



## How Ambassador Julissa Reynoso Learned to Talk Less and Listen More

She has a resume like none other: law firm partner, White House Chief of Staff to First Lady Dr. Jill Biden, US Ambassador (twice!). Ambassador Reynoso joins the podcast from her current post in Spain and shares how she's navigated a unique career between the public and private sectors, and the life-changing lesson she learned by watching Dr. Biden.

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**Alicia Menendez:** So often I talk with Latinas who are ready to make a pivot in their careers, but they see it as a clear end and a clear beginning. It's why I'm fascinated by the fluidity of Ambassador Julissa Reynoso's trajectory from big law, to the State Department, to her first ambassadorship at just 36 years old, back to a law firm, then to the White House, as chief of staff to First Lady, Dr. Jill Biden, and now as the US Ambassador to Spain. Julissa has moved back and forth seamlessly through worlds, which makes sense. She's been doing that since she was a seven-year-old kid who moved from the Dominican Republic to the Bronx. Julissa is an expert at learning unspoken rules. Now she's using those skills in the service of this country. The time when the stakes could not be higher. Talk about how showing up over and over changed the course of her professional life. The big lesson she learned from Dr. Biden and how a natural born judge learns to be a diplomat. Thank you so much for doing this.

**Julissa Reynoso:** Thank you, Alicia, for inviting me and having me be part of this dialogue.

**Menendez:** You're born in the DR. Your parents actually come to New York before you do, and then your mom petitions for you.

**Reynoso:** Correct, yes.

**Menendez:** What is your earliest memory of the United States?

**Reynoso:** Oof. Well, technically being at the consulate in the Santo Domingo, trying to get the visa to get to travel to the United States for the first time. I was, I think about six years old when I was sitting there, standing there. I grew up in a very rural part of the Dominican Republic in the mountains. We did not have access to running water or electricity. My first experience in school was in this village school where we were all in one big room irrespective of age. So it was very different in the Bronx. When I got there, I was about seven, the heart of urban life in America in the early '80s, where you had a lot of tough things going on in the country, and a lot of those tough things were manifested in their rawest form in New York City during that time. So it was a world of extremes.

**Menendez:** Were you the diplomat in your family?

**Reynoso:** I think it was more the judge. I was more the lawyer. I was always defending a case. I'm still the lawyer. I don't know how much of a diplomat I am, but I definitely always, since I can remember, I have had the lawyer head and as a kid I was always making a case, or defending a cause, or fighting some powerful thing or person.

Menendez: You went to Harvard a few years before I did, but I think it's fair to say that students like you are pretty anomalous. First gen kids who grew up in an urban center and find themselves at that type of institution who are given that opportunity. There's the workload of college, and then there are the social norms of a predominantly white institution. You had to learn, as you put it, how to navigate relationships that had different codes of conduct. Can you give me an example?

Reynoso: Because I was an immigrant. Once an immigrant, always an immigrant. You're new from the beginning. You're brought to a different city. You got to figure out the codes of the United States, the community in the Bronx, the things that were there before you showed up, even a different language. So going to Harvard, there were also codes that I had to sort out that were new to me. So my trajectory as an immigrant and as a new kid in New York City were things I learned early that I think there were skills that have helped me along the way, including as a new student at Harvard and beyond.

Menendez: You have what I think is going to be a pretty familiar trajectory to a lot of our listeners, which is, you graduate from college, you graduate from law school, you work at big law firms, and then you have a moment that to me, seems to happen to pretty much every lawyer I know, where they ask, "Is this what I want to do for the rest of my life?" And one of the things that I find fascinating about your career, Julissa, is that you have been able to move between private practice and the public sector. Can you take me back to how you navigated that first move out of the law firm and into government work?

Reynoso: So the private sector has been an interest that I've acquired as an adult. It was not something I thought I would do or enjoy until I actually did it. You go into law school or whatever as a young person thinking, "Okay, when I grow up, I want to be..." I wanted to be a professor, I wanted to be a teacher, but I needed the money. I needed to pay off some debt and I wanted to make sure Julissa wasn't going to be a burden to my family. I wanted to have some savings. So I said, let me go work at a law firm and then I'll do what I really want to do. But then I got to the law firm and at the beginning I was just like, "What is this?" But I met very good people who are friends today and who I admire for their intellectual and professional rigor.

