



Episode 8: Pedro

Official Transcript

Aren Hi *Dear Church* listeners, welcome to episode eight of our ten-part series that shares the voices and stories of young adults in the Adventist community. Just before we start the show, a quick note that today's episode makes brief mention of suicidal ideation. Please take care as you listen. If you or someone you know is struggling with their mental health, we've included links in the episode description to some resources that may be helpful. Okay, let's start the episode.

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Aren One of the most iconic streets in America is Sunset Boulevard. It stretches from downtown Los Angeles all the way to Highway 1, just steps from the Pacific Ocean. If you were to take a drive down Sunset, palm trees would guide your way as you pass through towns like Beverly Hills and West Hollywood. On a normal day you'll see upscale shops and five-star restaurants. On the right day, you may see celebrities getting coffee or filming their next scene—as the Santa Monica mountains watch over you.

And yet, perhaps the most visited location along the boulevard, and the most important, is what's found at 4650 Sunset. More than a half million guests walk through its doors every year. Typically with a parent beside them.

[Hospital PA Announcement]

Aren Children's Hospital Los Angeles is rated as the top pediatric hospital on the West Coast. It's also been ranked among the best in the nation for over a decade. So are its doctors.

Pedro I never really thought about pediatrics, but I find that when you just trust your gut and follow what it tells you, it's, you know, you end up in the place that fits for you.

Aren This is Dr. Pedro Orta. He works in both primary care and urgent care at Children's Hospital LA, along with putting in time each week at an immigration clinic, and teaching medical students as an adjunct professor. He's 31, by the way.

Pedro So that's been really meaningful taking care of a lot of, you know, kids who have disabilities and you know, kids who have medical complexity. So really being able to, I don't know, serve, [LAUGHS] I think it's something that my parents taught me all the way from when I was a little kid, and it's something that I continue to do in my work.

Aren Dr. Orta grew up about as far from LA as you can imagine, in South Florida. His family is Cuban. They're also Adventist, which may help explain him going all the way to Loma Linda for medical school. But he is truly the embodiment of their motto, which is "Whole Person Care."

Like, this family he sees regularly. They have a 14-year-old and a 4-year-old. Both with a history of behavioral issues. When he first started seeing them two years ago, the younger one had what he calls "the worst temper tantrums" he'd ever seen.

Pedro You couldn't talk with the mom without the daughter pulling the mom's hair, jumping on the mom, yelling because mom wasn't paying attention to her.

And, you know, over the last two or three years that I've been working with them, you know, really giving the mom a sense of agency and she's been the victim of abuse and trauma and violence in different ways. So helping the mom heal, so that she can also show up for the daughter, and, like, I saw them yesterday. And this four-year-old is like the entire time she did not interrupt one time. She was sitting there

calmly listening. It was an appointment for her sister, but I was just so shocked that I turned to the little girl and I was like, “I’m so proud of you that you’re, you know, being so respectful to your mom today?”

As a primary care doctor, being able to follow families over many years, it’s really a privilege to see that change, and you know, when you, when you give people just a little more knowledge, just a little more tools, I think people end up showing up differently.

But I, I really try to show up for everybody in a way that, you know, allows people to be seen.

Aren Today, on *Dear Church*: The story of a young man who is gifted beyond what most could imagine, and was burdened beyond what most could bare. How this accomplished physician uses his Adventist upbringing—and the experiences and challenges that came with it—to bring healing to the next generation.

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Aren Hi Pedro, thank you for being here.

Pedro Thank you for the invitation. It’s a pleasure.

Aren I’m tempted to want to call you Dr. Orta, but Pedro is okay?

Pedro Pedro’s great.

Aren Okay. Very good. What helped you discover your love for medicine?

Pedro That’s a really good question. I have always been a very curious person with a lot of interests, so helping to guide and channel that was always my mom’s challenge. And I remember when I was—I mean, I was always very musically involved. So, for a while there I was thinking like, “Okay, I’ll be a pianist.” And my mom was like, “No,

don't do that." And then I was like, "I'm going to be a pastor because that sounds cool. And you can, like, say cool things and help people." And she was like, "Well, you know, you could do that—but you could also be a doctor and minister through medicine." And I was like, "That doesn't sound as interesting, but sure, why not?" [LAUGHTER]

Aren So then, when did you decide on pediatrics?

