shrugging her shoulders as she finished, "I mean, maybe when I'm 90 and I'll be like 'I can live without my eyes!'"