

Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Five Transcript, Episode Seven: Danielle Romero

Judge Beverly Scarlett: Hello, I am Beverly A. Scarlett from Season 1 of Melungeon Voices Podcast. And I'm wishing the Melungeon Heritage Association a happy 5th season of Melungeon Voices.

Lis Malone: This is the Melungeon Voices Podcast presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone. And I am here with a tearful Heather Andolina. We are very emotional. Episode 7 always means the same thing every year.

Heather Andolina: The last episode, Lis.

Lis: However, it seems that every time we have a last episode, there is a new season around the corner. So, are we going to do our usual, let's manifest the season 6?

Heather: Of course. That's what we always do. And it keeps going, right?

Lis: We're going to start doing our burning of incense and calling on the podcast gods to look fondly upon us.

Heather: Yes. Bring us that sixth season.

Lis: And in all seriousness, it has been an amazing five years partnering with you, partnering with the Melungeon Heritage Association. Heather, it's always my honor and my privilege to be a part of such a meaningful storytelling and sharing of ideas that this podcast has always accomplished.

Heather: Aw, thank you, Lis. We couldn't have done it without you as our wonderful, magnificent podcast producer.

Lis: Always in the background making the podcast sausage, right?

Heather: That's right. Yes, it's been such a journey. I can't believe it's been five years.

Lis: I can't believe we're finishing up the fifth season. It's really been fun getting the congratulatory messages and even some of those audio clips from some of our past guests. Truly a wonderful feeling as a producer.

Heather: Aw, well, like I said, we couldn't have done it without you.

Lis: Thank you so much and congratulations to the Melungeon Heritage Association for all the hard work that you've done over all of the years, not just during the podcast years, but your

extensive history and celebrating all of the amazing work that we know that you have yet to do. Before we wrap up this little intro that we always like to do, you, as with years past, make a big announcement in Episode 7.

Heather: I sure do, Lis. I am so proud to be wrapping up this milestone fifth season of the Melungeon Voices Podcast with the announcement of next year's MHA Union Conference location. Next year's conference will be held in Johnson City, Tennessee.

Lis: Yay, Johnson City. So that's what we like to look at as one of the storytelling capitals.

Heather: Yes, it is called the Storytelling Center of the World.

Lis: Well, that is very, very exciting. I'm sure everybody will be looking forward to visiting beautiful Johnson City and participating in another very meaningful and informative conference.

Heather: Yes, very much looking forward to it.

Lis: Well, on that wonderful note, let's now talk about the fun guest that you have for this last episode for the season, Danielle Romero. So, tell us about Danielle.

Heather: Yes, thank you, Lis. Danielle Romero is a YouTube creator and hosts the YouTube channel NYTN, where she explores American identity and hidden history. She also delves into her multicultural heritage, both Melungeon and Redbone ancestry, through her documentary series, Finding Lola, uncovering the complex stories of her ancestors in Louisiana.

Born in New York, she now lives in Tennessee with her family. In this season's episode finale, I interview YouTube creator, Danielle Romero, and discover how she found out about her Melungeon and Redbone ancestry, how the two communities are similar, and what inspired her to start her own YouTube "channel that you'll all want to discover for yourself.

Lis: Thank you so much, Heather. And thank you for five great seasons of the Melungeon Voices Podcast. Let's all take a listen.

Heather: Hi, Danielle. It's so good to speak with you again.

Danielle Romero: Thank you so much for having me. I'm so honored. And this is our second conversation. So, I'm excited for where this one will go.

Heather: Exactly. Me too. So, I always like to start off with the question of when and how did you first learn about the Melungeon people or first heard the term Melungeon?

Danielle: To be totally honest, I think the first time I heard it was about six months ago. I was researching my great-grandma's line from Louisiana, and I ran into her Gowens, Drake, Chavis

family, and I went to Dr. Google, like I do for everything, and I started seeing the word Melungeon. And I'm from New York, only really unfamiliar with that word, was afraid that it was a word I shouldn't be looking up.

I ended up reaching out to you on the Melungeon Heritage Association website and started having a conversation because I was trying to figure out, what does this mean? Yes.

Heather: So I was on your channel, your YouTube channel, which we'll talk a little bit about later. And it was awesome. It was exciting. And I just had to have you on our Melungeon Voices podcast.

Danielle: I appreciate it. I know that I have been listening to the podcast and there are so many people who have been immersed in this their whole life. And I am so grateful for that. So hopefully people who are just starting out will be encouraged by me because I really only have a couple of months under my belt of understanding what this is and what the family story is.

Heather: And we'll go into that. Would you tell us more about your family history and what got you interested in exploring your family history?

