



Why Designer Jen Zeano Is Building a Queer Lifestyle Brand in South Texas

Jen, who is behind empowering T-shirt collections like the pink and red “Latina Power” line, started out hand-drawing on coffee mugs while working at a Best Buy. She speaks about what it was like launching a design company from her living room, and how being in the Rio Grande Valley fuels her sense of community and inspires JZD’s colorful, mantra-infused tees.

Alicia Menendez:

I originally started following Jen Zeano because of her colorful T-shirts and life affirming mantras, specifically her bright pink Latina power shirt which kept popping up in my Instagram feed. We also recently collaborated on a product together, a Latina to Latina T-shirt. We're going to have more on that a little later in the episode.

And the process of working with Jen gave me an inside look into how much care and thought she puts into each product, how she is constantly keeping her consumer and her community front of mind. And so I wanted to talk with her about how she has built her small business by betting on herself, the place she comes from, and the community she loves.

Hi Jen, thank you so much for doing this.

Jen Zeano: Thank you so much for having me.

Menendez: Jen, you have built and run a brand that is very proudly Latina and very proudly queer. If I had told teenage Jen that that was going to be the case, she was going to run a company that was very associated with celebrating those two identities, what would she have said to me?

Zeano: That you were crazy. I was a completely different person and I was struggling with both of those identities I think. I mean, I went through a phase where I didn't want, I hated the first day of school. For example, because they always ask you, "Tell us where you were born and what you did this summer", and I was always the one that had the "Well, I was born in Mexico and I didn't go anywhere this summer".

And it's funny, because when I was a kid we moved from Matamoros to Brownsville and I went into first grade here. And I hated it. I hated school, I didn't speak English. And I hated it. And I would cry every single morning. And I would scream at my mom, "Quiero regresar a mi abuela." I just wanted to go back with my grandma in Matamoros. I could not adjust to being here.

And then as I got older it was the opposite, I didn't want to go back to Matamoros. I just wanted to be here with my friends.

And then I came out gay when I was 18. So I was fairly young. And all of a sudden, so many things in my life made sense that I wasn't understanding as they were happening.

Menendez: Like what?

Zeano: Like being uncomfortable around girls. I was in the cheer team and being like, oh, I used to think, "I want to be like them," or "I want to dress like them". And it's like, no, it was different. Or like my first crush ever was Thalia, probably shouldn't have been Thalia. I know.

Menendez: So, so good.

Zeano: All of a sudden, like all of these things that I didn't understand were making sense to me. So it's been a journey, and had you told me that I probably wouldn't have believed you.

Menendez: Is there a clear turning point on the Latina identity piece of it where it flipped for you?

Zeano: It was when I, as I started getting older and I started reconnecting and understanding and almost craving those stories from my, my mom's childhood and how she grew up. And I saw myself turning into my mom, but I was proud of it. And I was like, wow, I understand why my mom would tell me this or, when my mom would say things like [foreign language], they make sense now. And all of a sudden, I just wanted to know more and more, and I want it to really reconnect with that.

And then in 2016, with the presidential elections, it was, all of a sudden it was like, I was meant to be carrying this message. And at the time Vero my partner was working in immigration. And so she was helping the kiddos from Guatemala and El Salvador to find ways to stay here in the U.S. so she was heavily right in the middle of it. And it, it just happened. I don't really know how, but it just kind of developed and it felt so normal. Like I should have, it was meant for me to get to that point.

Menendez: In 2014, you and Vero get married.

Zeano: Yes.

Menendez: You start the original incarnation of a company, no money. You say you had no furniture in your apartment.

Zeano: Nothing.

Menendez: What was motivating you?

Zeano: You know, in 2014, we literally, I'm not kidding when I say we had no money. We had nothing. Vero came out in 2014 and her parents did not take it well. So she got kicked out of her home and we were living in this tiny one bedroom apartment. And it was one of those situations where, what else can happen? Like where here, it's only up from here. I'm one of those people that always thinks of the worst case scenario. Then I'm like, okay, if I can figure out what to do in the worst case scenario, then we can only go up. And so for me, I would tell Vero, worst case scenario, we have to move in with my parents and it'll be fine. Right? Like, we'll just build up from there. That was the worst case scenario. And that was just like the motivation. Like, we can only go up from here. It's not going to get, we already don't have anything. So I was like, if not now, when, so we just kind of went for it.

Menendez: Okay. But most people, when they say, if not now, when? It isn't like let's become silk screeners and build a T-shirt line. I mean, how did you make that connection?

