

## Fashion Entrepreneur Lilliana Vazquez: “Build Something for Yourself”



On The Today Show and while covering red carpet fashion for Access Hollywood, Lilliana Vazquez has become one of the most sought-after style experts. As a first-generation Latina growing up in Texas, she assumed she'd become “an accountant, a lawyer or a doctor.” Instead, with her blog, The Cheap Chica's Guide to Style, as a foundation, she built a fashion brand at “the intersection of aspiration and accessibility.” With the recent launch of her online boutique, Tesoro Collective, Lilliana is parlaying her love of her fashion, her knowledge of e-commerce and her media training into much more: a sense of security and independence she's never had before. Tips for editing your closet and secrets to the perfect influencer photo paved the way for her blueprint to “build something that belongs to you.”

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- Alicia Menendez: Hey there. I'm Alicia Menendez. This is Latina To Latina. Each week we talk with Latinas on the rise.
- Lilliana Vazquez: Hi, I'm Lilliana Vazquez, style expert and founder of [tesorocollective.com](http://tesorocollective.com).
- TV Clip: *The stage is set at Radio City for this year's MTV Video Music Awards. And who knows what kind of fun we'll get into on this year's pink carpet. Let's get this party started.*
- Menendez: Such a TV person.
- I love that it is raining in New York City and you look adorable. You have on a hat, a cardigan, a vintage T-shirt, a short denim skirt, white sneakers, and I am here in black stretch pants and a shirt that my friend didn't want anymore and gave to me. So, I think this really sums up our aesthetics.
- Vazquez: I love that that is the first thing that you said to me when I walked in. Here's the thing, I've always thought this about clothes. Clothes are the truest, most honest representation of a person, and it's who you are at the core. And, it's for me, whether it's raining or a perfect 89 degree day with no humidity, I love clothes and I love getting dressed, and that brings me joy. So, I choose every single time I go in my closet. It's not the same for everyone. Some people choose joy through food, some people choose joy through work or working out, but people always ask, that they're like, "How do you have the energy to put together all these outfits and look cute all the time?" I don't think of it as looking cute. It's what brings me happiness. I love putting clothes together for myself or for other people. I don't think I'd be around this long if I didn't.
- Menendez: What is the most fashionable moment you had growing up?
- Vazquez: Growing up, I think it was my third grade class photo day. I remember this like it was yesterday. I had bought a white sweater vest that had little Scottie dogs all

over it. By the way, in case you don't know who I am or you know nothing about me, hi, I'm Lilliana and I love fashion. Okay. I know that kids have proper memories of birthday parties, and I have those too, but all of the pivotal moments in my life are defined by things that I wore. And I remember this third grade photo because in third grade we wore uniforms to school. But on picture day, we got to wear our chosen outfit.

I remember going to Montgomery Wards with my mom and picking out the most beautiful white sweater vest. It wasn't cashmere, but to me it felt like cashmere, and it had little white Scottie dogs, and I wore what is the equivalent of a pussy bow blouse on an eight year old. And I had just cut bangs and I thought that I looked so good in this photo. I look back on it now and, it's fine, but I remember being that age and being like, I want to do a bang for my picture. We cut bangs. I knew I wanted to wear that blouse that was way too grown up for an eight year old, and I was so proud of that little Scottie dog vest. And then I wore a little mini skirt, and I wore mary janes. I loved that outfit, and I repeated that outfit at any point in time that my mom would let me wear it. There were not too many occasions for that outfit, but when the occasion happened I wore it over and over and over again. And I swear, I probably felt more confident that day than I have probably felt on any red carpet in the last 10 years.

Menendez: As someone who loves fashion, I imagine you have a closet that is bursting at the seams.

Vazquez: Yes.

Menendez: What are your rules for editing it?

Vazquez: Oh, God. I'm a terrible editor. I wish I were a better editor. One of my rules is, you're only going to wear the things that you can actually see. So, I do try to put the things that I love forward in my closet so I can wear them over and over again. Then I'll have a moment where I think, I haven't worn this in three months, or six months, and I try to swap those things out. I tend to go back to the things that I love, and as I get older I'm trying to make smarter decisions about what I spend my money on, and the quality of the clothes that I spend my money on. I'm starting to learn that buying a beautiful cashmere sweater is something that you're going to have for 10 years, versus buying something that's acrylic and 50 percent wool from H&M.