So they really inspired me to enjoy the work. So beyond being in the private sector, I really enjoyed the practice of law. I enjoyed handling complex problems, be that in legal profession, or policy, or whatever, and surrounding myself with very smart people. I was always volunteering with community organizations uptown in Manhattan, in the Bronx, I always had these relationships with folks that were trying to make the city better. New York City that is better immigrant rights, education reform, labor rights. My weekends were always full of activity. And so I made these relationships.

I met politicians through my volunteer work. I met people like secretary. Then Senator Clinton and I forged these friendships. They weren't friendships automatically. They were like, "I kept showing up." You got to show up to things and making sure that you are giving whatever you can, your time, your energy, if you can make some obviously economic contributions, great. But I was mostly volunteering, door knocking, and when she became candidate for the White House in 2007, really every extra day I went out and took a bus to Philadelphia or plane to Iowa. I kept showing up and volunteering my time and whatever else I had to her and to her campaign.

Menendez: You end up at the State Department, she invites you to come work at the State Department. There's no manual for that. There actually are people who go to school to

study this. But for someone like you who's making that transition from law, you're really learning on the job. Were there mistakes that you can tell us about, because I understand it's the State Department, but do you remember making a mistake where you were like, "Okay, this is the learning curve," as uncomfortable as it is?

Reynoso: Well, so mistakes are always, the issue is do you have cushion. Do you create enough support around you to make sure that others can help you either fix it, or ensure that you don't do it again? As a new kid in the State Department, well, I was shocked that I got a job at the State Department, but that's where the Secretary Clinton ended up. She lost the election, so I thought I was just going to be at the law firm for forever or a longer time. But thankfully, President Obama named her and I got to work with her. It was a leap of faith, I guess. She's like, "Come over, help me with things in Latin America." And I said, "Okay." So I quit my day job without really knowing what the job was going to be at the State Department, frankly. I just left the firm.

I left the firm and I left it nicely, meaning the firm people were thrilled for me and I had a good family at the firm. They were like, "Call us when you're done," or whatever. So that was good to know that if anything went terrible, I still could do something with my life as a private lawyer. There were a handful of women, I think almost exclusively women around Secretary Clinton, who were really thoughtful and cared for my success. And when I did make mistakes, I gained and have so much trust and respect for the career people in government, in the State Department in particular, that I was like, "Help me out. Show me the way. What is this acronym?" Half of the things at the beginning were acronyms. I didn't know what they were, or "Why are we doing this? Explain to me why is our policy this way? How can we do this better?" With hopefully humility and also an open mind and also in certain instances, a critical mind, because part of the job is to be new. Work with an organization that predates all of us and does things sometimes that could be better. So I needed to make sure to be open, humble, but also critical.

Menendez: At the tender age of 36, you're then offered to become the ambassador to Uruguay and your initial response is, I am too young. This is too big of a responsibility. You must be out of your minds, but you clearly turned a corner on that, you take the position and that that's another leap.

Reynoso: Well, again, Secretary Clinton and Cheryl Mills trusted me to do the job. It was nerve-wracking, because I didn't have the experience of working in an embassy. I had been at the State Department for I want to say almost three years, two and a half years, helping to run a bureau with colleagues who had a lot more experience. But I took the offer, I ran with it. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me. Again, like anything else, you make mistakes, but because the State Department and all the other agencies in these embassies are so professional, they help you deal with all types of complications that come your way.

Menendez: Like what? What are the complications?

Reynoso: Oh my goodness. You get all types of things from personnel issues, people, it's an organization. So of course you're going to have folks who, most people do great job, other people, you're like, "How do we get this person to do something else with themselves?" You know what I mean? From that to dealing with local government people. Some people like us, some people don't, and how do you get the people who don't like us to at minimum respect us, or not work against us?

It's not mistakes per se, but these are things that are not necessarily in the handbook somewhere that you can read. "How do I get the minister of so and so to like me?" "One, do, do, do. Two, do, do, do?" No, you have to cultivate, you have to engage. You have to sometimes acknowledge that you don't have all the answers, and that goes a long way, as an American diplomatic in the world, often. We are so important everywhere. I think a lot of Americans domestically don't get that as much as I think some of us who are working overseas and showing some level of deference and humility. The return on that investment of time and energy and a show of just a sense of deference is tremendous.