Danielle: Yeah, so I grew up in New York and I had no idea that we had Southern heritage at all, but my Grammy had a picture of her mom on her wedding day and I remember helping her just kind of cleaning the house and I noticed her mom's picture and we had been told we were French on that side and I was like 16, but even then I had a feeling she was more of in French and so it kind of just having that picture just inspired me to start this journey. It was, I mean, I was 16. I'm 38 now, so it's been a long road and I think I thought I would figure it out in a year or so.

A sweet summer child and here I am and finding, I had no idea we had a Melungeon connection, so my mom's great grandmother was born in Akadish, Louisiana, but her maternal line is connected through the Goans and the Chavez and the Drake all the way back to Virginia, which blew my mind. I'm still working on it though. Wow.

Heather: That is amazing. When you start getting into it, it just starts unraveling.

Danielle: Yes. There are so many paths to take and sometimes you have to take a break and wait for your mind to clear on one line and jump back to another, but I am all in on the Chavis line right now.

Heather: That's awesome. I have Chavis as well.

Danielle: I think it must be a requirement because everyone's like, has one of those ancestors, which has been amazing because I was doing this work online for so long not connected to a community and as I'm meeting people, has just changed the dynamic of the research and it feels so much better now.

Heather: Yeah, definitely. I bet. You're a content creator and started a YouTube channel, like we mentioned earlier, called NYTN. What inspired you to start the channel and what content do you share with your followers?

Danielle: I started the channel two years ago and maybe even a little bit sooner because it was during COVID and I was interviewing some of my, it was right after my Grammy had passed away, my mom's mom. I realized that if I didn't start figuring some family stuff out, it was going to be gone. So, I started interviewing my great uncle, cousins over Zoom, asking them questions.

I ended up with a lot of answers, but even more questions. I decided to go to Louisiana myself and record it for them because I wanted them to come along with me and I called it Finding Lola, which is my great-grandmother. I decided to put it on YouTube because it was free and it was easy “to share with them.

I had no idea anyone else would care about this at all. It's blown my mind to have so many people also interested in finding family stories because I didn't know that there were other people like me out there. It started for my family and the family has grown, I would say.

Heather: Yes. You do discover that it's much larger than you could ever imagine.

Danielle: Yeah. The content has gone between understanding my family's story and me trying to, I'm a trained historian and so I love American history already and looking at American identity and why did our families have the experiences they had just to understand more because it's hard for me to understand these experiences in the vacuum. But then when we're looking at, well, what were the laws at the time?

What were the court cases at the time? What was happening in their state or wherever they were before it was even a state? It has helped me to understand. So, I've been just trying to balance the American history side of it and then situating the family in that time.

Heather: Now, I've watched your episodes on The Melungeon People and they're great by the way. I love it.

Danielle: Well, thank you.

Heather: What do you feel is the significance of the Melungeon identity in the broader context of American history?

Danielle: I'll tell you, even just hearing that question gives me goosebumps. It really does because as I've researched the Melungeon side, it's what we were told about America, that America is this melting pot. I think we've struggled with this idea of like, is it true?

What is assimilation looking like? Problems with immigrants losing their culture. But when you look at the Melungeon story, you see from the very beginning of this country, before it was a country, we had these blending of cultures.

To me, the significance of that is just seeing like, this is who we are. I think a lot of times as Americans, we feel like we don't have culture. No, we have American culture. This is our culture. It is the blending of cultures that form unique communities. I feel like giving me so much pride in the history, because our histories, some of it's very dark.

But when we see the, we're still here, we're still talking about this stuff that our ancestors made it. And it's something worth to keep, worth talking about still for sure.

Heather: But as you were saying Danielle, yes, I know when a lot of people, when they contact The Melungeon Heritage Association, that's one of the things. I didn't know this about myself, about my family ancestry and how blended we all really are. How so many of us come from mixed ethnic ancestry.

Danielle: Absolutely. And I say that not to diminish any other groups or people, but I think it's more for me, seeing how connected we are having opened my heart, honestly, to people in ways that I thought I was empathetic before. But even more so now when I see groups that I thought, well, we don't have anything in common really.

Now, I look and say, wow, do we share a fourth grandparent, Leo? Do we share a story somewhere along the way? And I think that's just the coolest thing. It's just super cool.

Heather: I love it. It is amazing. I'm familiar with the Redbone people as well as some of our listeners, I'm sure. What are the similarities between the Redbone and the Melungeon communities?

Danielle: Well, I'm definitely not a professional so I just say that. But just from my own research, one of the ways I was able to find the Melungeon connection is seeing that people were coming over from Virginia. My family was coming over from Virginia right around after the Revolutionary War.

