



How Alisha Fernandez Miranda Became a 40 Year-Old Intern

She had a life that was “objectively great” (big career, happy marriage, twins!) but still, she felt like she was “drowning.” So, Alisha devoted a year to chasing down the answer to her most burning question: What might have happened if her life had taken a different path? That year is now the subject of her new memoir, *My What If Year*, the story of the four internships (and the many misadventures) that got Alisha unstuck.

Alicia Menendez: We talk a lot on the show about career pivots, but my friend Alisha Fernandez did something much more dramatic, she put a pin in her uber successful career in social impact in order to become an intern. It is all the subject of her first book, *My What If Year*, a memoir about four internships, three countries, two kids, and one life-changing misadventure, Alisha's quest to figure out what might have happened if her life had taken a different path. This conversation is my quest to figure out how anyone who wonders "What if?"-- and who has not wondered "What if?"--can learn from Alisha's experience.

Alisha, hi.

Alisha Fernandez Miranda: Hi. I'm so excited to be here, I can't even tell you.

Menendez: Alisha, I want to start with how you and I know each other, which is that we went to college together, and because our names are oddly similar, Alicia Menendez, Alisha Fernandez, people would bring me your mail, Alisha.

Fernandez Miranda: I'm so sorry for that. Did I even get any mail?

Menendez: I think this is for you, and I'm like, "Look at the letters, they're different."

Fernandez Miranda: I have actually the most vivid memory of meeting you for the first time. I think it was at a mixer for the Women's Studies Department, the formerly known as Women's Studies Department. I feel like you were in sweatpants and you just were very cool, relaxed, and really smart. I was like, "Oh, we have the same name, and she seems awesome, this could be bad for me."

Menendez: Alisha, I think what was so interesting to me about reading your book is that in the years that have followed our knowing one another and being friends in college, I watched your life progress, as I watched so many college friends life's progress via Facebook and Instagram, and on Facebook and Instagram your life looked truly perfect. Early love, what seemed like a really happy, great marriage, these two cute little kids, a career that was thriving and blooming, and all of that was true.

Fernandez Miranda: Yep, it was true.

Menendez: It wasn't a lie.

Fernandez Miranda: It was true, was not a lie.

Menendez: Tell me about that... Is there a moment, are there a series of moments where you realize, "This isn't it, this is not enough?"

Fernandez Miranda: I can pick out little snippets, almost like a movie if I was watching scenes. At the beginning of 2018, I went to Davos to the World Economic Forum, which for me was a big

career goal. In my field, to be able to go to the World Economic Forum at Davos, was really a pinnacle moment. I was there, thinking I should have been enjoying myself, it was very cold and I was miserable, and it just felt... It felt empty. It felt not right. I spent a long time trying to figure out how to engineer it so it did feel right. I was like, "No, no, no, I just need some more hobbies, or I need some more time with my kids, or I need to take up knitting because that's really what's going to make me feel... I need to do all this self-care." But, there was this nagging feeling all the time, I need to do something else, this isn't right. I was terrified.

I was terrified of what that kind of change would mean, because my life was objectively great. I had and have my wonderful husband, my kids are kids, but generally delightful, and I have all the professional success that I had ever wanted and it just wasn't enough. It felt like, am I really going to throw a bomb into this very carefully organized and planned life and do something that I have no idea what the outcome would be? That was a slow process, I think, with definite moments in-between. Then, it got to the point where it felt like I couldn't not do it because I felt like I was drowning and I was upset, I was sad, I was crying all the time. I was like, "I have to do something. It's got to be big. Here is this insane idea to go do a whole bunch of internships. This has got to be the thing, or else what am I going to do?"

Menendez: Tell me about how this idea came together of this being a slate of internships, because I think a lot of our listeners have had that moment of great unhappiness. We've talked to other Latinas who have either gone traveling for a year with their family or have left their corporate job to start their own thing, I don't know that anyone has ever done something as experimental. How did this idea come together?

Fernandez Miranda: The idea that was in my head forever was this desperate need to somehow want to understand and be part of the field of musical theater. I know that Miami has, I suppose, a burgeoning musical theater culture, but not really known for it out of small circles. But my parents were both obsessed with musicals, including my Cuban dad who grew up in Hialeah, but when he married my mom, they started listening to musicals together. I've loved musicals forever. I would go to see a musical and I'd be walking out with this buzz and thinking, "I would do anything, actually anything to be part of this. I would just go and get coffees for people," but it was very facetious like, "Oh, that's never actually going to happen." Then, I had this very transformational girls' weekend with two of my college roommates.

We were very much in this vein of what would you do? We had a few martinis and I was like, "You know what? I would love to be an intern on Broadway. That's what I want to do." Then we left and we all went back to our normal lives, but for me, then that idea was in my head like, maybe I could do this. But it took eight months at least of working that out in my head, feeling there was no way I could do it because it was insane, and this was coinciding with this feeling of just desperation like I needed to shake up my life, I had to do something different. I talked about it mostly as a joke with people like my husband and my family, and finally it was just like... It was really a moment with my husband. He was like, "Why aren't you doing this?" He was like, "Just do it. Stop talking about it and just do it. Figure out when you can do it. Take a month off. We'll figure it out with the kids. Just put it in the calendar, set yourself a goal."

