



## How O Magazine's Arianna Davis Made It, on Her Own Terms

The digital director of Oprah Magazine talks to Alicia about the maverick moves that landed her jobs in journalism. And she discusses her new book, *What Would Frida Do?* and what the icon's "Viva la vida" mantra means to her.

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**Alicia Menendez:**

A big part of this podcast is finding inspiration in the lives and journeys of other Latinas, and that is exactly what Arianna Davis does in her new book, *What Would Frida Do? A Guide to Living Boldly*. There's no doubt that Frida Kahlo is a good source for that inspiration, but Arianna is too. We talk about the risky move that helped her get her foot in the door at O Magazine, her decision to leave and then come back, and how you cultivate enduring relationships when you work with some of the most powerful women in media.

Arianna, you write, "Anyone yearning for a more creatively fulfilling life shouldn't strive to emulate or be Frida. The most impactful art is created when you tell your own story." What is the story then that you would want to tell?

**Arianna Davis:** For me, one of my goals and one of the stories that I want to tell through my career as a journalist and a writer is inspiring other women, and particularly women of color, and I think that that's my point here in drawing from Frida's life, is not to say here's a blueprint of how to live your life, but it's more, "Here's a story of a woman who lived her life boldly very far ahead of her time, and hopefully just by reading her story and getting to know her, you'll be inspired to live your own life, your own way, but boldly like Frida did."

**Menendez:** Let me ask in a different way, which is if you were telling your own story, where would you want that story to begin?

**Davis:** I think it would start with being a little girl. I grew up outside of Baltimore. My dad is Black, my mom is Puerto Rican, so I grew up biracial. I grew up in the suburbs around mostly white kids. I went to private school, and so identity for me was always a very complicated thing, especially as a kid. And I was also a really shy kid and I was the kid who always had their nose in a book, so I think my story would probably start with being a little girl and just finding such solace and such escape in the pages of a book, and that's really what I think kickstarted my love of writing and reading and storytelling.

And it would then kind of take me through this journey of wanting to be a writer, going to Penn State, and studying journalism, thinking that I had to go down the newspaper track,

because that was what was accessible at the time, versus like magazines is what I really always wanted to do, but the world of magazines was so inaccessible. It was this glamorous world that only, to be frank, women who had access, and privilege, and could pay to move to New York City, and intern, and not make much money. But it was thanks to... I was a scholarship student at Penn State and at a dinner that we had, the publisher of Seventeen Magazine spoke, and she gave this really inspiration speech, and afterwards this was either crazy or genius, but I basically followed her to the bathroom and told her I would love to break into journalism, and I would love to be in magazines, and I asked for her business card. Her name is Jayne Jamison, and once I moved to New York, I reached out. We had coffee. She was super helpful and she basically, long story short, helped me to get my foot in the door and get my resume to apply for a postgraduate internship at Oprah Magazine.

And that's really what kind of kicked off my career.

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Menendez: It is one of the boldest moves I have ever heard to follow someone into the bathroom. Because as you say, that could really go one of two ways.

Davis: It really could, and honestly, if you asked me now, like I don't know what overcame me at the time. I don't know. It wasn't something that I planned. I just remember it just kind of kicked in and then I literally was like, "I cannot let her leave this dinner without at least introducing myself and getting some face time with her or asking her for a card." And I just went for it.

Menendez: We're both sort of in love with formats, you know, for you magazines, for me working cable television, that we keep being warned are dying. How have you adjusted your career and your work accordingly?

Davis: For me, after I was at Oprah Mag for six years, and it was... I love to say that Oprah Magazine raised me. I was Gayle King's assistant for four years. It was the best possible first job that a girl could ask for in the media industry, and then going from that to then I was an editor at Oprah Mag. But I realized I really wanted to get some digital experience and also just spread my wings, so I left and went to US Weekly, and then I went to Refinery 29, and Refinery was where I really kind of honed my digital chops, and that was where I got to learn really what it was like writing for digital and the difference between writing for

a print magazine and like writing in the voice of this magazine to being able to write from my own perspective, and writing for social media, and like understanding SEO, and all of those things.

And I also got to do on camera work, and hosting, and I really realized I think during my time at Refinery that this is the future. This is where things are headed. And so, that was what really started it, and that was what eventually led me to come back to Oprah Mag to launch Oprah Magazine's website, OprahMag.com, as the digital director. So, it kind of went again, a little full circle in coming back to O, but also literally starting there at print and then coming back to launch this digital entity.

Menendez: Right. It's like Back to the Future.

Davis: So, I do think for me, it wasn't until I left and I got all this experience elsewhere that I became kind of known as this digital wunderkind, you know, after my time at Refinery, that then it was like okay, I could come back to Oprah Mag in a new light and with a new level of experience and respect, where people could say like, "Okay, she's the right person," because I know this brand, I know the magazine, but I also have the experience and the background to say like, "Here's how we can make it digital."

