



Mariana Pineda Presente

MARIANA ARCHIVAL TAPE:

“Health care is a human right. Housing is a human right, and I am going to fight until my heart gives out. And I am going to shout until my oxygen gives out. And when I am too sick to fight, I know that all of you are going to keep fighting for us. ¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido! (The people united will never be defeated!)”

Attribution: Mariana Pineda speaking at rally/event in Albany, New York in 2022. [Courtesy of Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, New York State Media Team](#)

HOST:

This is Mariana Pineda’s story – a dedicated advocate, organizer, and powerful voice in the fight for healthcare justice.

CARLY PARIS:

“Amazing person. The brightest light you’ve ever seen.”

SUSAN KARBINER:

“She believed what Gandhi said – *be the change you want to see in the world.* And she never stopped.”

HOST:

In late March, organizers across New York started texting each other the same question:

"Has anyone heard from Mariana?"

For several days... nobody had.

From the Code WACK! podcast, this is "Mariana Pineda Presente."

A story about a passionate organizer.

Friendship.

Motherhood.

Love.

Loss.

And the people who refuse to let her fight end.

HOST:

Welcome to Code WACK!, where we break down how our healthcare system really works, what it means for you, and how we can make it better for everyone.

I'm your host, Brenda Gazzar.

Friends describe Mariana Pineda as brilliant.

Funny.

Fiercely loving.

An organizer who could command a rally one minute... and spend the next making sure everyone had eaten.

She was a teacher.

An immigrant

A single mother raising her youngest son, Max.

And before she died earlier this year at age 46... she spent years fighting for healthcare as a human right.

But to understand Mariana's activism...

you first have to understand Mariana the person.

[SEGMENT 1 — “TURN STRANGERS INTO FAMILY”]

HOST:

The first thing people remember about Mariana isn't politics.

It's warmth.

CARLY:

“Mariana, her pronouns were she, they, el, was the person who could turn strangers into family.”

HOST:

That's her close friend Carly Paris.

Carly's a New York activist who's organized on behalf of patients, LGBTQ+ communities, people with disabilities, immigrants, women and the environment. She's also faced crushing medical debt while seeking treatment for stage four endometriosis.

Carly says Mariana had a gift for making people feel safe immediately.

Carly:

“So I first met Mariana at an organizing meeting for DSA on Long Island.”

Host:

That's the Democratic Socialists of America.

Carly: “And then I'm pretty sure, like right away she invited me to her house. There was like a get together and at their house, there was so much food and just warmth. Like I said, she turned strangers into family.”

Host

Cooking for organizers.

Huge spreads for friends.

Making people feel nurtured and cared for.

CARLY:

“Someone who loved food, all kinds of food and loved having people come over to enjoy in the spread they put together.”

HOST:

Susan Karbiner met Mariana through the Poor People's Campaign.

Susan is a tri-chair of the New York State Poor People's Campaign and coordinator for its Long Island region.

SUSAN:

"As soon as I met her, we were friends. She was such a good person."

HOST:

At a community fair, while other organizers handed out flyers, Mariana spread blankets and art supplies on the grass for children.

SUSAN:

"Her son started drawing and all these other children around saw and they came over... and they started drawing and doing whatever, modeling clay, whatever she had. And that gave her the chance to talk with the parents."

HOST:

Susan laughs recalling that story she heard from someone else.

Because of course Mariana thought of that.

[SEGMENT 2 — "ACTIVIST MOM"]

HOST:

At the center of Mariana's life was her son, Max.

CARLY:

"They both were each other's world."

HOST:

Friends say motherhood was what kept her fighting for justice.

Even small moments became lessons in care and consent.

CARLY:

"And Max is now 10 but she'd even say [about] the cat — 'We don't touch the cat without consent.' Like just bringing all things to him. It was so kind of magical to see."

HOST:

Mariana became “activist mom” to countless younger organizers.

The person people called on when they needed help and guidance.

Advice.

Food.

Comfort.

Even while seriously ill herself.

CARLY:

They took so many people under their wing to make them feel comfortable. When people weren’t being heard, Mariana was the one who people would go to.

HOST:

And she was funny.

Really funny.

CARLY:

And I laughed so hard I like almost peed my pants.

HOST:

That humor mattered.

Because by then, both Carly and Mariana were already navigating devastating health crises.

[SEGMENT 3 — “LONG COVID”]

HOST:

Before COVID, Mariana already lived with asthma and heart problems.

But after getting COVID... everything changed.

SUSAN:

“When she got Long Covid, one of her lungs collapsed and the other partially collapsed. And she was so often in pain.”

HOST:

Friends describe years of escalating illness.

COPD.

Emphysema.

Blood clots.

Kidney and blood sugar issues.

Heart failure symptoms.

Exhaustion.

CARLY:

“It really went downhill after she got COVID, which then translated to Long Covid and that’s when everything really started falling apart.”

HOST:

And yet somehow... she kept organizing.

SUSAN:

“I’d be watching a livestream, a Poor People’s Campaign in Washington DC, and there was Mariana talking about healthcare and homelessness.”

HOST:

Friends describe watching her body deteriorate while her mind remained astonishingly sharp.