Pedro One of my cousins had a cleft open palette. And ever since I was a little kid, like my mom, you know, is always a strong influence, was always saying, "Oh, you should be a surgeon that focuses on helping kids with clefts, cleft lips." So that was kind of in the back of my mind.

And I quickly found that the surgical space was not for me, but I was very interested in how people become who we are, and much of that does happen in early childhood. So I felt that a lot of the questions curiosities and interests that that I had really align with youth development and, you know, how do youth become people that that can thrive in the world?

Aren How Pedro became a person that could thrive in the world begins near Miami. He's the oldest of four, the self-ascribed "ring leader" among a large group of cousins. They would bounce between houses and grandparents, offering new land to dig holes and build forts.

Pedro I grew up in South Florida in a loud, fun Cuban family. Best childhood memories include Sunday mornings at my grandparents' house with all the cousins, like, probably like 6-7 kids. Aunts, uncles, everybody getting together for Sunday brunch. And that was always like the big family event where often like the kids would sleep over at grandparents' house that night, and then he would like wake us all up like 9am, take us to the market. There was just like at least three stops: One was for the fruits of veggies, another place for the Cuban bread, another place for the cheese. And you know, we would come back, make these like massive fruit salads, good sandwiches and just play all day.

Aren Can you help me understand what's it like to grow up in a Cuban family?

Pedro There are very few secrets. So everything is kind of everyone's business and everyone's super invested in other people's lives and life choices, which is great. It's kind of nice to know that you have this whole family in the corner. So that that's a beautiful thing to have that kind of, I don't know, closeness to family and really feel that that's a core part of who we are.

Aren Another core part of their family was music. Pedro and his siblings took up instruments from an early age. He played the flute, but showed particular talent on the piano.

Pedro My parents decided that it was a good idea to have two separate pianos in the same house, so we would be in separate rooms playing piano simultaneously while my other sister was playing the violin and brother was playing the clarinet. So it was a cacophony of—I don't know if you would call it beautiful music, but [LAUGHS] it was a good time.

Aren But it sounds fun.

Pedro It was a good time.

Aren Yeah.

Pedro We had very few, how should we say it, noise prohibitions. And we were encouraged to express ourselves.

Natalie Piano was just so, like, integral to Peter.

Aren This is Pedro's cousin, Natalie. They've been close their entire lives. She still calls him Peter or his full name, Pedro Alberto, at times.

Natalie Pedro was, like, a prodigy on the piano. He was so good.

Aren That word she used was “prodigy.” Which is not how Pedro described himself. Nothing like the love of family to build up your childhood talents.

But I figured it wouldn't hurt to search Pedro's name on YouTube, just to see if anything came up. And there was this video I found from 2010 of a young Pedro performing in church.

[**Pedro Playing Piano**]

Aren She wasn't exaggerating.

Natalie He was, like, amazing at a young, young age doing like these full-on concerts. I'm talking like 8, 9, like 10 years old. I mean, written about in the paper. So, he was just so musically talented. But I mean, he was well known for his piano skills.

So he was so creative. He was also really intelligent. He always was, you know, chatting with the adults. He would read broadly. He was just kind of always an old soul. And he's still this way.

He also preached. His claim to fame was piano, but he was also a well-known speaker.

Pedro We had what was called child evangelistic crusades. It's very common in, like, Spanish speaking churches. And for like an entire month, usually sometime in the fall, every weekend it was like the kids preaching, the kids doing the entire program.

Aren Wow.

Pedro Like the first sermon that I gave it to church, I was probably five. [LAUGHS]

Aren Did you like doing that?

Pedro Oh, for sure. Yeah. I mean, that's what I knew. But it was also something we looked forward to.

So many of my memories and experiences were church related. So it's, I would say a majority of them actually probably were. I was always in spaces that really encouraged youth involvement and participation and really, like, tried to pull us in, which was great and it also gave me a lot of opportunities.

Aren As I continued my search, I found more videos of Pedro and his family performing—for church, for 3ABN, or GYC. Sometimes in grand auditoriums with large crowds. After watching several, it was clear how integral Adventism was to them.

Pedro's Sister [SINGING] Heaven paid the price, for Calvary's blood.

[APPLAUSE]

Aren How was the medical school experience?

Pedro Honestly, it was, specifically the first years, were two of my favorite best years of my life.

Aren Wow.