Zeano: We actually didn't start making T-shirts. I was hand drawing on coffee mugs. That's what I would do. I would get home from work and I would just hand draw on coffee mugs and sell them on like Facebook and Etsy and friends and family. We did that for a little bit. And at the time I was also working retail, I used to work at Best Buy. And then I realized if I want to do this, I can't just be hand drawing on coffee mugs. Like, it's just me and I can only draw so many mugs.

Menendez: Right. you'll never be able to sell that many.

Zeano: Yeah. So it was like a little switch that went off and I was like, well, let's make T-shirts, let's see what happens. And, we were not doing our own screen printing at the time, because obviously we could not afford to buy all the machinery that it takes. So we went to a local screen printer in our town and we were like, what is the minimum that I can bring you? And I think he was set at the time I think he said like 12 pieces. That's what we started with 12 pieces.

Menendez: What were they?

Zeano: It was actually the, "my heart goes Bidi, Bidi, Bom, Bom". We got 12 of them. Then I posted them on Etsy and I promoted them like crazy. I was like, somebody has to buy these 12 T-shirts. And then as we were selling, we were taking that money and then just restocking again and again, 12 at a time, until we worked our way up to 15 at a time. Eventually we had enough profit to create another design.

Menendez: Yeah, because you say it was by no means an overnight success.

Zeano: No, not at all. I mean, we've been doing this for over five years.

Menendez: Do you see the turning point as the pink Latina power shirt? Or do you see the turning point as the rise of Instagram?

Zeano: I think it was a combination. Latina power is definitely the shirt that made us rethink the business. And when we launched Latina power and we realized how people were reacting to it, that's when we were like, this is what we're meant to be doing. We're supposed to be a Latina empowerment brand. And it was both a let's follow what our customers want and I've never been happier doing something. We just went with it.

Menendez: Hmm...

Zeano: We would release T-shirts that were in English and then in Spanish to see what would perform better. And Spanish shirts always, always performed better, even today they just do better. And so, I think it was definitely a combination because social media is very, very important to our brand. I mean, a lot of our customers come from Instagram and they find us through Instagram and now through TIK TOK and Twitter and Facebook. But even to this day, I think Instagram is the one that drives the most traffic for us.

Menendez: What Happened with the Latina power shirt? Do you remember the moment when you said, okay, this is taking off.

Zeano: They sold much faster than anything else I had done up to that point. And not only were they selling, but people were talking about it. And that was like a turning point because I was like, people actually want to talk about this. They want to tell their friends about it. They want this sense of community and they're finding it through this T-shirt and, and that was like a turning point for us. I was like, this is how we build a community of like-minded people that have our same values our same missions.

Menendez: Tell me when you knew you had enough capital and wanted to make the investment into bringing your printing operation in house? Because that is a big investment.

Zeano: When we started seeing that T-shirts were what was selling for us and what people were, were responding to. We automatically started thinking in three years from now, where are we going to be at? It got to the point where our minimums are no longer, just 12 T-shirts right. We were doing a 50, 60, a hundred T-shirts at a time. At this time, we were still running the business from our apartment. So we didn't really have space for it, but my parents kept pushing us and they were like, just do it. Like we can empty out your

childhood bedroom and put it in there. Then the pandemic started and everything shut down and we couldn't get to our screen printer anymore. So we were kind of forced to learn really fast. We actually moved it from my parents' house into our living room. It was chaos like madness.

And eventually this year I was like, we, we have tapped out. We cannot grow anymore because there's no space for us to grow here. There were T-shirts everywhere. And then the machinery is, its big and you'd go to bed and you have the T-shirts like staring at you. Like you haven't printed me yet. So this year it was, again, one of those things where you would just kind of bet on ourselves and said, if not now, when? And we risked it and we were like, let's get a warehouse space and see what happens. But I genuinely feel like getting the space just opened us up for more opportunities.

Menendez: Did you use your own capital to rent the space or did you tap into loans to do it?

Zeano: No. So far we are a hundred percent bootstrapped. We haven't gotten any loans. We did get a grant from our city. Our city was doing small business grants, but other than that, everything has been just bootstrapping and taking the profits and just reinvesting them back into the business.

Menendez: It's funny thinking about the fact that when you were seven and you immigrated from Mexico, you had that sort of visceral experience of hating living in the United States, how that flips.

Zeano: Mm Hmm.

Menendez: And now you've built a business in the Rio Grande valley. Talk to me about the decision to build the business at home rather than to build the business anywhere else.

Zeano: For me, being here in Brownsville is it's literally one of the biggest inspirations for the brand because we live in, I think it's like 96% Latino community. And our culture is everywhere, everywhere. Our food or music, everybody here speaks Spanish. It just influences so heavily everything that I do for the brand. And when I was younger, people would always tell me, if you want to make it, you'll have to leave Brownsville. Because we're a smaller town or a smaller city. And everybody would tell me, there's so much potential if you leave, if you stay here, you're never really going to make it. And then when the business started to grow, people would tell me, you have to be in California. Like if you really want to keep growing your business and you want to scale more than you have to get out of you, you have to go places where, where you'll be able to scale.

