



How Christy Haubegger Became a Media Mastermind

As a child, Christy Haubegger knew what she wanted to be when she grew up: a boss. As the founder of the iconic Latina Magazine, a film producer, and now an agent at one of the most powerful talent agencies in Hollywood, Christy is more than a boss; she's a force to be reckoned with. Born to a Mexican-American mother, and then adopted and raised by non-Latino parents, Christy talks about her unique take on the shared struggle of existing between cultures, the merits of a white sense of entitlement, and why impact is more important than money or titles.

Alicia Menendez: Welcome back to Latina to Latina. On this podcast I talk with Latinas about how they got to be so amazing.

I was about 12 years old when the first edition of Latina hit newsstands in 1996. I remember feeling like we, Latinas, had arrived. If you've ever read the magazine then you can think Christy Haubegger for willing it into existence. Today, Christy is an agent at CAA where she reps some of the biggest names in entertainment and runs the agency's multicultural business development. Christy, needless to say, is a visionary, and a connector, and very, very busy. When we sit down in her swanky LA office each time a phone rings right outside her door I'm reminded how lucky I am to have Christy's undivided attention.

Thank you for having us here in your office-

Christy Haubegger: Sure.

Menendez: ... at CAA. You have movie posters, but the thing I am most curious about is who that little girl on the poster is.

Haubegger: That is me when I was about four or five and is likely apparent to anyone how looks at the photo, my mother used to cut my hair.

Menendez: Preciosa. Look at those bangs.

Haubegger: I know, she said it was crooked because I moved, but not sure she was a talented hairdresser.

Menendez: What did that little girl want for her life?

Haubegger: I was thinking about this a while ago. Somebody asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up and I remember thinking that I wanted to be a boss.

Menendez: Yes, what a good answer.

Haubegger: Because my mom, this was a different era, and she was worried about me being bossy. I was like, "But what if I want to be a boss?"

Menendez: Which is good, I'm not necessarily a fan of banning the word.

Haubegger: Oh I know.

Menendez: I like a bossy girl.

Haubegger: I know, well we get things done.

Menendez: Yep, yep. You go to Stanford Law, why am I sitting at CAA in your office as an agent instead of some big corporate law firm?

Haubegger: Well, a lot of people go to law school because you can go right after undergraduate. For me, part of it was that it was a bit of a default graduate school. I went to UT Austin and got a really marketable degree in philosophy. I was either going to open up a philosophy or go to law school. While I was there I had a great professor who became something of a mentor for me. I had taken a class called Corporate Governance and Social Responsibility. I was there completely for the social responsibility part, but I really liked corporate governance, understanding how businesses and corporations worked was really fascinating for me. With this mentor professor he said to me, "You should think about learning more about business". I signed up for some business school classes at Stanford. I learned probably enough to be dangerous. I took some accounting and leadership, and marketing and I was like, "Oh my gosh, I love this. I'm in the wrong school".

Menendez: It's an expensive mistake.

Haubegger: It's a really expensive ... and I borrowed so much money. I had worked on a business plan for a self-directed study program on a magazine that didn't exist yet which was this magazine for Latinas. Another professor, a woman who was teaching at the business school said to me, "This is a really good idea. You should think about doing this". I thought well maybe I'll try and be an entrepreneur and if I fail miserably I could be a lawyer.

Menendez: There's a piece missing in the story, which is whenever I read it it's like you graduate from Stanford Law and then you live in a tiny apartment, and it's lean living, and then there's a magazine.

Haubegger: And then there's a magazine. Oh my gosh, mad.

Menendez: What happens in that period?

Haubegger: Well I really did live on love and ice water for two and half years.

Menendez: In California or New York?

Haubegger: Well in California for the first year and a half and then New York. People always tell you that networking is really important and part of what networking is is actually really just sharing your most vulnerable biggest dream with everybody you can because you don't know who's going to have an opportunity or a connection that will be helpful to you. There was this classmate of mine from law school and he had an aunt whose house in the Hamptons was next door to a woman named Jackie Leo. Jackie was the editor-in-chief of a magazine called Family Circle. She was friends with the number two editor at Essence who was Stephanie Stokes Oliver. I met my friend's aunt, and her neighbor, and her friend Stephanie who agreed to get me a meeting with the chairman of essence and that was my big break.

I had some angel investors, but this was a real live angel. This was a man who had 30 years prior started a magazine for African-American women. I had 15 minutes with him. I remember I sat down with him and I said, "Here's the thing, there are going to be more Hispanic women in the United States than there are African-American women in about 20 minutes and we haven't had a magazine yet". That's it, that's the pitch. He was struck by that and he promised to read the plan. He invited me back to present to his board of directors who made a modest investment to test with the option that they could invest if it went well. We did a bunch of testing and it went really well. This takes about a year and a half and now I'm living very lean in New York.

Menendez: How are you feeding yourself?

Haubegger: I did legal contract work. I did research for professors at Stanford after I graduated. I did all kinds of things. When you're doing this every bit of money you raise or make, and I raised \$50,000 from a small investor, every bit of money you put back in the thing you don't pay yourself.

Menendez: I think back to it because I was a pre-teen and I remember that magazine coming out. It meant so much, especially for me as an English dominant Latina because there were magazines they were just for a Spanish language audience and for someone who was less acculturated.

Haubegger: Yeah, that's right.

Menendez: It was amazing. I don't look like Jennifer Lopez, but to see Jennifer Lopez reflected back at me meant something.

Haubegger: We put Jennifer on the first cover because we thought she might be the next-

Menendez: Because she's going to be a thing.

Haubegger: The next big thing, got that right. One of the things that was really remarkable to me was to see her on a newsstand next to everybody else.

I will tell you that it took me three years to get it off the ground. There's this thing, you set a goal and you think you're crossing the finish line but the truth is you're just crossing the starting line. That was the beginning. It was like oh now we got to do it again.

Menendez: For you, your biological mother is Mexican-American.

Haubegger: Mm-hmm.

Menendez: Being adopted, did you have any trepidation about stepping into a space that was defined by your Latina identity?

Haubegger: Oh, yeah. My parents were incredibly supportive and loving. They wanted me to feel good about who I was. As I got older I remember thinking at one point that I didn't fit in anywhere. I didn't fit in like the Anglo world. I didn't fit in the Latino world. I kind of had that experience with one foot in each culture that I think it turns out most of us have. I had this idea at one point that I realized well if other people don't see images of themselves in the media well they can go inside the house and see people who look like they do. Well I didn't have that. I always wondered was I more acutely aware because I couldn't take that for granted in the same way.

Menendez: When did you know it was time to step away?

Haubegger: After the first 10 issues you get it, after the first 50 you really get it. I wanted to do other kinds of storytelling because I had this really profound realization that the only people who read Latina were Latinas. It just like oh wait, I actually want other people to know who we are and to see what we're capable of. I really wanted to do another kind of storytelling because the truth is I didn't do it because I wanted to be in the magazine business. I did it because I wanted to tell our stories. I felt like there was so much opportunity in film and television. For me, it wasn't a matter of if, it was a matter of when. After we sold it was any sort of, not easy, but it was a good juncture to do that.

I moved back to California in 2003. I worked on a movie called "Chasing Poppy". Then I worked on another movie called "Spanglish".

Menendez: As a producer.

Haubegger: Yeah, as a producer. I thought that being a producer was the, and it is to some extent, the analog to being a publisher. A publisher's job it to get all of the resources together so that creative people can do terrific storytelling. I thought if I could be a producer that would be the next step. The problem was for me to work on one movie for two years is really hard if your professional metabolism is accustomed to a new product every 30 days. I loved development, but I hated production, which is a really big part of being a producer.

Menendez: Yeah, what does a producer do?