Menendez: You go back to private practice, was that strange after having essentially been the CEO, the executive director of a small enterprise? Was the transition back to the law firm hard?

Reynoso: First of all, I was just happy to be back in New York. That's my city. So I missed my friends, I missed my family. I miss this, the New York thing, people just not knowing who I am, which is also, frankly good.

Menendez: The anonymity of New York is the best.

Reynoso: Going back to New York, I was just nobody in the subway, which I loved, and the work at the law firm, was an adjustment because I hadn't done it in years. I was out for five years and change. I was afraid that I was no longer knew what I was doing. There are certain technical matters of litigating that I had to get help from other folks, but there were things and practices from diplomacy and just being out there in the world of foreign policy that actually helped me, I believe, become a better lawyer and a better counselor, a better advisor to clients, and helped me tremendously in getting work and getting good results for people that I represented in companies that I represented.

Menendez: Just when you think you're out, they pull you back in.

Reynoso: Oh yeah.

Menendez: President Biden heads to the White House and you are offered to be First Lady, Dr. Jill Biden's, chief of staff. Can you give us a sense of the type of decisions that a chief of staff has to make and how you went about making those decisions?

Reynoso: Well, the first business of being a chief of staff, especially when you're beginning in government, is hiring, is getting the team together. We started working before the president got sworn in.

Menendez: What is called the transition for folks who've never worked on it.

Reynoso: Correct. And I was blessed to have a fantastic team already in place, because a lot of the Biden family, the Biden transition, the Biden campaign operation, they were fantastic, and so a lot of the folks were already in the mix, so it was a matter of working with what we had, but also bringing in new people to create a team for the White House that could support the President and the First Lady. And a lot of it dependent on frankly, references, conversations with Dr. Biden in particular, who is God sent and the needs of the White House, and it's a lot because we were in the middle of a pandemic and we were transitioning during a very complicated time, and we were all new. It was complicated, but that's the first major, major job of the chief of staff.

Menendez: I wonder now that you are serving as the ambassador to Spain, if there is a lesson from your time as ambassador to Uruguay that when you came in you were like, "I'm doing this differently this time," or "I'm never going to make that mistake again." Was there a different approach given that now this isn't all new?

Reynoso: Well, I'm older now. I have a child. This is a different country, the bigger embassy, a lot more things going on in the world. Frankly, in many ways, many, much more complicated

time to be doing foreign policy work, especially in Europe. I try to sleep earlier. That's what I do now that I didn't do last time. I think if my age is taking its toll, my son takes his toll, because I got to get up earlier. But that is something I specifically notice that I'm doing differently.

I'm also reading more, reading novels, reading plays, obviously we always have to, here in this business, read the news. But just reading for academic or just pure joy and that is something I am putting into my daily program. I try to pace things more now, pace my life, be much more contemplative, try to be... You know what else? And I learned this from Dr. Biden in particular. I keep my mouth shut more now. I am much more aware of my reactions to things, meaning my verbal reactions to things, because I think the older I get, the more I'm like, "You know what? I should probably say nothing."

Menendez: When you say you learned that from Dr. Biden, you learned that by watching her do the same?

Reynoso: Yes. She's very mindful. She's very thoughtful. She's such a great listener. That is her, one of her magical talents.

Menendez: Julissa, anything I missed?

Reynoso: I just hope the Latinas who listen to your program, I just hope they really appreciate how much there is to see and do in the world, and I hope our community can become more involved in foreign policy. It's just so urgent and so important. Increasingly every day the world is just much more interconnected. Our problems are much more... The difference between domestic and foreign every day is just less real. There's so much to learn from unity, take advantage of our position as Americans to get to know the world and travel, and learn, and read, and represent the country, because I think as a country, we come richer by it. We can really have our story be much more relevant for folks, our community in the United States, but folks all over the world who can identify with some of our paths.

Menendez: Ambassador, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Reynoso: Thank you, Alicia. I hope to see you soon.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua 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](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com). Slide into our DMs on Instagram, or tweet us @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise [latinatolatina.com/shop](http://latinatolatina.com/shop) and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic Apple Podcast. Google podcast, Goodpods or wherever you're listening right now.

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