Menendez: What did you do that made you known inside the industry as a digital wunderkind?

Davis: I mean, I don't want to say digital wunderkind. I think that sounds very... I shouldn't have said that. But I-

Menendez: No. Live like Frida. Own it.

Davis: I would say I wouldn't necessarily say I was known in the industry, but I will say that I think one thing that I did really well was understanding the types of stories that I think millennial women, but also specifically women of color were really interested in, and I think I became really... I had a good instinct for just what does well on the internet and what people were interested in reading, and I think especially like... I wrote a lot at Refinery, a lot of personal essays, or features about topics that were specifically interesting to women of color. I think I just had a really good instinct for things that were like internetty, and voicey, and that was something.

Menendez: What was your metric? Was your metric like if I am interested in this, then I know that other women of color will be interested in this? How did you develop that sense of what it was that would really resonate with the audience?

Davis: I honestly think it was just instinct. I think it was also just as someone who just constantly is plugged in, and I'm always reading, and I'm always reading what is on the internet, and I think that I was at Refinery specifically during a time when it was I think the perspective of women of color was something that we were seeing more digitally, and it was during kind of a prime time where I was like, "I'm seeing the stories that are out there that I'm seeing get a lot of buzz that do well. I know what stories I click on. I know what stories I want to read." And so, I think I just had a good sense from literally just as also a reader and someone who just loves pop culture and media, then turning that into, "Okay, well, if I were writing a story on Beyoncé's Grammy loss, would I want to just write about Beyoncé's Grammy loss, or would I maybe want to think about how this is a signifier of a bigger problem of how Black women aren't valued compared to white women at work?"

And so, it was things like that where I was literally thinking about what I would want to read, and how I would want to take a story to the next level, versus just like the straight up news, and I think that I started to get a really sharp sense of, and that I wanted to try to bring to the Oprah Magazine audience.

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Menendez: It just really struck me as I was reading What Would Frida do that Frida never painted with the public in mind, and yet your work as a writer, as an editor, just it must by necessity be crafted with the audience in mind. So, in your current role as digital director of O, the Oprah Magazine, where you oversee all of OprahMag.com's editorial, social, video strategy, it's a huge job. How do you sort of assess each piece that you assign, that you edit, against your sense of who the audience is and what that audience wants?

Davis: One of the most important things that I think I established for our site early on was we have this imaginary reader in mind, and her name is Janet, and we talk a lot about Janet. She is probably in her early 40s. She isn't coming to us for parenting content because she's a mom, but she is probably coming to us more for an escape. She's coming to us for that live your best life content that Oprah's so known for. She's coming to us for the service and for a dose of positivity. She's coming for us for advice on how to live her best life, on how to have a better outlook on life, on maybe with a side of royals news and a little something that's gonna pick her up and make her day better.

Menendez: I think a lot and I wrote a lot in my book, The Likability Trap, about mentorship and sponsorship, and how critical mentorship and sponsorship is for women in general, but especially for women of color, and also how delicate those relationships are. So, when you have worked with someone Gayle King, when you have been in proximity to someone like Oprah, how do you maintain those relationships and how do you leverage those relationships?

Davis: It's funny because Gayle is not a fan of the word mentor, but you know, she is a huge mentor. I feel like a lot of it is just because Gayle is so good hearted, and I'm also the same age as her kids, so I think that in a way, when I was her assistant and I was like this 22-year-old who was in New York with no family, like I think that she also kind of just like noticed that and she really took me under her wing. And I think what has been key for our relationship, but also my relationships with other women who have helped me along the way, is I think just almost treating those relationships like you would a friend in realizing

that you can't just go to people when you need something. Like you said, it's really just checking in. It's paying attention to what they're doing.

If Gayle does a really big interview or something that she does that makes me proud, I reach out to her and I let her know that. Keeping that line of communication open and making sure that you're not only reaching out to them when you need something, but that you're also just showing them love and being there for them, too. And I think that that's really important, especially I think for women of color. It's just having that relationship that almost feels like familial and it's not just like a transactional thing, where it's only when one person needs something or the other. I think that that's really key.

Menendez: It's such good advice. In some ways it should not be that hard to deploy, and yet it is a lot of the nuance of maintaining those relationships that I realize is hard to teach for a lot of people, right? Like that the way we talk about mentorship and sponsorship ends up sounding really transactional, and yet what you just said is really what creates a sticky relationship. You write of writing the book, which I realize is very meta, "I imagined Frida shaking her head at the silly girl who is forcing creativity upon herself instead of letting it happen naturally." How did you sort of square that truth, which is that creativity sort of needs time and space to happen, with the realities of being up against a deadline?