So I'm trying to make better decisions, but I'm not a great editor. I think I'm a great wearer. So, one thing that I do is I will change outfits in a day. I know that most people will get up and pick one outfit and wear it the whole day. There are times when I changed my outfit three times a day. I'm like a small baby, you know when you have a newborn and you're like, they're going to start in this outfit and then they spit up all over it, so then you've gotta change their outfit, and then you're going to take them to meet your friends, so you change ... sometimes I think about myself that way and I'll change outfits two times.

Menendez: I have so much stress over your dry cleaning bill.

Vazquez: It's bad, but I also hand wash a lot. It's therapeutic for me. I hand wash a lot, I hang dry in my closet. I have a very, very good relationship with my dry cleaners and they give me a massive discount, which is great. But, I love getting dressed and to me it's trying something new, especially when I'm on vacation. We went on vacation for my birthday, we went to the Bahamas and we went for three nights and four days. My husband basically packed everything in a North Face backpack for himself. I brought an international sized tote. Like a giant suitcase. And I did multiple costume changes in the Bahamas, and it was amazing!

I loved the photos, I felt so great, I was smiling from ear to ear. People were stopping me and asking me where I got stuff. And most of the clothes that I buy now, and most of the clothes that I've bought in the last few years, are really affordable. That's kind of how I've built my brand is on accessibility, because I do think that it's not about spending a ton of money often, I think it's just about spending money on the clothes that can look really expensive. The way things look expensive is with a ton of confidence, great accessories, and great hair and makeup.

Menendez: I'm thinking of you on that trip to the Bahamas with that big suitcase, and there's a part of me that's like, Lilliana, that's ridiculous.

Vazquez: It is.

Menendez: And there's a part of me that's also, that is your thing, and that is your brand. So when you go on vacation is your husband taking your influencer pictures?

Vazquez: Okay, so this is the question that I get asked all the time. I am very, very lucky to be married to somebody who is an incredible photographer. Now, that is just by chance and by practice. His preference is to take surf photos and nature pics, but I quickly saw that he had an eye for photography and I said to him, "Will you take some photos of me?" Now, the problem with him taking fashion type photos is that he doesn't like clothes, and he doesn't like fashion. If you've ever been at a photo shoot you know that to get the right shot sometimes you've gotta take 100 shots, right? Just to get the right one, even with a professional photographer. Now, Patrick will probably take five, so I'd better have that pose down, I'd better make sure I looked in the mirror and knew that that sleeve was gonna hang off by a quarter inch and adjust my shoulder because he will give me five photos.

But, on this last trip to the Bahamas, I have to say that I did one of the boldest things that I've ever done for myself which is I bought a tripod, and I bought a shutter release. I set up my own camera on a tripod, and I learned how to play with the shutter and the timer, and I would literally tuck the timer in my bikini bottom and then just take as many photos as I wanted. Now I travel with that tripod, which was \$19.99 on Amazon, and that shutter release, which was \$24.99 on Amazon, and now I take 90% of my own photos.

Menendez: Growing up, is this what you thought you'd be doing?

Vazquez: Oh my gosh. No, I always loved fashion so I think maybe it was one of those things that growing up ... I'm first generation Latina, I'm one of the first kids in my family to

go to college, so I always thought that I would be an accountant, a lawyer, or a doctor, which were the only kind of acceptable professions. Because they're steady and you make a good income. I think if I probably gave myself the space to dream a little bit bigger when I was a little girl, I probably in my head felt like fashion was really where my heart was. I remember, I used to watch this woman Gloria Campos on TV in Dallas growing up, and she was the only, not just the only anchor, I think she was one of the only reporters that was Latina, and I remember thinking she's amazing. She's almost like this unicorn to me, just to see somebody that had my kind of skin tone and my coloring. I had dark hair and dark eyes, and to see somebody like her, in Texas, which is ... not that this is a bad thing, but the land of blonde hair and blue eyes, and cheerleaders.

It was really special, and I think that also made an imprint on me and I thought, I wonder if I could ever do something like that. Not that my family or my parents ever said I couldn't, but they just didn't even know how I would get there. I didn't know anything that worked in television, my parents didn't have a cousin that was a station manager, or a producer, or someone in L.A. My family was all in Ft. Worth or Mexico, that's it. Most of them worked in a factory or in a mill, that's why I think it is so important to continue to mentor and have interns that are Latina that come from my hometown or that come from Texas or come from Arizona because a lot of them don't think that they can do this. We're always, I don't know, I just feel like we're not given a ton of exposure to media and fashion and if I can do that, that means there's a million other little girls that can too.

Menendez: But coming from a more middle class community, would you call it?

Vazquez: Yeah, I mean barely middle class, yeah.