Haubegger: The director is like an editor. The director is the creative storyteller and film is a director's medium. Your job as a producer is to make sure that in the development to make sure that we had access to getting the story right, everything from location scouting, to figuring out how we can do this with this kind of talent, to finishing movie and marketing, and how do

we find the right audience, how do we do all of that. It's really the business side of storytelling.

Menendez: Through that process is that how someone suggested to you that you be an agent?

Haubegger: Yeah. Well I got to know a lot of agents through that process. Coming out of it I was really proud of "Spanglish" but it is-

Menendez: Oh my god, it is one of my favorite movies.

Haubegger: It was a two year production.

Menendez: Paz Vega is magic.

Haubegger: I know, she's so talented.

I really had no idea what I was going to do next. I knew I wanted to do something that moved faster. I knew some of the folks here at CAA and they offered to create a role for me. I thought well maybe I'll do that because it will give me a good look at the whole industry and I can figure out where I want to go. Here I am 13 years later. But I had not idea what an agent really did.

Menendez: I don't think most people do.

Haubegger: Yeah so-

Menendez: What do they do?

Haubegger: I used to tell me family it was like a glorified temp agency, you get people a job and then next year you got to get them another job. CAA had I think 23 non-white clients when I started because I did sort of a census. Now we have 450 including 200 Latino writers, directors, actors, music artists. I decided that what I was going to do was actually ... I was like, you know what I'm going to do, I'm going to change the way the whole agency business works, naturally. I came in here-

Menendez: Because I'm boss.

Haubegger: Yeah.

Menendez: That's what I'm going to do.

Haubegger: I'm a boss, that little girl was right. I came in here and I was struck by the fact that we didn't have a lot of diversity in the client roster. But it turns out that the way people decide who they represent is actually who they feel passionately about and who they know personally and maybe somebody with whom they have had a social relationship. As it turns out, you need agents who look like the world if you want to represent the world because for good and for bad, women sign women. As we got more women agents we signed more directors.

I work really closely with America Ferrara and Eva Longoria, and Salma Hayek. I work with Gina Rodriguez. We have decided that there's an opportunity to aggregate and make a real focus out of representing these folks because particularly as they become producers, so Salma Hayek as a deal at Lionsgate. Jen has a deal as NBC Universal. America has a deal at NBC Universal. Eva has one at Fox. Jane has one at CBS, like five Latinas who have producing deals now because I was like we don't have the producers to actually change the kinds of stories we're telling. These women who are incredibly smart and incredibly hard working can begin to be part of that pipeline. That's been a big focus of mine because what I can do to help the individual careers of one or two people, you only have a certain amount of capacity, but if I could be part of catalyzing the whole industry to shift and move its scale that matters a great deal.

Menendez: For you as an agent when the Sony email hack story unfolded, do you look at that and think, "Shit" or do you look at that and think, "Finally, transparency"?

Haubegger: It's actually usually pretty bad because we are all so ill prepared for what we are up against here. One of the things that is transformative though has sort of been ... and I was one of the organizers of Times Up this last year ... sunlight is really good for that kind of thing where behavior that was tolerated or you thought you were alone suddenly finding out you're not or finding out this is actually endemic to your industry is great.

Menendez: Do you think there is a parallel for what we're now going through with Times Up and the light that's shining on the challenges that women in the industry have faced that there will be something akin to that for the racial and ethnic complications of people in this industry?

Haubegger: I think one of the things that I'm really proud of is that when we got into a room for Times Up, if we get 20 women together and close the door we're going to figure out something to do. Very specifically, we made it about women of color. The truth is, you realize you can't solve one aspect of inequality without addressing the larger injustice. We were like why don't we change the way our business operates.

