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Alicia Menendez: I want to read you a pitch I got about being a guest on this podcast from Andrea Campos. She wrote, "Over the last two years, I've gone from drawing on my bedroom floor during the pandemic to published author who's worked with JLo. It's been a very unconventional journey and I'd love to inspire other Latinas to keep going toward their dream, even if their journey doesn't look like everyone else's." I mean, how could I say no to that? And so today, Andrea shares how she made her leap from marketing to freelancing just as the pandemic hit, the importance of showing up for the craft, even when the path is not clear, and how all of that work helped her land her role as the illustrator on Jennifer Lopez and Jimmy Fallon's new bilingual children's book, "Con Pollo." Andrea, thank you so much for doing this.

Andrea Campos: Thanks for having me. I'm so excited.

Menendez: You're a triple Cancer, which I don't know that I've ever met a triple Cancer before.

Campos: I feel so exposed. Yes, I am a triple Cancer. It's not something I normally tell people because I think Cancers get a bad rep for being too sensitive and I'm that times three, but I've learned to live with it and I feel like I'm finally in a position work-wise where being soft is a good thing. So I feel like, "Okay, universe, you led me to probably one of the five career paths where being super sensitive and soft can actually be a good thing." So here we are.

Menendez: Well, I say it as a fellow Cancer, though not a triple Cancer, because when I see your artwork it is so upbeat and it is so positive that I'm like, "Is this a reflection of Andrea or is this Andrea psyching herself, her emo self out?"

Campos: That's interesting. I think with my art, so maybe I'm like a non-traditional Cancer in the sense that I'm really sensitive, but for the most part, I play in just a really happy space. And that's reflective in the colors I use, how I decorate my home, how I dress generally. I feel really lucky I've, I don't know, maintained a really good relationship with five-year-old me and that she's kind of the one that has the control sometimes. I think that's where the art comes from, where I choose to make art from a good warm place. And sometimes that is just making that space for myself so that the rest of me can feel good. And other times, it's generally what I'm feeling.

Menendez: It's interesting that you bring up five-year-old you, because as a kid you loved to draw. What did that look like? When was the first time you sort of knew, "Oh, I'm kind of good at this. There's something here."

Campos: My mom is an architect, so I think I inherited a lot of creative skills from her. But as a kid, those were the classes, those were the projects I was most excited for was when it's like, "Oh, you're doing this, but there's a creative component where you have to design this board or draw this thing." And I remember it was my preschool. We got to draw a bunch of pictures and then the teacher picked one, someone's drawing to essentially make the t-shirt for all of our field trips and that ended up being my drawing. And my parents joke about it now because they're like, "Oh, that was your first merch item at four." I'm like, "It wasn't a good drawing, it was stick figures." But I think that was the first time where I felt the acknowledgement of like, "Oh wow, people can actually appreciate what you make. That's so cool. That's so special. I love that."

Menendez: A part of your story that is going to be super familiar to a lot of our listeners is when you tell your parents, "I want to go to art school," they're just like, "Nope."

Campos: Yeah, I think for me in high school, I always had a feeling I'm like, "I want to do this," and at the time, I was exploring so many different creative things and one of the things that I really loved was interior design. I remember having a very serious discussion with my dad in particular being like, "Hey, I want to study this. I think there's something really beautiful here." His response was just, "Hey, that's great, but I want you to get a real job." That real job comment just sat with me for so long because I was aware of my status as the child of immigrants. I was aware of the pressures that my parents were inadvertently or not putting on me.

 Also, I think just society's pressure where it's like, "Okay, they gave up so much for me to be here in this country. Who am I to just waste that and choose a career path that's not going to be lucrative, that's not going to allow me to sustain myself?" So I made the choice to go into marketing, which I saw was a good blend of creative and business. I was like, "Okay, I did the right thing," but at the same time you, I'm like, "This isn't what I like. This is not what I'm supposed to be doing. I need to go back to square one."

Menendez: So you make the leap, you make it at a pretty bad time though.

Campos: To be fair, I made the leap without fully knowing what was coming up in the months ahead.

Menendez: Of course.

Campos: I made the leap, for those listening, in early 2020, I'm talking February, 2020, quit my normal job, set the wheels in motion to move to a brand new city. I'm like, "Yeah, I did this. I finally mustered up the courage." My friends were like, "Yeah, you finally did it. You've been talking about this for years." Then all of a sudden, weeks into my new life, pandemic shuts everything down. That was really hard.

Menendez: So how did you sustain yourself both financially and just spiritually during that period where the plans you had made all fell through?

Campos: I remember those first two weeks in particular were exceptionally hard because the same friends that had been cheering me on two weeks ago were now, "Wow, your timing was really bad." I was like, "Yeah, you're not wrong." In a lot of ways, I felt like I had finally taken the leap of faith, stretched out my wings only to hit a wall and just literally fall to the ground. At that point, I decided that in that moment I wanted my priority to be myself. So taking care of myself emotionally, taking care of myself physically, and taking care of myself mentally because I was already going through a lot as someone who had just jumped into a brand new career, only to be met by this tremendous amount of resistance. Then on top of that, all of the emotion and the weight of the emotion that was going on in those very early pandemic days. As you said, I'm a triple Cancer, I absorb, I absorb what's going on in the world around me. So I was just sitting in an apartment that wasn't even mine anymore, just shaking like, "Oh, God. What now?"