Menendez: Working middle class community. How do you reconcile that with being part of an industry that is very privileged, very elite, and that you and I are sitting here talking about the Bahamas and talking about the luxury of buying a cashmere sweater. I mean...

Vazquez: I think for me the way I reconcile it is, part of who I've always been is based in accessibility, right? And I've always said this from the beginning, I think when I started my blog, I've always said that for me there's this cross section of accessibility and aspiration. You need the aspirational stuff because you want to dream, and you want to see and you want to have the opportunity to experience those things. Even if you read about them or watch videos online.

Then there's the accessibility component, which is, how can I relate to people that can't do that? How does everything I say and do and create reach those people? That's how I reconcile it. I want to make sure that if I'm presenting something that is aspirational, that I'm doing it through a lens that is very accessible. And the other way around, too, it's not just about ... people always say, that's so great this was a blog for people that don't have a lot of money to look really expensive. And I was like, yes, that's one component. This is also a blog for women that have a lot of money that maybe decide, hey, I'm a single 27-year-old woman and I have money and now I want to change the focus of where I'm spending my money and I want to save money for a down payment so that I can buy my own apartment in New York, but I still want to look just as good as I did this whole time. How can I

spend money, and how to make that saving's something that's really enjoyable and it doesn't detract from that lifestyle.

It's a two-way thing. People always thought, oh, it's for people that don't have money that want to look like they have money, or dress like they have money.

Menendez: You've had all the jobs.

Vazquez: Yeah, I've had a lot of jobs.

Menendez: Today Show, Meredith Vieira, Access Hollywood.

Vazquez: Yeah.

Menendez: How do you learn to take those opportunities, because they come and they go, and not hold them too closely?

Vazquez: I think that's been probably the hardest lesson for me, and I don't know that I'm very good at that. I think that when you work in television and media your fate on a show or your fate in a role isn't really up to you. I mean, I can tell you this, I go into every single one of those opportunities and I work as hard as I can on any given day. I go far and above what is asked of me, and most of those shows, I mean two of the shows I still work on, but Meredith I don't work on anymore, and that wasn't by my choice, that was by a decision that someone else made.

I'm learning to get better and not take it so personally, and the only way I can do that is to know that at the end of each day I kind of say a little prayer saying, hey listen, I gave it my best and I did the most that I could and I'm proud of the work that I've done and whatever happens tomorrow happens, and there's nothing that I can change about that. I think that helps a lot because most of the time it's not really about you, and you can't get tied up in it. And I also think that learning to build something that is yours, that you have control over and that other people don't have control over, also gives you a sense of security that being at the hands of anybody else isn't going to give you, you know?

Menendez: Is that where Tesoro Collective comes in?

Vazquez: One hundred percent.

Menendez: Will you tell us about it?

Vazquez: Yeah, of course. Clearly I love clothes, and for the longest time I have wanted to have a store. I've always wanted to have a store, I think when I moved to Philadelphia it cemented for me. Philly has an amazing fashion scene and I lived in a neighborhood that had tons of beautiful boutiques and I always thought gosh, I wish I could just open a store here. I never got around to it, and I also saw the retail landscape changing a ton. In the last three years it's really changed a lot. Brands are being founded on Instagram and brands are literally becoming an overnight success just though having an Instagram account and a shop-able website.

Last summer I walked into a store in Montauk. My husband and I love the beach, and we have a house out there, and there's this beautiful men's store and I walked in and I said listen, your store's gorgeous but you're missing one thing. And the owner was like, um, I didn't ask you what I was missing, thanks so much for the information, but I was feeling kind of bold that day and he said, "What?" I said you're actually missing women's, the bulk of the customers out here are women because it's, in New York City a lot of couples, the men tend to stay back in the city during the summer and the women and kids go out to the beach to live at their houses. I said, so there's going to be women here all the time and you don't have anything for them to buy. I work in fashion, here's who I am, I'm a style expert, why don't you let me curate just a couple of racks of women's clothes that I think would sell really well here. And he said, if you can run it and you can handle the inventory, go for it. And I did, and it was super successful.

So we did a very tiny pop up in this store last summer called Adam Mar, and the brand was called Tesoro Collective. Now, the reason I named it Tesoro is because that is my mom's nickname for my brother and I. She calls us her tesoros, which means treasure in Spanish. I love that word, I think it's such a beautiful word, and I thought of this collection as treasures that I curate for my fans and followers and fans of the brand. And then I called it collective because I didn't really know that I just wanted it to be clothes, I thought maybe one day I could incorporate home goods or, maybe if I have a baby, baby things. I just didn't want to limit myself.