And they were settling in what is now Louisiana in Texas. And for a lot of these people, they were at this point considered free men of color. For the most part, it was men doing it and men getting the land.

But they weren't able to be in Louisiana as freemen a lot of the time, because we're talking post-Revolutionary War. But there was an area called the Neutral Strip, No Man's Land, kind of in between Texas and Louisiana, where a lot of my family settled. And it reminded me so much also of, you know, Melungeons who stayed on the East Coast and kind of created their own safe communities where they could be who they were.

And so, I see the not only, you know, shared ancestry, because there definitely is, but the shared experience of not being black or white and needing to truly find, in the most “literal sense, middle ground for you to exist in. And I think I kind of see that in both groups, histories for sure.

Heather: What has been the response to your videos about Melungeon heritage and mixed ethnic ancestry in general?

Danielle: I would say overall, extremely positive. And most people are looking. I think the reason a lot of people are looking, people are rage, we're losing grandparents.

And we have children or, you know, we have nieces and nephews, and we're realizing, all right, do we have anything to pass on at all? Do we know anything? So that's, I would say that's the bulk is positive.

How can I get connected? People sharing their family stories and connecting with each other in the comments. I will say, I have had people be frustrated about the word Melungeon because I think they think it means mulatto.

That is a misconception I see a lot, especially with my Elvis video, not saying he was Melungeon, but just kind of exploring those claims. A lot of people who were frustrated jumped in and I could tell by the response, they're saying, well, he wasn't half black or he wasn't mulatto. Those words don't mean the same thing.

So, you can see there's just not a familiarity with the term really at all. I think outside of people who are in it.

Heather: Yes, Danielle, and we did have a previous guest in season 3, Katya Farris. She spoke about Elvis Presley and his possible Melungeon ancestry.

Danielle: I'm writing this down right now so I can look into it.

Heather: Yes.

Danielle: All right. That makes me feel better. Like I said, when I did the video, I like to just explore the questions.

It's okay for me not to have the answer. I'm okay with that. I want to have the conversation. But I'm glad to hear that.

Heather: Yes. Katya had mentioned about Elvis Presley some characteristics that he had from, I don't know if you've heard of this, it's called Ehlers-Danlos syndrome.

Danielle: Oh, yeah.

Heather: Have you crossed that?

Danielle: Yes, I have. Yeah.

Heather: Katya believed that Elvis Presley did have that, which is something that we have discovered is very common among people who are Melungeon descendants.

Danielle: It's so interesting. Maybe we could even jump to talk about the physical traits that show up because this was another thing that jumped out to me. Now, I preface to say I don't think someone needs to have a checklist to prove that they have Melungeon Heritage or what have you.

But while I was doing this, I came across a checklist, I think from familytree.com, and it was just, signs you might have Melungeon ancestry, and it talked about the bump at the back of the head, and it talked about the teeth. I remember the dentist I went to here in Nashville, commented about my teeth, and he said I had shovel teeth. I was like, I don't know what that means.

And he's like, I don't know what it means either, but you've got them. And I started researching that, and that was on the list. And so, I thought that was super interesting. Again, I don't know for sure. I don't know if you've heard of some of these or not, but the shovel teeth are the one that got me.

Heather: It is very common. And I know when people have reached out, a lot of people will say that, oh, I've got the Anatolian bump on the back of the head, shovel teeth. Yeah, from what I've heard, it's very common but now some people say that it's not a thing. I don't know. But a lot of people swear by it.

Danielle: Yeah, I don't know about the bump as much. I don't think I have it. I'm going to have to have someone check. Because when I do it, I could trick myself into anything. But the teeth, when I was researching it, it's connected to Native heritage. And I was like, that makes sense in this context, because a lot of people of Melungeon heritage do you have Native ancestry.

And so, I wondered if that was it, but I don't know for sure. It's just kind of fun exploring that. And also, I had like 7% Portuguese that I could not figure out. I don't know where this came from. We don't have that story. So, I don't know, that might be part of it. I haven't gone too deep into that side yet though.

Heather: Oh yes, the Portuguese, I think I had some in my DNA. Yes, a lot of people talk about the Portuguese connection. So that is definitely a possible Melungeon connection.

Danielle: Definitely. Yeah, it's been fun just triangulating and trying to just be flexible and open. Like when you're doing family history, we need to be flexible and willing for everything we think

to be wrong. And I have been, but it's been really incredible to find connections to this community. Like I'm just, I love learning about it. And I hope other people are getting excited too on my channel, hearing about it, because it's, I feel like it's the quintessential American story, for sure.

Oh yeah. And I think we even talked about it when I was on your channel, about that we're, we're all interconnected. It's just amazing how we all piece together.