Davis: I am one of those writers, I think, who does thrive best under pressure and under deadlines, like I think that I'm definitely a procrastinator. And so, I think, and I write about this in the book, I definitely had moments where I was like, "I know that I have to write 20,000 words by the end of this month, but let's go to brunch." I think for me it was remembering also, and I think a lot of celebrities and writers say this. It's like sometimes you have to live life in order to get that creativity and that inspiration.

So, there would be sometimes where I would unexpectedly just be out, whether I was like out on a walk, or I was out getting drinks with friends, or I was at the movies, or whatever, where I would unexpectedly find inspiration, or something would occur to me, or come to me in a way that was very organic and very natural. I did try to think about that and think about the fact that like Frida wasn't ever on a deadline. She was never under any specific pressure. She was just creating what came to her and what felt right and necessary to her in that moment.

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Menendez: Frida had extreme confidence. At the same time, she wasn't uncritical of herself, which I really relate to. I wonder if you do too and if so, sort of where that duality shows up in your own life?

Davis: 100%. Listen. Writing this book, I had my own doses of imposter syndrome. You know, it sounds amazing, like, "I'm the digital director for Oprah." You know, that's an accomplishment and something I'm proud of, and I know that it's pretty badass if I really think about it, and like I'm confident in my career and where I've gotten to be. But then at the same time, the idea of writing a book, and writing a book about one of the most famous women in history, and the fact that as I said, like I'm not Mexican, so there was that piece of it, and there was a lot of elements of this that had me wondering like, "Am I the right person to write this book? Should I be writing this book? What if people hate the book? People might not understand my voice. Maybe they'll think I'm a crazy person for writing about this imaginary Frida."

All those doubts and those criticisms definitely came to mind while working on this specifically, and sometimes also in my day job at Oprah Mag, it's just sometimes when the weight of it hits me that I'm 33 years old and I'm leading this amazing brand, and that's incredible and something to be proud of, and to be confident about, but sometimes there are times where I'm in meetings with people who are more than twice my age and have been in journalism for a very long time, and I can recognize that they're looking at me as the young person, or they're looking at me as like the only Brown person in the room, and I've had a lot of moments in my career being the only or the other, and that's also something that can make you doubt yourself or feel critical. But I think that in the end, I just mostly tried to just trust the journey and trust where I'm going and recognize that I think everything happens for a reason, so the fact that the opportunity to write this book came about, and that I was given this opportunity, I just had to go for it.

And if I was going to write a book about living authentically and living boldly, I had to do the same in my writing of it, and I couldn't try to write it or be someone that I wasn't because I was doubting myself, or I was worried, or had insecurities. I had to just go for it.

Menendez: My book agent said to me, and I thought this was a good piece of advice, and I saw it bore out in *What Would Frida Do*, which is it's much more interesting to read about someone who is on a journey themselves and someone who is a little bit unresolved than to read a book about someone who is a finished product. In part because it's just more honest, right? Like there's no one who's 100% fully aligned and fully baked, and how uninteresting would it be if someone was just like... had arrived at their destination. Especially at 33.

It is more interesting to be with someone in process, right? To be a person who wants to live boldly and is on your own journey to get there.

Davis: Yeah. I think that one of the reasons why I'm starting to embrace my social media presence more and lean into it more, because I realize that like what you said, I think that people enjoy the fact that, you know, they can follow along on the journey, and that they can feel a part of it, and I try to be as authentic as possible and be honest. I try my best to tell my story and say like, "Listen, I'm digital director for Oprah Mag, but there was times when I was an intern making minimum wage, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch while the glamorous girls in their high heels were going to get sushi for lunch." Or whatever. Just remembering those moments where I was just like, "I'm never gonna make it in this industry."

Or I like to talk as much as possible about the many noes that I got. There was this dream job that I went for that I made it to the final edit test phase of, and I was like, "This is it! I'm getting it." And I didn't get it. And I'm pretty frank about my time at US Weekly. I did not... I had a pretty negative experience there and I came and left in 10 months, and that was hard after being at the dream job of Oprah Mag, and loving it so much, and having grown up there, and then taking this risk and leaving, and then going to a place where I immediately realized on day one this was not the right fit. And trying to navigate that, and it was rough.

Menendez: How did you realize that? Like what was it that happened that made it clear to you?

Davis: It was just I think a feeling of realizing I'm a really big energy and vibes person, and I think the one thing that I've really realized from that experience is who you work with is so important, and I think that the people who work at a place really... At least in media, I will say. I think the people who work in a place can really represent what that outlet and that publication is all about, and I think that's why I loved my time at Oprah Mag so much, because every single person who works at Oprah Mag really embodies that kind of spirit of like living their best life, and really is like a positive person, and it feels right for the publication. Refinery, it was all like young millennial women who just really wanted to empower people. And then I think at US Weekly, it did almost feel like it fit in that it was a lot of kind of... I don't want to talk badly about them, but I will just say there was just an energy there that I felt like was not a fit for my spirit, and who I was, and what kind of storyteller I wanted to be, and I realized that pretty early on.