 I decided to essentially build myself a mini artist residency where I was like, "All right, you have eight hours a day, seven days a week now to fill. You can't hang out with your friends, you can't get distracted. Just do what makes you feel good. Let's like pick a creative activity each day with the goal just being, play, something that can distract you from what's going on in the world and even internally a little bit and then hopefully that'll build your confidence back up again and make you feel good." In the course of doing that, drawing came back and I realized, I'm like, "Wow, I really like this. It brings me a lot of peace." It turned into a form of art therapy for me that I think really allowed me to process everything that I was feeling in a way that felt right for me. I couldn't find the right words, but the little doodles and sketches were like, "Wow, this is 100% how I feel right now and I think others probably feel the same way too."

Menendez: As in I think of the moment, you start transposing your art onto Instagram and it's an MLK illustration that Quest Love shares that really starts to explode your account. What I find really interesting is that you are super savvy. You say to yourself, "I need to now look at this account through a business lens." So can you talk us through what that means? What were the changes then you made to the way that you were approaching the work and Instagram as a vehicle for reaching potential partners, collaborators, consumers?

Campos: Some of those little shifts I made was one, just being more vulnerable in what I was sharing and just honest about my thoughts and feelings around a lot of the stuff that was going on at the time. I think a lot of my early work in particular is a direct reflection of how myself as a first generation Mexican-American sees themselves in a US that's in a really challenging time right now with regards to climate change, social justice, and the way that people I think are on very two distinct sides of the spectrum. So a lot of that was I think just me pouring myself into this being like, "I want to show the world who I am." I think the other part of it, the more maybe business savvy part of it was me realizing that everyone is stuck inside right now. I think a lot of people feel how I'm feeling right now, overwhelmed, confused. If I could figure out little tidbits of way to help them express themselves through my art, then maybe I can continue to grow in this space.

 So that's why you'll notice too, a lot of the stuff that I did was really topical and it was I think my interpretation of things and people latched onto that and started to let me know, "Wow, I feel this way too," or, "You perfectly captured what I wanted to say to my friends or my family," or, "Thanks for finding a positive way to say this because I know that my parents have different views than me, but I think you really captured the sentiment that I was trying to get to." So I started to use my art as a vehicle for broader and larger communication and I think it all kind of snowballed from there.

Menendez: You are now on your third children's book and there are huge names attached to this one, "Con Pollo: A Bilingual Playtime Adventure" -- Jennifer Lopez, Jimmy Fallon. What does the process of getting a book that made look like?

Campos: Yeah, so I think this is a unique project obviously because of who's involved, but high level, the way that illustrators will work with authors is through art directors. So an art director on their team found my Instagram of all things and was like, "Hey, one of our clients saw this drawing you did. They really liked it. Would you be interested in talking about potentially collaborating on a book?" Of course, I was like, "Yes, let's do it." Much to my surprise, it ended up being Jennifer Lopez and Jimmy Fallon. So my jaw was on the floor and for a split second I was like, "Oh my God, do I even know how to do this?" That imposter syndrome kind of came in. But thankfully at that point, I think I had mustered up enough courage in my little Cancer shell to be like, "You're going to do this, you'll figure it out. You're smart, you've figured things out before. Fake it until you make it, or better yet, make it until you make it."

 Which I think is so important for artists to do, just keep making work until you make it. And then from there, high level, you work with an art director who really has developed, I think, the artistic vision for a children's book or whatever project you're working on. They'll share the story with you, you as the illustrator have the opportunity to sketch out what your vision is, you send it back to them, and then it becomes a really collaborative effort where the authors are like, "Hey, I like this, but I was actually thinking of this for this." And you kind of go back and forth, make edits until you're finally in a place where everyone's happy and then you share it with the world. I think that's why I'm so excited that everyone's able to see that process or the end product of that process in just a few short weeks.

Menendez: Is that customary? Is that part of the work that you do a lot of stuff on spec?

Campos: In the children's book space, yes and no. I think for bigger projects like this where they're still in a bidding process, that is generally part of the process. And most publishers, most editors will pay for your time and your work, or they should if they don't, while were you are doing that spec work. That has been my experience with in the bigger publishing houses. With some of the smaller publishing houses that I've worked with, there hasn't been much spec work. It's just like, "Hey, we like your style. Here's the story, bring it to life." There still is a lot of that back and forth, but primarily with the art director at that point who has a clear vision too and knows what you're capable of because they've seen your work online, they know your portfolio, they've seen whatever else you've kind of made. That's, I think, the biggest difference there.

Menendez: Andrea, coming from a family full of artists or people who had a creative instinct who because of immigration largely were not able to fulfill their dreams of being working professional creatives. Does that then translate to you as an opportunity or a burden?