And I would still be like, no, it's okay. Like, I'm going to figure it out here. I don't mind if it's a little bit harder, but I just feel like the brand would not be the same if I was elsewhere because this city is a huge inspiration for me and my family here is a huge inspiration for the brand. And I mean, we're literally five minutes away from Matamoros. So whenever I

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want, I could just go over well, pre pandemic go over and literally be in the center of my home of where I was born of everything that makes me who I am. So I just don't see myself ever leaving. And I don't see this brand being the same if I were elsewhere, I think it would look completely different.

Menendez: I know that feeling. RGV needs things like this, right?

Zeano: Yeah

Menendez: Like, in as much as you need the town to sort of keep the vision, to keep the creative sensibility. I also think we talk a lot about how Texas is growing and changing.

Zeano: Yeah.

Menendez: So often maybe we talk about the border only through the lens of keeping people out who gets to come and who doesn't.

Zeano: Mm Hmm.

Menendez: And if we were in a different moment, we'd be talking about the border as a place where you could have an exchange of ideas and have an exchange of commerce.

Zeano: Yeah.

Menendez: The border is in so many ways, a vibrant place

Zeano: It is. It's beautiful too.

Menendez: And if you live in any other part of the country, you might not know that.

Zeano: Mm hmm. It's true. I mean, this is a completely different lifestyle that we have here. I think we're very, very lucky. It's very sad because I, when I went to high school, my teachers would literally tell me, do not go to college here because we have a University here. And they would literally tell us, you have to apply to UT Austin. You have to go to Texas A&M at least go to UTSA, because if you stay here, you're never going to make it. You're never going to be anything. And this was teachers telling you this at the age of 16, 17, when you're super impressionable.

Now I wish teachers, and even just like everybody in general would just be like, there's so much here. And if we nurture the talent that we have here, the RGV would be even more amazing instead of pushing our talent out, because it's like, oh, you have so much

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potential. You should go and be this elsewhere. And instead of just being like there's potential, so I'm keeping you, and I'm going to nurture you. And I'm really going to make sure that you stay here and you, you share your gift with the locals here. So for me, it's just super important. I love to travel, but I love coming home.

Menendez: So, now that you're out of the apartment, now that you're not surrounded by T-shirts in your bedroom printing equipment in your living room, and you've opened up all this space, what do you want that space to be for? What do you envision as the future of your company?

Zeano: Growth so much growth right now we have a manual press and I'll kind of go a little bit into the manual press. You like physically have to screen print. And then there's an automatic press that you just put the t-shirts and screen prints themselves. And I really hope that we can make that investment next to kind of allow us to take on more projects and be able to have partnerships with more brands and hopefully open the door for us to do retail someday. I would love to see our products at like Target or Nordstrom, right? And now that we have the space, we can take those projects on. We will be able to do it instead of, being in our apartment and be like, we can do more than a hundred shirts. So I really hope that this opens the door for, for opportunities like that.

Menendez: We've interviewed so many small business owners who have had their products on the shelves of these exact stores. So I feel like this is good. We're going to put out into the universe, manifest it.

Zeano: Yes!

Menendez: Jen, what did I miss?

Zeano: I don't think anything. I think this was, this was great. I've loved chatting with you and telling you about my grandmas and my town and my parents, the things that are most important to me.

Menendez: I loved hearing about it. Thank you so much.

Zeano: Thank you.

Menendez: I was really struck during this conversation with Jen, by a lot of things, the power of starting small and learning from your consumer. The bravery and faith it takes to create the space for new opportunities to emerge. And the way a sense of place for Jen that is South Texas can play in who you are and what it is you build. Would Jen Zeano Designs be Jen Zeano Designs if it were based anywhere other than the Rio Grande Valley? I mean, I am

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so excited to be working with Jen and the whole J Z D team to bring you our Latina to Latina t-shirt it is perfect for tucking into a pair of jeans. You know, I love a half tuck and it is so comfortable that you will want to wear it as often as you can wash it.

Or at least that is the case for me, which is good. Cause I have a few of Jen's t-shirts so I can at least rotate them through for you, our beloved listeners, you can use a special code Latina to Latina for free shipping through September 2021 and go to Jen Zeano Designs that is J E N Z E A N O designs.com. Pick up a Latina to Latina tee for you, for your friend who you listen with and support to Latina owned businesses in one fell swoop, and be sure to send us pictures of yourself in the tee tag us on Instagram. We can not wait to see you in it, and we can't wait to feature you on our feed.

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