So, I say all that to say that I think that for me, I try to be as open as possible with those things and just make people realize like yes, when I tell my story of, "I started as an intern and now I'm the digital director, and I'm only 33," like it sounds amazing and it sounds great, and it is, but there also were a lot of down moments. There were a lot of obstacles along the way. And so, I think that that's part of what... Going back to your point of following the journey, I think is so interesting, because it's also like I don't know how my journey's gonna end and nobody else does, but I think that's part of what makes it interesting.

Menendez: You write in your dedication to What Would Frida Do? "To Frida Kahlo, who has taught me the most important lesson of all, Viva la Vida." What has that come to mean to you?

Davis: I mean, that I think of everything has really stuck with me the most during this pandemic in that Frida, on the last painting that she painted not long before she died, it was a painting of... a really vibrant painting of watermelons, and she wrote at the bottom of it, "Viva la Vida," and that was kind of her mantra, and this was someone who she had just had her leg amputated, she was literally in pain 24/7. Her husband had cheated on her with her sister not that many years before. It was looking like her days were numbered. And yet still, through all those things that she had gone through, her last message to the world was Viva la Vida. And to me, that was just so inspiring, because it's just like no matter what, on the days during this pandemic when I'm like, "I'm just never gonna leave the house again. It's just..."

I get very... You know, I get very... I can have a very negative outlook, or I can get down on myself, or I can be like just thinking about all the negative things and just feeling like we're all just gonna be trapped in our houses forever and just going into this spiral of doom. But then I do think about Frida and it's like this was a woman who would just spend months at

a time in bed, and didn't know if she could ever walk again, didn't know if she was gonna die the next day, didn't know if her husband really loved her or not. There was just so many different things and when I think about the fact that through all of that, she was still able to channel this positive message of just like live your life. Life is what's most important and you only get one of it is what I kind of take from that. It just reminds me that no matter how bad things get or how bad of a day I'm having, I can also channel that same energy if Frida could.

Menendez: I want to ask you one more question, because you said something very early on about growing up and being half Puerto Rican, half Black, growing up in the burbs, going to private school. It was predominantly white. You said identity was always complicated. Was there a moment where it became uncomplicated?

Davis: To be completely honest with you, I think I've only really felt less complicated about my identity maybe in the last two years, like in my... now that I'm in my early 30s. I grew up... Growing up in a place where being other, like being non-white was just like that was in itself not the norm, but then it was like if anything, it was Black and white. There weren't very many Latinos in Maryland, or at least the part of Maryland where I'm from, Ellicott City outside of Baltimore. So, you know, there was a lot of jokes. My Black friends would say, "Oh, okay, so you're Mexican, right?" And I'm like, "No, I'm Puerto Rican. I'm Black and Puerto Rican."

They're like, "Yeah, same thing." Or they would be like, "You talk like a white girl. You're not even really Black." Then my Latino family would make fun of me because I don't speak great Spanish, or they would... There would always be whispers, because there was a lot of drama when my parents got married about the fact that my mom married a Black man. That was always kind of like the secret thing that was in my family. And so, all of those things affect you when you're growing up, and especially when you're a kid and all you want more than anything is to just fit in, to have friends, and the kids at school would tease me about my hair. All of those are things that stick with you even as an adult, and even I think in my 20s, and trying to find my way, and there were times where I would find that people that I thought were even my friends as an adult would question my identity or would be like, "Well, since you're not really a Black girl." Or they would say things like that, where I would just be like, "Wow."

You know, and so it's something that I think unless... I think a lot of people, unless you did grow up with some type of duality, it's not necessarily always easy for people to understand, and I think for me, even sometimes when people say like, "What side do you identify with more?" And I'm like, "Both." I feel like if I pick one or the other, that's like picking one parent over the other. Like I'm a Black woman. I'm very proud to be a Black woman. I'm also very proud to be a Puerto Rican woman. You know, this is who I am, and I think that I can now really stand firmly in that and stand firmly in my identity, and open up about my struggles with that and how that journey has come along now, because I'm at a point in my life where I feel more confident in myself, but it did... It took a very long time.

There's a lot of pieces that go into it. Embracing my hair, embracing how I look, embracing how I speak. All of those are things that are part of the journey, so I think that it's still complicated. It probably will always be complicated. But I'm at a point now in my life where it's a little less uncomplicated. So, all of that is things that I've carried inside of me and also



carried I think into rooms that I've walked into in my career, where I feel like I have to kind of explain and make things clear, or help people understand that duality of who I am.

Menendez: Arianna, thank you so much for doing this, for taking the time.

Davis: Of course. This was such a great conversation. I could talk to you all day. You were great.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com) and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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