Campos: I've been thinking about this a lot recently because there's two people in my family whose stories I think of that I sometimes get emotional just thinking about it in relation to what I'm doing now. So for context, my mother studied architecture in Mexico. She practiced architecture for about two years, but when her and my dad made the decision to move to the states, her degree did not transfer. So she was back at square one and she went from being in a field that she really loved to essentially working as a caretaker for the elderly. I know part of her heart and soul were just completely broken in having to let go of that, especially after you work so long and so hard for a career, to not even be able to practice is hard. The other person actually is my grandfather who just passed away a couple weeks ago, and that's why this is so top of mind for me. When he moved to the States with my dad, he worked two jobs for 25 years.

 He worked at, it's like a railroad engineer, just mechanic, all the things back in the day, and also a server. But he is and was the most talented artist I had ever interacted with. He could paint, he would do sculpture, he could sketch you in a way that made you look like a photograph. It was wild. But him pursuing art full-time was never an idea that crossed his mind because it wasn't an option. He had three kids, he had just moved to a country where he didn't have a support system. He was working two full-time jobs. While I'm grateful for both of them because they gave me these talents, I feel like directly connected to them. I'm excited to be in a place now where I get to pursue this professionally.

 It does break my heart because I feel like I have both the support and this added pressure of I'm not only doing this for me, I'm doing it for them and who knows how many others in the past that weren't able to do this. While that is a beautiful thing, especially for someone who is sensitive to me, I'm just like, "Oh man, I really don't want to let them down." It's not letting me down, but also this broader community down that, especially over the last few weeks, has been really, really top of mind.

Menendez: Yeah. I personally have always had difficulty managing my expectations around what that is going to look like and what the universe is going to bring me on the other side of it. I'm still struggling with how to give myself the grace to slow down and enjoy any of those moments without asking myself, "What's more? What's next?"

Campos: Yeah, I mean, I feel really, really similarly, especially right now with everything that's going on with "Con Pollo," it comes out next week, there's press opportunities. I'm going to be in rooms with people that I never imagined I would be in rooms with. Similar to you, I'm like, "Wow, I feel so grateful and so lucky to be here," but also in the same thought as, "I can't mess this up," because I know people like me don't get to be in rooms like this and I've made it this far, I need to keep going at all costs. I think that's where the overworking comes into play or ignoring maybe your health or your mental health or whatever to try to maintain that pace, because I think the further you move into the entertainment industry in particular, things start moving faster.

 I don't think a lot of people realize that the people on the top have support systems, full ecosystems that work with them to be able to move at that pace. I am one person, I don't have that. Not right now. Maybe in the future, who knows? It's hard to just maintain that, not only physically, but mentally, emotionally with this added layer of like, "Well, I know there's a million other people who would die for this opportunity, so I need to make the most of it regardless of what's going on maybe inside or whatnot." So yeah, that really resonates with me.

Menendez: I'm crying because of the number of times I have heard one of our guests say, "I'm going to be in a room that people like me normally don't get to be in." That's the whole point. Let's get to a point where there's so many of us in the room that you can actually just walk into the room without the pressure of being the first, the only different.

Campos: Yeah, I mean, I'm used to being the only. I've been the only in so many spaces, in high school and even in my working life, but this just feels different because you're creating, at least for me, I'm creating content stories that will live beyond me, that extend beyond me that are going to go into people's homes. I think there's something really special and intimate about a bedtime story. Now, thinking about me being a part of that, I'm like, "Okay, this is huge. This is one small step in the right direction," and, surprise, the kids lit world is not very diverse. I think the last stat I read was, and this was as of either 2020 or 2019, that only 9% of kids lit writers and illustrators are people of color. So that's not just Latinos or Latina or Latinx, everyone kind of bunched in and that there are more stories about animals than there are of kids of color.

 I'm just like, "Okay, I personally want to change that." That's, I think, one of the things that I'm really grateful for with all the projects that I've gotten to date is that they're opening doors so that in a year or two, I can hopefully write my own story that centers an experience that maybe is similar to mine or centers an experience that hasn't been shared with before. I think slowly kind of going through that, maybe I'll take some of this pressure onto myself and open that door a little bit wider. So to your point, it's not me being like, "I can't mess this up because I'm the only," it's like, "Hey, I can mess up a little bit because I'm human, but I opened the door like four inches wider and now someone else is standing next to me so they can take this one on." I think that's a really beautiful thing.

Menendez: Andrea, I thought I loved you so much, but I really love you so much. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this and showing up with such an open heart.

Campos: Thank you. Thank you. You brought me to tears.

Menendez: I mean, it would not be a Latina to Latina episode if we didn't both cry, but it also would not be a Cancer to Cancer episode if we didn't end up in tears. Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Julek and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Florence Barrau-Adams 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. And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, GoodPods, or wherever you're listening right now.

**CITATION:**

Menendez, Alicia, host. “How Illustrator Andrea Campos Is Using Art to Spread Positivity.” *Latina to Latina,* LWC Studios. November 28, 2022. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by:

