



What Gracie Mercedes Needed to Give Up to Level Up

The star of NBC's Grand Crew built multiple careers as a style blogger, filmmaker and actor in tandem, but as she approached her 40th birthday, she knew it was time to make some hard choices. Gracie shares the mental shifts that set her up for professional success and what she, a serial monogamist, learned by being alone.

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- Alicia Menendez: I've been following Gracie Mercedes on social for years, and it always seemed clear to me that while she was enjoying success as a style blogger, what she really wanted was to act and tell stories.
- So, when Gracie shared that she'd been named a series regular on NBC's Grand Crew, I had all the feelings you'd have after watching a close friend fight for something for years and then, actually get it.
- Gracie and I talk about her no-drama divorce and what she's learned by being alone, and how committing to what she really wanted and shifting her focus to the work of creating rather than fixed outcomes changed everything.
- Gracie, I have wanted to have you on the podcast for so long. Thank you so much for being here.
- Gracie Mercedes: Oh, thank you. Thank you for having me. This is fun.
- Menendez: I want to start with the premise of your podcast, Not Blank Enough. You don't decide to host a podcast with that title unless throughout your life you have been told you are not something enough, and that's something probably changes along the way. So, growing up in New York City, what was the thing you were not enough?
- Mercedes: Oh, God. I was not Latina enough. I was not Black enough. I felt like I was not smart enough. I think I didn't come into my own or get any confidence in who I was until... I think it started maybe in college but it didn't fully develop till my mid to late 20s.
- Menendez: Because growing up with your mom, your grandmother, your aunt, Dominican, they're just like, "You're Dominican." That's it. That's the story. But it's apparent to you that there's more-
- Mercedes: To that story.
- Menendez: ... to that story. But it's not really until... I think it's just interesting that it's not really until college that you begin to unpack that Latinidad is not a race.
- Mercedes: Yeah. It was because my roommate, who's still one of my best friends, Jasmine Paris, she's African American, she's Black. She said to me, you're Black. And I was like, "What do you mean? I'm Dominican?" And it's because in the community, in Latin community especially, I think it's changing now, but back then, we identify as our ethnicity. And because of racism, colorism, white supremacy, we don't want to be associated with blackness or African American. And we're taught that darker skin is not as good as lighter skin, to stay out of the sun, to marry a white person or a lighter person.

My grandmother was light-skinned Dominican with straight wavy hair, and she had two kids with a very dark-skinned Dominican. In Dominican Republic, her parents disowned her for being with this darker-skinned man. Same country, same ethnicity of people, but there is that racism that exists. And then, she had two daughters that look like me. My mom and my dad are both Afro-Latino and so, I grew up with Black parents but I was always told or taught we're Dominican and I am very much black, and I am very much Latina. But back then I didn't know that, and we weren't taught that.

Menendez: I imagine you on that dorm room floor at NYU, piecing all these puzzles together.

And I would argue that in the Venn diagram of professions, there is big overlap between the theater kids and the broadcast journalism kids. So, as a failed theater kid who now does broadcast journalism, I love that you majored in broadcast journalism and then, crossed the chasm over into acting. I mean, do you think that that was a thing you were telling yourself because you wanted safety, because you wanted security, because pursuing something that was truly-

Mercedes: Yeah, 100%. I mean, both my mom and my stepdad... My mom remarried when I was about 12, and my stepdad and my mom both worked in finance. And I very much thought I was going to work in business finance, which is crazy because I hate numbers. I hate business. I hate any of that stuff. And luckily, by the grace of God, I didn't get into the business school at NYU. And then, I got into the university as a whole and did a liberal arts program first and then, transferred to college of arts and science for broadcast journalism. And that was 1000% my way of being like, "I'll be in front of the camera, but this is a real job." And I was doing plays all the time. And my roommate Jasmine, she was in Tisch for acting and directing, and so, her friends were all in Tisch and all theater people.

I did a bunch of plays at NYU that were not part of the Tisch program just like other programs there. And there was just a voice inside of me that was like, "You're first generation. You're the first to go to college. You have to get a real job." And creative arts didn't ever seem an actual possibility. It just felt like a dream or a fantasy, and it didn't come from my mom. My mom was actually very supportive in anything I wanted to do. When I told her I was quitting my job at MTV to move to LA to be an actress and a writer, she was 100% supportive. It was just a pressure I was putting on to myself.

Menendez: What did it require of you to begin to pull out of producing at MTV, move to LA and start with, it's basically like a second life?

Mercedes: It was a combo of things. So, I strictly wanted to do news, and thought I would be an anchor or reporter. Got a job at ABC News right out of college. I literally started working two weeks after college and quickly realized this wasn't for me. I'm too empathetic. I'm too sensitive. I was depressed every night and everyone I was working with, they were so in it and in that world and in that news world. And I was like, "These are not my people." And so I had interned at MTV in college. So, I asked them, I'm like, "Can I come back? Can I get a job?" But everything, there was freelance, so they're like, "Yeah, we can put you on this job for the next two weeks and then, if there's another job after, sure." So, I thought, well, at least entertainment news is lighter and it's fun and it's music and acting. Being in that world and surrounded by Beyonce and Jay-Z and the VJs, I was like, "Ugh, I love what these people are doing. I want to be a creative person. I want to work in the arts."

I had been there for about four years and moved up in the ranks from a PA to an associate producer to a producer, and one of the executive producers of TRL brought me into his office and was like, "We are talking to a few people about basically grooming us to take

over the show at some point," because he was going to move on and asked me if I was interested. And I was like, "Oh, you know what? Let me think about it." And I, at that moment just decided I didn't want to be on that path, and I wanted to actually pursue this thing that was inside of me from childhood. I mean, I was the kid in the house making my mom and my aunt watch me dance to Janet Jackson and Madonna and perform around the house. I was always that kid, and so, I knew it was in me. I just was afraid to take that leap. So, yeah, in my late 20s, I moved to Los Angeles to pursue acting and writing.

Menendez: You have an interesting side note to that though, which is in the midst of that, you stumble into styling and becoming a styling. And I think that there are a lot of our listeners who in some ways will have found you at that point, who almost know you more for your styling and for your blogging than they do current day as an actress who has a sitcom on broadcast television.

Mercedes: I started working in restaurants and bars in New York when I was 16. So, I was always doing that hustle on the side. I was doing it. Even when I worked at MTV, I would take shifts on the weekend just for the money because I loved to travel when I was younger. So, by the time I got to Los Angeles and had to wait tables for my living, I was spent. I didn't want to do it anymore. And I did it for a couple years here, and I was just like, "I can't keep doing this."

I did get lucky that I did book commercials right away. I was doing pretty well booking commercials and doing on-air hosting gigs, which is where that broadcast journalism degree paid off. It was the on-camera hosting that segued into styling because my agent at the time was host now, can't just be people who can talk on camera, you have to have a niche. What's your niche? And I had been styling on the side just because a friend of mine who was a stylist was like, "Do you want to assist on some shoots?" And that turned into a gig.

So, I told my agent, I was like, "Well, I style. I guess, I can be a style host or a fashion host." And it just kind of snowballed. That turned into me suddenly being considered as on camera style expert. I started my blog and then, that became a whole thing on its own. And I just started making really good money from blogging and Instagram posts. But at a certain point, it took over my life. And at a certain point, I had to be like, "Did I come here to be a blogger, or did I come here to be an actress and a writer?"

And so, I pulled away from all that slowly, and it was hard. There were three years there where I was making a lot of money doing this job and was able to buy a house with my ex-husband and go on trips and have this financial freedom. But I was missing out on auditions. I wasn't really in class. I wasn't really making my own stuff. And so, I literally was like, "I'm not doing this anymore." I started archiving thousands of photos on my Instagram page, and I started following writers and directors and actors I admire, and just started immersing myself in the world of Hollywood and making films and making... I started making short films and I started doing web series and just really just left that behind.

Menendez: And I remember when you were deep into your film, I recognized that it felt like a mission statement. It was saying, "I have been creating this content for you for free. You're welcome." But now, I'm going to invest my time and energy into a project that actually is going to live beyond the grid."

Mercedes: It really is a shift to not only... It seems like a silly thing to go through your Instagram feed and be like, "who do I want to follow and who do I want to unfollow?" But if you're on that phone one, two, however many hours a day and you're getting that input all day long, it is

important. So, to me, it was important to follow people like Gloria Calderone Collette or Daniel Ceracho or actresses that I admire to see what they're doing, what they're putting out in the world, what are they working on. And that for me was inspiration. And then, in turn, that inspired me to tell my story and do what I wanted to do. And there was also a shift in. I think as actors, a lot of times we worry so much about who our agents are and what auditions were going to get.

And I did that for years. And I ended up with a terrible agent who I did not like and not going out on substantial auditions. And it wasn't until I was like, you know what? This is not really going the way I want it to go right now. I'm going to focus on making my own stuff. It was when I started writing, it was when I started making short films. It was when I started doing a web series that I started meeting more people in this world who were doing great things. And in turn, one thing just organically led into the other.

I got my first writing job on an NBC show called Perfect Harmony because the showrunner was a friend of a friend. And because I had been putting on Instagram that I'm writing and doing this, she was like, "Hey, I'm staffing my room. Do you have a sample?" And I happened to have a sample. I had written a pilot earlier that year, and I sent it to her, and it was that job that led to CA coming to me. They saw all my short films. They saw that I write. They saw that I direct. They saw that I act. And so, they came to me and was like, "We want to rep you across the board."

So, I literally within a year went from this crappy agent who wasn't getting me anything and saying horrible things to me to a conference room with five agents at CAA being like, "What do you want to do with your career?"

Menendez: You have stuck with this when it would've been much easier to opt out at a lot of points, and I wonder what the closest you ever came to walking away was.

Mercedes: I never came close to walking away. I definitely have moments where I'm like, "Will this work? Am I ever going to make a living doing this?" And it's funny. The last time I had that thought was literally right before I got the Grand Crew audition. I love that. It took me 13 years to get my first series regular. If you really think about from the moment I got to Los Angeles and started pursuing this to the moment I booked Grand Crew, I was frustrated because I got with CA in December of 2019 and had my first real pilot season in January of 2020, and it was going really well until the whole world shut down in March of 2020. So, then, everything became self taping, and I wasn't getting any callbacks. I was getting some good feedback, but I wasn't really getting very far.

And I remember calling a friend of mine who has the same agent as me, and she's been doing this a little longer than me, and I was just like, "I've had 30 auditions. What's going to... When am I going to get a back or something?" And she goes, "Grasie, 30 is not a lot, first of all." And she's like, "It's sometimes 600 of auditions." And she's like, "Just keep doing the work. It'll come. It'll come."

I started thinking, "Okay, what can I do to be better at my auditions?" Maybe I need to really work it through with someone before I get in front of the camera. And so, I started doing that. And it's funny, the audition before Grand Cruise audition, I was like, "You know what? It worked." Working this out before I tape that's working for me. The next audition, I'm going to do it even more, and I'm really going to get it. And then, I got the Grand Crew audition breakdown, and I read the role of Fay and I was like, "Oh, my God, this is me. We had so many similarities," and I just felt really confident about going into that audition and taping that audition. And then, I was lucky enough two weeks later to book the job.

Menendez: You referenced the extent to which you identified with Fay, your character on Grand Crew. And I imagine that one of the many ways is THE recently divorced piece of it, which is both part of the character, part of your lived experience, and me, you're serial monogamous, get married or marry with that person for a pretty long time. And I got to say in retelling the story, which you've retold many times, so I'm not going to ask you to retell it. The thing that I am struck by is the fact that you get out and then, you actually manage not to jump right back into a relationship, which is really hard for a serial monogamous to break that habit.

Mercedes: I know. It's been two years since my ex-husband and I separated. I was really conscious of not jumping into something right away because I have always been a serial monogamous, and I was with him for almost 14 years, and it was a clean break. We're still friends, and so, it wasn't like an ugly thing. It was something that was very thought out over three or four years before we actually split. And so, that helped, I think, the transition. But you'll see in season two, there's an episode about Fay dating after being divorced, and it is weird. It's weird to get back out there, at least the experience I had was I was dating these guys and they assume you want to be in a relationship. And I'm like, "No, I just want to have fun. I just want to have fun for a little bit and see what that feels like."

Menendez: It seems particularly relevant to me, given that the inciting moment behind this divorce is you sitting in therapy and your therapist saying to you, "What do you want?" And you realizing, "I want to be alone." And I wonder for someone who basically went through all your formative years not alone, what it is you have learned about yourself from being alone.

Mercedes: So much. I mean, I think I was learning stuff before we split, and I think that was actually why I realized I needed to split. I don't see our relationship as a failure. I don't see our marriage as a failure. I think we were together in the time we were supposed to be together. We knew each other from our early 20s. We got together in our late 20s. We stayed together until our 40s.

I outgrew the relationship because I started discovering more about myself. I started as discovering more about what I need in a partner, what I want in a partner, who I am as a person. There was a lot of self-discovery and identity. A lot of questioning of why I ended up with a white guy. What was that about? Was that something that was bestowed upon me by my family or by my culture, and what we were talking about earlier? This colorism thing that has loomed over me my whole life. And not to say I won't ever fall in love with a white person, and I don't think there's anything wrong with interracial relationships, but for me, it was just, I felt like there was something I was denying in myself. And all this self-discovery just happened over the last... Honestly, I think it was around the time I was turning about to turn 40, and I was just like, "Something really happens in your brain when you're about to turn 40." You're just like, "Wow."

Menendez: I'm turning 40 this year, so I feel this so hard.

Mercedes: Yeah, it's like it's a real thing. It's like, what do you want for the rest of your life, the second half of your life? What do you want? What's making you happy? What's not making you happy? And it's funny because Fay was recently divorced, and she's figuring out her life, and she moved to LA from New York because of her husband, and now, she's in season two, questioning everything and dating and figuring out what she wants to do with her life and her career. And so, I'm like, "Yeah, this is me."

Menendez: You're born Grecia Maria Mercedes-Garcia.

Mercedes: Grecia, yeah.

Menendez: I wonder what about that girl who's different than Gracie Mercedes, which is a package. What about that girl you bring into the rooms you go into?

Mercedes: Grecia and Maria are my two grandmothers. I'm named after my two grandmothers. Grecia was my mom's mom. Maria is my dad's mom. And the reason why I became Gracie was simply because for the first five years of my life, my mom and my grandmother and I lived together. And so, they were calling my grandmother Grecia. And so, they were started just calling me Gracie for sure, and so that stuck.

But yeah, I feel like I bring that. I feel like it's in me. There are two things that I feel like are in me and I can never hide. And that's one being Dominican and two, being a New Yorker. I think I could live in LA forever and ever. I can play whatever parts I play. I think I will always at the core and in my heart, be a Latina, Dominican American from New York City, and I think that brings something to who I am and the characters I play that can't be like imitated. I think it's just part of my DNA and who I am.

Menendez: Gracie, thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Mercedes: Thank you.

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, and remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Good Pods 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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