So Tesoro Collective was born as a pop up and when it ended I was really sad, at the end of last summer going into the fall. Really, really sad. When you work in our business you go go go, and you rarely have time to stop and process why you're not feeling great that day, or why you're sad, or why you're blue. Luckily I have a very intuitive husband who could sense that something was really wrong and he said, just think about why you're sad. And I said, I'm not sad, it's just, I've moved on. And he said, no, I think you're really sad because you don't have it anymore and you really loved it. And he goes, think about it. And I said, okay. So I did, and he was right, I was really sad because it was over and I didn't know if it was going to come back. So he said, why don't you take some of the money you made at Tesoro and build out a website. It's not that hard, I'm sure you know a ton of people that could help you, and he was right.

Everybody that I knew that had worked in digital, in e-commerce, in buying, all came together and I called in favors. I rarely ask for favors, I just, I don't know, I think I'm always saving them for a rainy day, you never know when you're gonna need it. I saved all my favors and I called them all in at the same time and Tesoro Collective was born. Now I have a brand that is mine, and authentically mine, I buy every single piece myself so nothing gets on the site, nothing gets put on our Instagram if it's not something that I want in the store. I wear probably 95 percent of everything on the site. Some of the stuff I don't just because it's a sizing thing. And I love it, it's been super successful. We launched a week before black Friday last November, it will be a year November, and we are finally making a profit.

Menendez: Congratulations.

Vazquez: Very, very happy about that. We just did our second summer at Adam Mar, and we're going to sign on for a third summer next summer. I think next summer I'll

probably try to do a self standing store, even if it's just seasonally out in the Hamptons, whether it's Montauk or East Hampton or Amagansett. I love it, and now we're partnering with different brands. Saba is a brand that I love, it's a shoe brand, they have a beautiful store in Dallas so I want to do a pop up in Dallas.

I think that's the way that brands are headed, I think it's all about collaboration. For me, I don't have the kind of capital to build out a physical store space or to lease a space as a pop up, but I know a ton of brands that don't carry clothes that would love to have women's clothes and you know what else, I can go on television and talk about the event. That's something that is unique about me as a store owner, I am media trained and I can speak very well on behalf of other brands and I finally get to speak on behalf of my own brand. It's been a dream come true for me. That gives me a sense of security that I don't think I have had ever in my career. I know that if I really want something to be successful it's up to me, and I'm willing to put in the time and the hard work and the sweat and the blood the tears, because there's been all of that, to make this work. It's important to me.

Menendez: I want to back way up.

Vazquez: Do it!

Menendez: How did you end up on TV?

Vazquez: Oh my gosh. Um, this is such a funny story. So, the very first TV job I ever had was on a show called Central Park SummerStage, and it was a local public access show here in New York City and I answered an ad on Craig's List to audition for it. Now, I had worked in radio in college, I had done an entertainment show for our station and I knew I loved it. I'd also written for the newspaper. I knew that there was something I loved about media and radio and we didn't have a TV station in college, because we built it I think my senior year and I just wasn't a part of that. I went to their studio, in Brooklyn on J Street, and I auditioned, just like I'm sure hundreds of other people auditioned, and I got the job.

I don't know how I got the job, because I had to read a prompter and I had never read a prompter in my life before. It was a show that filmed every weekend in Central Park and my job was to talk to the audience and talk to the band and they would air the concert live on that show. It was so much fun, it was so hot, I was so sweaty. I watched those DVDs probably two years ago, I was so bad. Like, so bad. I think maybe nobody else auditioned and that's why they gave me the job.

Menendez: Well someone must have thought you were good.

Vazquez: Listen, I don't know if they were tired of looking at tapes and they were like, this one. And that was my very very very first job on TV.

Menendez: And is your blog how you ended up on the Today Show?

Vazquez: My blog is how I ended up on the Today Show. Yeah, I started the blog-

Menendez: Cheap Chicas?

Vazquez: Yeah, it was the Cheap Chicas Guide to Style, I started it in 2008. Nobody likes to think back to 2008 because that's when everybody lost everything, but it was a perfect time to start a, kind of a, fashionable blog that was focused on savings and style without a price tag. I did local segments based on that blog. A reporter at ABC in Philly found it and said hey, could you possibly take me shopping at H&M and show me how to recreate celebrity looks for less, I said sure. That led to an opportunity at NBC, and then somebody at the Nate Berkus show saw it, and I started pitching the Today Show.