That's always what I have to do, I have to have a goal. Then, let's work toward it. That was really the beginning of then thinking, "Okay, if this is a project, how am I going to do it? What fields would I want to work in? Who do I know? How am I going to take it forward?"

Menendez: What did that outreach look like, because I've tried to draft the email that you must have written in my head several times and it's like, "Hey, I'm Alicia. I have an amazing business and a Harvard degree, and I want to be your intern." It's like, "All right, this is a fishing expedition."

Fernandez Miranda: It was not dissimilar from that. In fact, you could have basically just changed the spelling of our names and you more or less would've had the email that I sent out to people. I tried a lot. I did a full resume, and I explained it upfront. I was like, "This is an unorthodox request. I want to come in and learn about what you do. This is my background." I've made very clear that I was willing to do actually anything. I will file papers. I will get coffee for people. I will sweep up trash. I'll do anything you want. I just want to have this life experience. Would you consider it? For the most part, nobody wrote me back. I mean, I can't even tell you how hard it was to get an unpaid internship.

Menendez: I think that's an important point in life, Alicia, which is I used to think that you would write one email where it's like, "Can you please be my mentor?" The person who would write back and be like, "I'd love to be your mentor." It's like, actually, people just sometimes don't even... It's not even that you got to know, it's that the amount of outreach for basically anything and the accepting of people are not going to close the loop because they're busy too. That does not mean that you should stop going.

Fernandez Miranda: No. I mean, being a consultant is good training for rejection all the time, I think, so I figured it was a numbers game. If I reached out to enough people, if I sent enough emails, people would write me back. I asked friends, anybody... I went on LinkedIn like a crazy person. I was like, "Does anybody know anybody who knows anybody who does any of the things that I want?" In the end, it ended up being people that knew me, people that trusted me enough to say, "Yes, this is strange, unorthodox, but we know Alicia, we know she's going to do a good job. Let's see how it goes."

Menendez: This represents, I think, the bulk of the book, which is the stories of what happened during the period of your being an intern. If you could just pull out for me either your favorite story, your favorite memory, biggest mistake, what in this big period of time most jumps out to you?

Fernandez Miranda: Oh God, there's so many. I mean, my biggest mistake... How can I pick just one? I think that I was so bad at so many of the things that I did, which is a really unusual feeling for me. I'm a real striver, and I am a person who has always tried to do the stuff that I'm good at. All of a sudden, working in a hotel, in a restaurant where I have to carry plates, use hand-eye coordination, and remember which table has which dietary requirements, and I'm a very clumsy person so I was bumping into chairs, I was breaking glasses. I spilled an entire bottle of coke on myself in front of the person I was supposed to serve it to, and then had to finish my shift in that same outfit. I checked somebody into a room where another person was already in there, undressed.

I mean, the hotel and restaurant internship, God bless them. But the most memorable, Broadway. That was my dream, and it was cut short. I did it, I left for New York on February 29th, 2020. I was supposed to be there for a whole month, COVID happened, Broadway went dark. But those few weeks, sitting in that rehearsal space, was everything I always wished and hoped it would be. It was a true dream, so that has stayed with me. But I have

stopped saying no to things just because I'm worried I'm going to be bad at them, and I have tried to look at them as opportunities to learn, to grow, and to be really intentional about putting myself in those situations where I am uncomfortable, where I don't know the most in the room, where I'm doing something that feels scary, because that was the whole point of this. That was the biggest takeaway for me. I wasn't doing that enough.

That was part of why I was feeling, I think, just so stuck. Now I am really... It's a conscious effort. It's an everyday effort to not feel stuck again, and I think that's a big part of it.

Menendez: I want to know when it became clear to you that this was a book or that you were interested in putting this into a book, but I'm also interested in... Books are not easy to get published, what did that require of you? How did you make that happen?

Fernandez Miranda: Hard work and luck, like everything, definitely both in almost equal measure. At the very beginning in this girls weekend, one of my college roommates had suggested I write a book about this and we had a title. She was like, "Call it the 40-Year-Old Intern," you'll do it for your 40th birthday. I was like, "Yes, I love it." I loved it.

Menendez: You registered for the Instagram handle...

Fernandez Miranda: Had the Instagram, I bought the domain, I did all the things. I was like, "I love this. This is my new brand, 40-Year-Old Intern." This is what I'm going to do. I was only 38, but it didn't matter. I was still going to be the 40-Year-Old Intern. There was kind of this idea, but I really did not take it very seriously because... I love books, I've always loved books, but just the idea that I could write a book did not seem at all feasible to me. It's a lot of words, a lot of pages, and not something I had ever done. But as I would try to tell people what I was doing and really try to make the space to do it, so to tell the head mistress at my kids' school that I wasn't going to be on the parent council next term because I was going to New York to sit in on some Broadway and off-Broadway shows, I found that if I said to people, "Oh, and I'm going to write a book about this at the end," they were like, "Oh, okay. Well, you have a goal."