Pedro Yeah, I really felt that—I don't know if it was being Loma Linda and having some of the similar cultural backgrounds, if that was a big part of it, but I really felt that I was surrounded by a lot of like-minded people and was able to develop a lot of wonderful friendships.

Yeah, medical school was great. I think it was also a time that allowed me to open my mind and be exposed to a lot of new things to allow me to see how people live life

different ways and how, you know, some of the more sheltered ways of seeing the world are not necessarily the way that everyone in the world lives and experiences life.

Aren After growing up in one community, and being homeschooled until college, Pedro found himself exposed to what it means to care for different types of people. When he was younger, he had gone on mission trips to the Philippines and Nepal. Now he was reflecting on what he saw there. Adventism seemed to look different every place he went. He also found himself confronted with questions about God and human suffering—and the role healthcare plays in it. Questions he wasn't sure he had the answer to.

Pedro Third year was tough and I think one of the big reasons why it was tough is because you really come to see the limitations of our healthcare system and the limitations of our ability to really help people. So much of the reasons why people experience disease and lack of well-being is systemic and not going to be addressed in a 15-minute appointment, so that was really disappointing and kind of almost left me feeling a little bit defeated.

So, I was kind of at this place of personal transition and also disappointment with healthcare, so I felt that I needed to step away and ask some more questions and reflect a little bit more. So that's when I took my break and did—I call it a break. [LAUGHS] But did my Master's in Healthcare Policy at Harvard.

Aren Your break was doing a masters at Harvard.

Pedro Yeah. [LAUGHS] It was my gap year.

Aren I mean, just as somebody who did not go to Harvard, actually, I know that you probably thought I had [LAUGHS] but I mean—

Pedro A lot of people have.

Aren Such a prestigious school though. What was that like to be a student at Harvard?

Pedro You know, I was really surprised and impressed by how everyone was very kind and open and curious. And, you know, often we hear that the world's a scary place. That people who believe or live life differently are to be distanced from or feared. And I realized that, you know, people live very fulfilling, beautiful, and open lives in many different ways, in many different places. So that was like one of the biggest takeaways from that experience.

Aren Pedro says it was these years that helped shape him into the care provider he is today. One who aims to meet every person and every family wherever they're at. Because he knows for himself what the opposite can feel like. To feel as if you have to work to be seen, even if it's superficial.

Pedro You know, it's taken a lot of years to figure out, like, why did I show up in childhood as I did? And I think a lot of it was trying to, you know, adopt behaviors that were socially acceptable, socially celebrated because I knew that there was this like, deep dark secret that I, you know, needed to be protected from.

So, I identify as a gay man and that really became something that first, like, came into my thought process when I was five. I remember having like my first crush and it was this kid, his name was Gilbert. And my sister had the same crush, and that's, that was a problem. So I made-up other crushes because, you know, growing up in a very conservative, you know, Adventist Church, lots of Cubans—we didn't believe in Hellfire per se, but we definitely believe in the second coming. And that was always in the back of my mind. And I just remember having like all these nightmares that God would find out that, you know, I like boys and I would end up, you know, on the wrong side of, of eternity.

So it was definitely a very prevalent part of my childhood that I found other ways to compensate for [LAUGHS] like by being very smart and sociable and taking all these leadership roles. And in retrospect, it was definitely to cover up slash protect that quote “defect” that I that I knew I had.

Aren Do you ever remember hearing anything from the Church or from family that caused you to be more afraid of revealing that secret?

Pedro Absolutely. I remember just like an early childhood, so many family events where, I mean, we did have a lot of gay aunts and uncles, like a little more distant and I would hear, like, little comments like, “Oh, don't let the kids get close to it to that particular person because they're gay and it's contagious,” or stuff like that. This is like early 90s. Or you're driving down the street in Miami Beach and, you know, there's a not insignificant gay community in that area and you know, two men are holding hands and a family member will say, “Oh, look away because that's gross.” So those kind of very clear, you know, being gay or being different is gross, something to be ashamed of, something to stay away from was very much a part of the socialization that I had and what I perceived to be safe and not safe in the world.

Adults underestimate how much kids know and how much they know about their bodies, but also about the world they live in. And that's one of my favorite things to do as a pediatrician now. Like when I walk into the room, really just talk with the four-year-old, the three-year old, five-year-old. Half the time parents want to interject and speak on their behalf. But if we give kids the time, they really surprise us with how much they know about themselves and about the world.

Aren As Pedro got older, he hid his secret as deep as he could. But as an adult, after meeting more people and taking more classes, he began to wonder: what it would mean to unbury it? Would he be happier? How would that affect his family, or his chance at a career? He also began attending a new Adventist Church, whose pastor said things he'd never heard from the pulpit before.

Pedro So much of what she would share in her sermons about Jesus being accepting and opening to all people, as well as the Church being a place that should welcome all, really was healing for me and helped me come to a place of accepting myself before I was ready to, you know, broadcast it to the world.

Aren Following his first year of medical school, at the age of 22, Pedro decided it was time.

Pedro I called my aunt on the way to the airport to Miami, and I was like, “Well, we have to have dinner because I have something to tell you.” And she was like, “Okay.”

And this entire dinner, I can't get a word out because I just like feel like there's like this deep, like something in the pit of my stomach. So 2 1/2 hours in, she's like, “Well, the restaurant is going to close, so we have to go. You either got somebody pregnant or you're gay. We know it's not the first. So what's going on?” [LAUGHS]

I remember like taking—letting this, like, deep breath go and I was still very much shaking because I had never uttered any words that, you know, hinted at any, you know, what I knew was not a defect, but I still thought might be perceived as one. And, you know, she basically talked about how, like, she's kind of suspected it her whole life, or my whole life, and she was glad that I was at a point where I could share that with her and that I was, you know, opening up myself to new experiences and that she was a safe person if I ever needed to talk to anybody about this. Because, you know, I still hadn't talked to anybody else and I wasn't sure how to do that.

Aren When that conversation with your aunt was done at the end of that night, how did you feel?

Pedro I felt like a big weight was lifted. I felt like a big weight was lifted. And I was still very unsure about, you know, how to proceed. But it felt like, you know, the first time the world hadn't collapsed. Maybe I could try a second time, maybe I could try a third time.

Aren I asked Pedro why that aunt was the one he chose to come out to. He said she had simply made him feel safe. Which led me to wonder what that had to say for others.

I decided to reach out and ask if I could interview Pedro's parents as well, but they declined my request. I didn't want to look too deep into it—but it felt like I was gaining a better understanding of how painful this all was.

Pedro January 26, 2016, I remember being a big day where I had like one of my really close friends had his birthday party and his parents come to me afterwards that they thanked me for being there for him and being such a good friend and somebody that he can trust. And then I remember going home that evening and just thinking like, wait is—do I have anybody like that? Because there's like this huge secret in my life that I really don't feel like I can share with other people.

I really remember feeling at that moment, like, relationships are two way streets. Like, you can't only be the one who's giving. You have to be allowed to be helped or have people show up for you and you can't have people show up for you if you're not really able to be vulnerable.

It really took me down a dark place and I, you know, the one and only time that I thought about taking my life, because it really made me feel so sad and lonely that I was kind of navigating life in many ways on my own, although on the outside I was very, like, doing quite well, but on the inside I felt like I was living two lives. Like, my inner life and then the way that I showed up in the world.

And then I was very lucky that as soon as that thought crossed my mind, I had a friend text me and she was like, "I noticed that like you seemed a little bit off today. Is everything okay?" And you know, sometimes things happen at the right time for the right reason and that was definitely one of them.

I texted her and I was like, "Actually, no. Do you have time to talk?" And then we went on this big walk around Loma Linda campus, and I was able to share it now with a second person. So it was definitely a slow, painful process, but every time that I would share it, it felt like another burden was lifted.

Aren The fact that that friend texted you in that moment when you were doubting whether you had anybody in your life who cared.

Pedro Yeah.

Aren And you learned in that moment somebody does care.

Pedro Yeah.

Natalie He called me. And he was like, “I need to tell you something.” And then he started crying. I remember saying, “I already know what you're going to say.” And he was like, “I know, but I need to say it.” And, you know, he told me. He's like, you know, “I'm gay.”

For us on the outside it felt like an obvious next step for him. For him it was massive because there was no support from his community growing up. And no example of what it meant to be a gay man in his community. Like there was no room for him, right? So, and I don't think that any of us ever fully understood that and how incredibly difficult that would be.

Aren As Pedro began to slowly share his secret, he knew the time was coming when he would have to tell the two most important people in his life. Which would also be the most challenging. And—after initially saying no to my request for an interview—I received a surprising text one day that his parents had reconsidered.

Aren Can you hear me okay?

Jodhana I hear you perfect. And this is Jodhana.

Aren Hello.

Jodhana And this is Pedro, Peter's father.

Pedro Sr. Hello.

Aren It's nice to meet you both. I'm Aren.

Pedro Sr. Hi Aren.

Aren Jodhana and Pedro Sr. sit closely together at their kitchen island. She takes the lead on answering most questions, occasionally pausing for vocabulary help from her husband.

Despite their initial reservations, they seem open to talking.

Jodhana I mean, I remember Peter was like around six or seven-year old, he put his sister's high heels—no, not his sister, his grandmom high heels and we had, think I had a picture of that. I mean, he was always very, he like everything that was feminine. He never like to play with a little car, a truck, he didn't care to play with balls.

Pedro Sr. He was a mama's boy.

Jodhana But he will enjoy being behind me all day long, helping me with every single thing that I had to do.

Jodhana You know, Peter, he's always Peter. He's always very bubbling and he's always very happy and he loved to make people happy. I felt that there was something going on that it was not the Peter that we always, you know, encounter every time we get together. And then he told me, "Mom, I need to tell you something."

I don't know what was it. I mean, I would imagine was God who put in my mind what he was going to tell me. He didn't tell me anything. I told him, "You want to tell me that you are, that you're gay?" And then he told me, "How do you know?" He asked me if my sister had told me anything. His aunt. So I told him, "No. I just thought that's what you want to tell me."

So it was a very hard moment because I was not really expecting him to come out to, you know, to tell us.

Jodhana I tell Peter that day, “Peter, I know what you're going to you're going to tell me, but even if you became”—*cucaracha*, a roach?

Pedro Sr. Roach.

Jodhana “...A roach, I will love you the same way and I will always be your biggest fan.” And I just kept myself quiet for months until he had the courage to talk to his father about it.

Pedro My mom like definitely, it was hard because, you know, parents really have a way of seeing their kids and envisioning of their kids' futures. Some people have described the coming out process to parents, or the parents' experience of the coming out process, as an experience of grief, going through like the five stages of grief that Kübler-Ross talks about so eloquently. I definitely saw that process play out in my mom, and you know, thankfully, you know, she went to that process and we're in a really great place now.

Jodhana I was at one point very angry about it because that's not what I wanted for Peter. I want to see Peter's children running around my house. I wanted Peter's children to be playing his piano and to do all the wonderful things that Peter used to do that he found so much enjoyment on. So it was a lot of things and then beside, you know, the stigma around the situation. So it was very, very painful.

But as years went by, the Lord speak different to my heart, and we start having more open conversation. And it was during that time Peter wanted to always talk about that. And I was not open because I couldn't, you know, it was, I was not ready for it.

But as time went by, then, you know, I became more *receptable*—

Pedro Sr. Receptive.

Jodhana Receptive, and more able to, you know, to, to hear him and to speak to him and to really be the friend that he always had. And be his mom at the same time.

Aren You know, you sometimes hear about parents who, when they find out that their child is gay or lesbian, they actually separate the relationship with their child. Did you ever have any consideration of this is going to affect our relationship forever in a negative way?

Jodhana No, I never did because my love for my children is bigger than whatever religion or people will say. I know the heart of my children and just knowing that he waited 23 years of his life suffering inside, and for the fear of what other people will say, or the fear of being rejected by us, that cause me more pain than anything else.

Aren I'm curious about your dad.

Pedro That was a funny one. My sister was a pianist at this Methodist Church or something like that where there was a same-sex couple as the pastors. And she calls me, and she's like, "I don't know if this is right. I don't know if I should work here. Am I supporting sin?" I'm not out to her at all, so I just like asked her questions, "How do you feel?" Kind of also trying to gauge like, you know, like how she would react about to come out to her.

And then I guess my dad was listening to the conversation and then he jumps on the phone and he's like, "Why are you supporting the gay people?" Pause. "Is it because you're one of them?" And I was not gonna lie, so I sai, "Yes." And then he was like, "Oh okay. I just wanted to know." [LAUGHS]

Pedro Sr. I said, "Well, if that's who you are, that's who you are."

Pedro I had, like, built up this huge emotional moment and then it was just like, "Okay, great. Thanks for letting us know. Bye!" [LAUGHTER]

Pedro Sr. I said, "If that's who you are, all I'll tell you is, you know, be cautious, be careful. And, you know, it doesn't change how I'm gonna deal with you. You're my son, I love you, and that's it."

Pedro We actually became a lot closer afterwards because I feel like we both had a lot of respect for each other in terms of being able to, you know, live our truths even if they diverged.

Aren So you're saying it actually in the long run has improved your relationship with your dad?

Pedro Oh, for sure. With everybody.

Aren Talk a little bit more about that. Why do you think that is?

Pedro I think it goes to like the core of who we are. What we want is, you know, the people that we care about to be healthy, happy, and to be at peace. And I think that when we are at peace with ourselves, which is what I was coming to be as I, you know, accepted myself and started coming out to other people, were really, we're living more vulnerably, but also more authentically. And I think people really appreciate that and respond to that well.

And I think you get what you receive, like, what you put out into the world. So as I gave more authenticity, more vulnerability and, you know, more consistency, I think people really were able to open up themselves up to me in similar ways.

Jodhana You know, it takes a lot of courage because I mean, he lost a lot of friends. Just because of doing that. Because his cycle—

Pedro Sr. They weren't friends.

Jodhana They weren't friends, yeah, but for Peter to do that he knew that he was risking a lot in. You know, what people think about him, about his image, about his influence. You know, to decide to do that, it takes a lot of courage. And I really admire him, for him to do that.

Aren There was still somebody else meaningful to Pedro that he hadn't come out to—and, unfortunately, he never would. Back in 2015, before Pedro had told anybody, his grandfather, the same one who would take him and his cousins to get Cuban bread as kids, was tragically killed by a drunk driver. He had been driving on a Miami freeway in the early morning, when a 25-year-old woman, returning from a night club, got onto the same freeway in the wrong direction. She collided with him head on.

To make matters worse, the police thought the hospital would call the family, while the hospital assumed the police would. They ended up finding out about their grandfather's accident while watching the evening news.

Natalie It was terrible because he was young and healthy and he would have lived for 20 more years. Yeah, it was truly terrible. And so just in the context of Pedro Alberto's story, like, which is the story of our family because our family is so tight, right so. You had this going on and then Pedro Alberto's thinking, "My grandpa was going to be the great neutral factor in my news and me coming out and now, like, he's gone?"

I think he thinks, and we all know, that if my grandfather had been living, he would have offered Pedro Alberto so much compassion, kindness, and really smoothed the coming out journey for him and the family. But he died, you know, he died before he got the chance.

Aren Without his grandfather's presence, and with his grief still fresh, Pedro had to figure things out on his own. One of the few examples he could look to was an experience he had at his local church as a teenager. A lesbian couple had come to the church seeking Christian community, and so a board meeting was called. Pedro was on the board, and witnessed the discussion. They reached a consensus that the couple could come to church—but would not

be allowed in the sanctuary. They would have to sit in the mother's room, an isolated area in the back of the church normally reserved for parents of infants. Now it would be used to house the two visitors.

Natalie Imagine being raised with that in your mind, right? Like, there was no room for him. And I really think that if Pedro Alberto had been given a vision for what it looks like to be a gay man and a Christian at the same time, he would still be Christian. But I think that because we talk about being gay as like the bottom of the barrel, then like there's no framework for, "I'm a gay man, and Jesus loves me, and I love Jesus, and all of these things live together," right?

Aren If you ask Pedro, he's no longer Adventist simply due to intellectual differences. But if you ask Natalie, she can't help but wonder if things only changed because he figured they had to.

Either way, and despite what he's endured, Pedro doesn't come across as if he carries resentment. In fact, when asked about Adventism, a smile comes across his face—as if thinking of an ex he still cares for, while also feeling they're no longer compatible.

That isn't to say he doesn't wish things were different. It's that he chooses to see his upbringing as part of what's led him down the path he's on now, which is to help as many kids, some who are a lot like him, as best he can.

Pedro I mean, I'm such a lucky person to have grown up the way that I did with the family that I did in the places that I did. You know, every family has their issues and their problems, but I feel lucky to have had, you know, that degree of support.

But so many people don't. And we see this a lot in studies that are done of youth who are, you know, rejected by their families for various things, including like their sexuality or changes in beliefs. Kids who are not supported at home end up having the worst outcomes. So how can I, you know, help make the world a little more achievable, accessible to more people?