CARLY:

“She’s one of the smartest people I think I’ve ever met in my life.”

Host:

And she was a passionate and convincing orator.

CARLY:

“For any number of issues, obviously health care was their number one, she never needed to write anything down. And it just blew my mind, all this information she had, and she connected to the issue so fast, her mind must have run like a million miles an hour.”

[SEGMENT 4 — “THE SHELTER”]

HOST:

When illness forced Mariana to stop teaching, she lost her employer health insurance.

Eventually, she and her son Max moved into a shelter.

CARLY:

“I specifically remember the cockroaches and how she would stay up at night so she could swat them away from Max.”

SUSAN:

“He also was spending a lot of time at the emergency room because he couldn’t stop scratching the bed bug bites that he was getting in the shelter. The shelter was a horrible, horrible place for a young boy to spend his eighth and ninth years.”

HOST:

The shelter bus often failed to pick Max up for school.

Meanwhile, Mariana’s own health continued declining.

HOST:

But even there, she organized.

SUSAN:

“She was organizing the other people in the shelter into a tenants' union to fight homelessness. She never stopped advocating for people’s rights.”

HOST:

While living in a shelter.

While struggling to breathe.

While fighting exhaustion and pain.

Mariana was still building community.

Still advocating for others.

Still trying to change systems bigger than herself.

[SEGMENT 5 — “THE HOSPITAL”]

HOST:

Again and again, Mariana ended up in emergency rooms.

Friends say she often wasn't believed.

CARLY:

"She was ignored. They also didn't believe her because she was in a shelter so they thought she was looking for relief from that. They considered her drug-seeking."

HOST:

By that point, Mariana had lost the employer insurance she once had as a teacher.

When we interviewed Mariana in the summer of 2021, she was paying \$3,000 a month for COBRA to keep her employer sponsored health care. A GoFundMe page had raised \$12,000 for that cause.

Susan Karbiner says after becoming too sick to work, Mariana was forced into Medicaid-level care — and she believes hospitals treated her differently because of it.

SUSAN:

"She couldn't afford to buy insurance after she used up her savings, she had to go on Medicaid, and she couldn't get all of the care that she needed to keep her alive."

HOST:

Susan says hospitals repeatedly stabilized Mariana in moments of crisis... only to discharge her before she was truly safe.

SUSAN:

"Every time she went in, she was released before she should have been. She wasn't given the total care.

One time they had her scheduled for a pacemaker, and then when they took her off the temporary pacemaker her heart was beating okay and they just sent her home. And that was the last time. She died a few days after that. They didn't keep her there to see if she really did need a pacemaker."

[pause]

HOST:

Friends believe race, disability, poverty, housing status — and the kind of insurance Mariana had — all shaped the care she received.

CARLY:

“Quite a few times when she was in the hospital, she would call me crying, because of pain, or because of other issues. Even things like she needed help to go to the bathroom and nurses weren’t helping her. They weren’t giving her the adequate equipment. And so I would either call or show up and because I’m white, I was able to get her the care that she should have had regardless of a white person asking for it.”

SUSAN:

“When she went to the hospital for example, one time , they were being very pushy. And she had what’s known as an autistic meltdown. And they treated it as an emotional breakdown and put her in the psyche ward. It was not a psychological problem.”

HOST:

And through it all,

Mariana kept going.

She traveled to Albany to advocate for the New York Health Act.

She organized mutual aid.

She built coalitions.

She started Spanish lessons for activists.

Weeks before she died.

SUSAN:

“She never stopped. I think she felt that if she didn’t keep pushing herself as far as she could, that she was giving up and then she would die. She may have known that she wasn’t going to live very long, but she wasn’t going to give in to it.”

HOST:

Carly remembers Mariana talking often about needing to stay alive for Max.

CARLY:

"She would say how she needed to keep fighting for Max."

HOST:

Then, in late March, friends stopped hearing from her.

A group chat began buzzing.

People called.

Texted.

Waited.

Finally, a friend who knew someone in Mariana's apartment building asked them to check on her.

CARLY:

"And that's when we found out that she had passed away."

[pause]

HOST:

The date was March 31st, 2026.

Mariana Pineda was 46 years old.

[ENDING]

HOST:

In activist spaces, there's a tradition.

When someone dies, a speaker calls their name.

And the crowd answers:

"Presente."

Present.

Still here.

SUSAN:

"There are so many people who are carrying on her work because of her, because of her friendship, because of her inspiration."

HOST:

A community garden she helped create still grows food for families in need.

Organizers renamed a disability justice working group in her honor.

Friends continue fundraising for her son, Max.

And the movement Mariana helped build, keeps moving forward.

HOST:

Mariana Pineda – Presente.

[MUSIC SWELLS]

Next time on Code WACK! —

What would universal healthcare have meant for Mariana?

And why do her friends believe the New York Health Act could have saved her life?

If you enjoyed this episode and would like to support Code WACK, subscribe, leave a review and share this episode with a friend.

This episode was powered by HEAL California, uplifting the voices of those fighting for healthcare reform around the country.

Thanks for listening. I'm Brenda Gazzar and until next time, stay healthy.