One of the things that I think is remarkable is that it's really, really clear to me that talent is equally distributed, opportunity isn't. When you look at the numbers and you say women have directed 4% of the 1000 largest motion pictures in the last 10 years, well we clearly aren't 4% of the talent. You could argue maybe we're not 50% of the talent but you can't tell me it's 4. At the same time, when women of color have been excluded from all these you can't tell me we're not representative of the talent, we're just not representative of the opportunities yet.

Menendez: Who do you think is underrated Latina talent?

Haubegger: Oh my gosh, I think we're all underrated Latina talent, every single one of us is underrated. I mean-

Menendez: Well underestimated for sure.

Haubegger: Underestimated, although, one of the things that I will say, and I work with a lot of women if you think of Selma and Jen, and America, and Eva, and Gina, pound for pound, they are smarter, tougher, harder working in part because-

Menendez: They have to be.

Haubegger: ... nobody was going to hand them anything. Nobody's going to hand them anything. I have a little bit of that too where I've become accustomed to nobody making it easy for me. I assume nobody will, and so I will outwork everybody. I wouldn't trade it for anything in some ways, because I feel like I have muscles, because I struggled a little more. I feel like I have resilience. Tell me "No," that's just where we are starting. "No" is where it starts.

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Menendez: Have you ever failed at anything?

Haubegger: Oh yeah, I fail all the time.

Menendez: Like what?

Haubegger: I failed to go to the gym this morning. But I think there's a great opportunity in failure. I always say I don't fail, I either win or I learn. If you can get rid of your dignity and use every failure as an opportunity to learn because you're willing to ask people, the question is what could I have done better, what didn't work for you here, all of those things I find to be really, really easy to ask.

Menendez: I'm still not buying it.

Haubegger: Oh gosh.

Menendez: Can you tell me about a time that you failed?

Haubegger: Oh yeah. Let's see, at one point I realized for Latina I had hit up 200 investors, I got 5 yeses. I got 195 nos. You can call each of those a failure. There are people that I'd like to represent that we don't represent. I've failed so far.

My job is one of persuasion and I often fail to persuade people. If I hadn't failed so much the industry would look like the world and it doesn't yet. I feel like until that's righted I'm not done.

Menendez: You said something earlier that I want to pick up on when you were talking about pitching Latina and how one of the things about networking as just being willing to be vulnerable and telling people what your biggest ... I at least and I feel like this has to do with being raised in a Latina household and in a household where my dad was raised by poor immigrants. You did not ask for things and you certainly did not ask for help, and you certainly were never vulnerable. Everything you have just said, which I believe is antithetical I grew up believing.

Haubegger: It's still hard for me. I still work at being vulnerable. One of the things about being super independent and bootstrapping is that I'm super self-reliant, but that makes it really hard to have friends in deep relationships because great relationships require vulnerability. What I find is that when you ask people for help it makes them feel important and needed. If you can frame it as a way to connect with people, people generally are good, I believe. People

generally want to help. But if they don't know how because they don't know what you're dreaming of it's really hard. Nobody wants to tell people what they aspire to because they don't want people to know when they didn't make it. But if you don't tell people what you aspire to they can't help you.

Menendez: It's easy to look at you and say this is a person who has everything.

Yeah.

Haubegger: Okay.

Menendez: Most people who are like me who are careerists we want to build something that lasts us and you did that.

Haubegger: Well I hope to be doing that. One of the things that I think is remarkable is that there's your work and then there's your life's work. It's really easy to get caught up in the frustrations of your work, like the thing I'm doing right now. The thing you have to remember is it actually fits into a larger narrative about what's your life's work because I suspect that at the end of things we're not going to measure our lives in money, or titles, or any jobs you had. You're going to measure it in the impact you had.

Menendez: Thank you.

Haubegger: I'm so happy you're doing this.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us today. Latina to Latina was originally co-created with Bustle. Now the podcast is executive produced by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me. Sound edited by Oluwakemi Aladesuyi. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Send us ideas for guests or talk to us about what's on your mind right now. Remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or wherever you're listening, and please, leave a review. We love hearing from you.

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