The fact that there's an outcome to this that's not just your personal fulfillment makes it so much more palatable to everybody. Then, it started to be a convenient excuse, and I did some pretty heavy journaling throughout, but mostly because I didn't want to forget it, but it was not anything I really took seriously until probably the first lockdown. I got back, and my husband was like, "Are you going to write something about...? Are you going to pull this together? What about this book idea? Is this still happening?" I was like, "No, it's too raw. I'm miserable. I can't believe I had to leave New York. I can't believe the kids are not in school." I did not feel emotionally like I could go back and look on that time, but I had a lot of spare time in the evenings after the kids were in bed and there was no going out and no seeing other people where I then went back to those notes and those journals, started to write, and started to put some ideas together.

Pretty soon, I had a section that I had written about this time in my life that was, now going back to it, pretty bad, but it was something. It was finished, I had written it, and it was done. I kept that up as I went along. I wrote after every internship. When I finished the last internship, and then I felt like I kind of knew how my story ended, I went back and re-looked at everything else. Then I realized I had written 80,000 words. I was like, "All right, this is something that could be a book." Then, I did what I do for everything in my life, I made a spreadsheet, I wrote down every single agent that I thought would possibly be interested in this, but always with this... The experience was enough. It's okay if this

doesn't become anything else because this was already enough for me, but I've done all this work, so let's see what's going to happen.

I queried 41 different agents, and I just got a few rejections and a lot of ghosting, a lot of people just never wrote me back. But I kept it up, just like finding the internships, I figured maybe it was a numbers game, but all the while kind of making these other plans for my life that had nothing to do with writing. Then finally, an agent wrote me back and she was like, "Let me see the rest of what you've got." She asked to represent me, and we did a lot of work on editing the book. But my publishing process was completely a Cinderella story because in the meantime, while I had been writing in lockdown and doing all these things, I had gotten the advice that a debut writer, no profile to speak of online, needed to have some other published writing under their belt. I started working on short essays that were little snippets from the book. I found this woman named Zibby Owens on Instagram, and Zibby had a small essay blog at the time called Moms Don't Have Time to Write, so I submitted the essay.

She wrote back within 24 hours in her very patented Zibby energy, she was like, "I love this. I'm going to publish it. Let's get on a Zoom call. Let's figure out what this is all about." We kept in touch. I published another piece with them. I told her, "I have an agent. This is very exciting for me." As we were getting the package ready that was going to go out to different publishers, I got a two-line email from Zibby that just said, "I'm starting my own publishing company. Have you sold your book yet? If not, I want to publish your book."

They launched a company, they signed me, and my book is going to be the first book out that they publish, which... It's a startup publishing company, startup book, but it's been so exciting. I have felt so supported. I do not think I have had the traditional publishing experience from what I hear from other people, because I've had a community with me the whole time, and that has been an amazing feeling.

Menendez: But, nothing about this is traditional.

Fernandez Miranda: But, I mean it was a risk. Once the book was out and we were like, "Okay, we're going to do this," whatever I do, I throw myself into 100%. Once I was doing the book, I was like, "We're going to do this book, we're going to do it right." But I was up for the ride, because I'm going to see where this goes and I'm going to hustle and try to make it work.

Menendez: Part of the subtext of your story is that you had the financial means to step away from the business for about a full calendar year in order to do this, and that's just not going to be the case for a lot of people. But I wonder if there is a way to microdose a what-if year, if even just the value of a what-if week or a what-if month, should someone have that luxury, can still create the same type of change?

Fernandez Miranda: Yes, without question. The original plan and what ended up happening was short sabbaticals from work, which only was a reality because my husband and I had built a business and we owned that business, and so we were in a position where I could manage enough of what I needed to do, nights and weekends and around this period. But I absolutely think any kind of experience, any time that you can make for yourself to try something like this is really worthwhile. It doesn't even have to be an internship or another job, it could be a class. There are so many online classes. If your whole life you have been interested in songwriting or composing music, you go onto edX and there's 50 free courses that you can take. It's going to take effort. If you have kids, you are probably going to have to do it after they go to bed or in the morning before they wake up, or on your lunch break.

I've devoted a lot of resource to this project, but time was a huge resource I devoted to this, because there was a lot of other stuff in my life that I couldn't just say goodbye to because I was off doing these internships. That included parenting, that included being a spouse, and that included continuing to make sure the company was running in the way it needed to, even if I wasn't there doing the day-to-day nine to five. But, I was desperate to do it. I put in the time. I made the time. My sleep suffered and lots of other things. It's not without recognition of the extraordinary amount of privilege I had to be able to do this, but there was a lot of hard work and effort. I think making the space and the time for your what-if course, your what-if day, your what-if week is so, so vital.

There are so many ways, I think, to push yourself into visualizing what is the life that might look different from your life now that you want, that doesn't need to be in any way similar to the way that I did it, but fundamentally the same theme is still there.

Menendez: Alisha, I love you so much.

Fernandez Miranda: I love you too.

Menendez: Thank you so much, and congratulations.

Fernandez Miranda: Thank you so much.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina-to-Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. Remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google podcast, Goodpods, or wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us grow as a community.

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