Aren Pedro, what do you wish people in the Church could understand about the experience of somebody who is gay or who is part of the LGBTQ community?

Pedro I think that churches, just as much as like any other human institution, often get so stuck on the rules that they forget the why. And I think that when we forget that, you know, in addition to being a place of belief, there's also a place for life, we start limiting who belongs in that life. And that that can be really challenging.

Because, you know, people are all different in their own kind of ways. And churches should be, you know, just like countries, just like cities. They should be places where, you know, all the people that choose to be part of that space should feel welcomed and included and shouldn't feel like they have to hide who they are. I think it would be helpful for, you know, a lot of people, not just queer folk, if the Adventist Church could think of itself more in that way.

I think that when we forget that church is so much more than just like the 28 fundamentals or whatever you want to call them, we do harm to a lot of people within our sphere of influence. And unlike people of different colors, people of different, you know, sizes, you can't really see who's queer on the outside. And that makes it even so much more important that we use language and honor our commitments in ways that makes people feel included, not excluded.

Kind of as I was saying before, like I knew when I was four or five, you know, the impact of words on my feeling of safety. So, in the context in which I'm in now, I'm able to, you know, educate every family about like, you know, we never know who our kids will be when they grow up. So, choosing words that respect people so that they feel safe is really helpful and really modeling, you know, ways that we can help our kids feel safe is something that I really try to put at the center of my work.

[Hospital PA Announcement]

Aren What do you love about your cousin Pedro?

Natalie I love his zeal for his family. He inspires me to call my family because he stays so well connected with everybody. I am blessed by that, and I'm taught by that too.

Jodhana I just love Peter because that's what mothers do. Just love their children. And I can't imagine having any other child. I mean, he brought so much joy and so much happiness in my life. To me, just he's a wonderful person and a wonderful human being.

Pedro Sr. I'm proud of Peter as just Peter, you know, not because of what he's accomplished, just because he is Peter. You know, we put a lot of emphasis on people's accomplishments, but I just love Peter because he's Peter. I think that's the way God loves us just because we are, not because we are more special or less special or gay or straight or rich or poor, He just loves us. And that's really, I think that's how I love Peter, just because he is.

Jodhana Thank you very much for taking your time and to spend it on Peter and just letting more people in the world know what a wonderful person he is. I think he really is a wonderful person. Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Aren Thank you both. Have a wonderful weekend, okay?

Pedro Sr. Yep. Thank you.

Jodhana You too. Happy Sabbath.

Aren Happy Sabbath.

Jodhana Have a wonderful weekend to you too. Okay, bye bye.

Aren Bye.

Aren Do you still play the piano?

Pedro I recently found the pedal for my electric keyboard. So I've been playing every evening this week, for the first time in a long time. So I'm really, really happy with that.

Aren Pedro, thank you for your willingness to share your story today and while you know are not Seventh-day Adventist anymore, thank you for how you have helped and are helping our church be better.

Pedro Well, I think it's such an important place, and I feel very lucky to be invited to these conversations. Thank you.

Aren Thank you.

Aren When Pedro and I had our interview together, I hadn't given him much heads up about writing a letter—and considering he no longer identifies as Adventist, I'm sure it felt like a strange request. I told him if he does want to write a letter, he could send it to me, but no obligation. I didn't expect to receive one.

But, a few weeks later, he sent me a text. "Hey man," it read. "Regarding the letter, I've racked my brain trying to see if there is anything that I left unsaid during our interview that I could write. I really couldn't come up with anything. I do, however, keep coming back to the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. I think it would be an apt summation of what I hope for the Church?"

Here's how it reads:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

. . .

Aren *Dear Church* is a production of SECC Youth and the Southeastern California Conference. It is engineered by JO Cordero and hosted and edited by me, Aren Rennacker. Music courtesy of Blue Dot Sessions, cover art by Taji Saleem.

Special thanks to today's guest, Dr. Pedro Orta. Not a lot of time has passed since our interview together, but I can tell you that Pedro is enjoying his work, his summer in LA, and teaching a new group of medical students. He and his parents continue to talk almost every day.

Thanks so much for listening—if you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to the show and leave us a rating and review on your podcast app. We will be taking one week off, and then bring you our last two episodes, including our final young adult guest in our next episode, and we hope you'll join us then.