When new people come become part of this organization and learn about this ancestry. It's not a surprise. You're like, oh, we're cousins. I mean, there's so many people that have reached out. And then I'm like, oh, let's exchange DNA. And then it's like, yeah, we share a common ancestor. It's so crazy.

Heather: It's amazing. I think we were talking before we started, just how I had used some of the GED match kits with other people to match on, you know, with Melungeon lines. And a lot of that also cross matched with Lumbee on the same line.

Danielle: And I haven't delved too deep into the Lumbee. I'm working on a video about that right now. But again, just historically, it makes sense, you know, and if you understand the history of these groups, it's like, yeah, people were just, they're hanging out together, having children together.

But it has been exciting for a New Yorker to find all of this Southern heritage. It's the coolest thing. So cool.

Heather: Oh, I love that for you. I mean, it's so exciting, but you're exactly right. I too have Lumbee connections. So, Danielle, can you highlight for us some of your favorite episodes on your channel?

Danielle: I think one of my favorite ones was part of the four-part series I did, Finding Lola. It was the beginning adventure on my channel. We're going down to Louisiana.

And the last two episodes, three and four, I actually got to meet cousins in Louisiana. And this was the first time that things had gone from work on the computer alone at night, 2 a.m. in your bed doing Ancestry 2. These are real people who you have history shared with.

And getting to sit with them is kind of like I got bit by the bug. Like I just want to keep meeting people now. Like I just, I couldn't believe that I could figure it out and people would want to meet me. And so, I think that that's one of my favorites videos I've put out because I think so many people have been encouraged by that to reach out. And it can be kind of tricky reaching out to DNA matches. And how do you figure that out?

But when it works, it's amazing. So, I'd say that was one of my favorites. And honestly, doing the Melungeon videos has been extremely rewarding for me personally, just as a former history

teacher and I homeschool my kids. I'm homeschooling them this year and my oldest is going into fifth grade. We have to focus on Tennessee history. That is what we focus on.

I'm so excited and I am so excited that I'm going to be able to sit down with her and be able to give her more information about who she is and our connection to the state. I wouldn't have had information without working on the Melungeon videos. I'm excited to be able "to pass it on. I don't know how excited they will be. We'll see.

Well, like you said, this is not taught in schools. Once again, when we have people who reach out, it's like, why didn't I know about this? Why am I just hearing about this?

Heather: Because it's not taught in schools.

Danielle: No, not at all. I think this year; I was trying to just look at the curriculum. We're going to talk about the Cherokee for sure.

But I think, again, it goes to this binary that we've been taught to see through. Black people, white people, and the nuance is gone and we need that nuance. You can see the lack of nuance thinking today, I think even in conversations across political conversations, community conversations, and again, just the Melungeon story, it forces you to sit with that nuance and you can't quantify it, but it's still there.

I think that is, again, just the essence of the American story and why I'm so excited about learning about the Melungeon heritage and, of course, super excited that I get to claim heritage there too. But either way, definitely think everyone should be learning about this heritage "So I'm going to do my part, but.

Heather: Yes, exactly.

Danielle: And thank you.

Heather: Once again, your YouTube channel is NYTN, so our listeners can find you there and check out your awesome videos. Is there any additional information you like to share with everyone?

Danielle: I would say just do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. I think a lot of times people are afraid to come in as an outsider because I see myself as an outsider for all of the Louisiana heritage, Melungeon heritage. I am an outsider. I didn't grow up with the food, the culture, language, even knowing who my family was. No idea.

And I would just encourage you, if you are new to this, whether you have Melungeon heritage or not, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. Take that step. And it's not going to be easy, but it's so rewarding. Knowing who you are is something that I didn't know I needed. I didn't know how important this was for me, and it's given me such confidence and such an empathy.

And so, I would just encourage you to just take that step, reach out to someone or just blindly email like I did to Heather. But reach out and see where the journey takes you. I mean, I've been on it for 22 years and hopefully I'll get 22 more. And I still won't be finished, but that's okay. Right.

Heather: Right. It's a journey. Danielle, thank you so much for being a part of the Melungeon Voices podcast. And I look forward to watching future episodes on your channel for more of your informative and insightful content.

Danielle: Thank you so much. It means so much to be included. And I hope my ancestors are proud to see us connecting.

Heather: So, thank you so much.

Lis: You've been listening to the Melungeon Voices podcast. On behalf of myself, Heather Andolina, and the entire MHA Executive Committee, we'd like to thank all of those who participated in making this episode possible. For more information, you can visit them on the web at melungeon.org.

That's M-E-L-U-N-G-E-O-N dot O-R-G. The information, views, and opinions expressed in this podcast episode do not necessarily represent those of the MHA. Melungeon Voices is presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association.

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