I told the story on my Instagram Live a few weeks ago, I pitched the Today Show I think for almost two years, and I never got a response back. Never. Not one time. It wasn't until a friend of mine who had a relationship with a producer there pitched me on behalf of a segment that I actually got on the show. It was probably just that I wasn't sending it to the right person. Also that I probably didn't have the right experience at that time, and I always tell people this that want to work in television, you have to learn to crawl before you can walk and before you can run. You might think that you're ready, but you're probably not ready. I wasn't ready when I was pitching them, and everything happens for a reason. When I did get the opportunity I was ready. At that point I'd probably done hundreds of local segments and I'd probably done 30 national segments on other daytime shows. Thank goodness I was ready, because when the stakes are that high with those opportunities, you kind of only get one shot.

Menendez: I've noticed occasionally on your Instagram account you get political, especially in these times when it is challenging not to be political.

Vazquez: Yes.

Menendez: When is it important enough to you to stand up and say something?

Vazquez: I, so political, right? It's a polarizing word and I kind of back away from the word. I don't think I'm being political, I think I'm being human, and I think I'm being honest. I think I'm expressing my feelings as the person that I am, and-

Menendez: So an example of this would be during the family separations.

Vazquez: Yeah, the family separations at the border, in my home state. To me, there are issues that transcend political parties, and that is one of them. I do not want to live in a world or live in a country where children are separated from their parents. I don't care what the reason is, I just don't stand for it. Whether you're republican, green, tea party, democrat, it does not matter. When you are a parent or an aunt or somebody that has children in their lives, if you can't go to bed at night knowing that if tomorrow the police knocked on your door and just took your child from you you'd be okay with it, then you're not okay with what happened at the border. But this issue, I mean I talk about it now and it makes me want to ... it's horrible, and as somebody who has struggled to have children and I see people, you know, it just was really personal.

Menendez: I've never heard you talk before about struggling to have kids.

Vazquez: Yeah, it's a really, it's a hard one. It's a real hard one. It's been a long, it's been the hardest thing I think I've ever done. This experience with my husband has been a lesson in the fact that I cannot control everything, and you probably can't control most things, and the things that you can control sometimes aren't really the things you want that mean the most. That has been a lesson that I'm still trying to wrap my head around, and it's hard but it's also really nice because you get to talk to people that are going through eh same thing. I am not a very open person publicly, and when I say that I think you understand what I mean by that. Yes, I'm on TV, and yes I have an Instagram that gives you an insight into my life, but there are certain things that are incredibly private and certain things that are incredibly scared to me that I do not share.

Infertility is one of those issues that I just, I think for me I've seen a lot of people share their journeys on television, and on their blogs and on their websites. It's their choice to do that, it just hasn't been mine. It's something that I wanted to do with my husband and I, my family, and my very very close friends. I've been asked a million times to share it, on TV, in a magazine, in an article. I think when there's good news to share, maybe I'll feel different.

But, a lot of times I think what happens is as women go through infertility you tend to only hear success stories. It is very, very challenging and very very hard to not be one of those success stories. It is a story that needs to be told, because for every woman that is successful through IVF there's probably five more that aren't, and those women don't have a voice. But a lot of times I think that's by choice, so for me when there's something to tell I will tell, and maybe I just won't, you know? At the end of the day I think Patrick and I have decided that we will be parents and I can live with that.

Menendez: I'm gonna ask you one more question.

Vazquez: Okay.

Menendez: When you are a stylist and a television host and a business woman, do you ever feel like you're enough of any of those things?

Vazquez: I have good days when I do think that I'm enough. I will say that in the last job description you mentioned, business owner, that's probably where I feel like I'm most enough. I think that has a lot to do with, I get a lot of pleasure and happiness out of seeing the people on my team happy and succeeding. I feel enough as a business owner, on most days. In television, as a stylist or a host, I'm trying. It's hard, it's really hard. Probably not, it's so competitive and it's very political. I'm not a really political person, so no, I probably don't feel like enough. But that's a whole nother issue that we need to call my therapist in for.

Menendez: Lilliana, thanks so much.

Vazquez: Thank you so much for having me, this was really wonderful.

Menendez: Hey, one of the best ways to support us, besides telling everyone you know about is, is by listening on the RadioPublic app. When you listen there, we get paid. And

the app's tip button lets you leave us a tip of any amount up to 100 dollars. Major shout out and thank you to the individuals who left us our first two tips. We promise to spend it wisely.

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. Anita Gonatro was the sound designer on this episode. Email us at hola at latina to latina dot 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 RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or wherever you're listening. And please, leave a review, we love hearing from you.

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