



## Why Lilia Luciano Prepares for Confidence, Not Perfection

The journalist and podcast host reflects on her journey from Spanish-language television to the Today Show, to the local news job she almost turned down that would ultimately put her on the path to joining CBS News as a national correspondent and anchor. Lilia shares her approach to combating imposter syndrome, her relationship to preparation, and the value of learning every aspect of the craft.

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- Alicia Menendez: Luciano may not have grown up knowing that she wanted to be a journalist, but there is no denying that she's a natural and gifted storyteller from her early success in Spanish language television to her rise to Today Show correspondent at just 25 years old. In the six years she spent exploring every medium and finding her way back to news, to the job she almost said no to that finally allowed her to weave together all of her unique passions. And now her role as National Correspondent and Anchor at CBS News and host of the Inflow podcast, Lilia's Path is a statement to her tenacity and her love of the craft. We talk about what is in her middle of the night go bag, the importance of emotional boundaries, and why Lilia prepares for the sake of confidence, not perfection. Lilia Luciano, I have to tell you, I've been pretty stressed about this interview because there's nothing more intimidating than interviewing a journalist.
- Lilia Luciano: No, I feel like my headspace is happy hour, us chatting.
- Menendez: Okay, good, good. You come from a very storied family in Puerto Rico, and I wonder what the expectation then was of you growing up, and was there a sense that you were supposed to carry that legacy forward?
- Luciano: On my mom's side, my great-grandfather was one of the founders of the estado libre asociado, the status that Puerto Rico exists in now. He signed the Constitution of Puerto Rico and Puerto Rico became the commonwealth. So his children, some of them pursued politics, my grandmother, my mom's mom lived her life running political campaigns and she also ran hospitals. She did a lot of things professionally in the '50s and kind of left my grandfather to do all the things that moms used to do at the time, cook and put the kids to bed. She was somebody who was very entrepreneurial and was always telling me as a kid, I would make a drawing and she's like, "Oh, that could be a business." And my mom too worked really hard, she dedicated her life to service. As did most of her family. On my dad's side, my grandmother was a very famous and beloved comedian. The equivalent would be kind of like the I Love Lucy of Puerto Rico a lot of people remember this character because it was brought to some of the first Spanish language stations here in the States. And she was an incredibly influential artist who then became a senator, a politician in Puerto Rico, the second woman senator, for 24 years. Those years were the ones that I was around because I was born in '84. This happened in 1980. What I witnessed was her doing good for so many people, and doing so in a very public, visible way.

I guess I was conscious at an early age that somehow I had to follow in her footsteps. From both sides. There are incredibly high achieving women. My sister and I have always been told, "You can do anything. You can be anything. You are the best at this." And I loved writing, I was curious about the world. And it was in a conversation with my dad, he's like, "Hey, what about journalism? I feel like you'd be great at that." And I said, "Oh, let's try it out."

Menendez: I want people to understand because this is one of the things that surprised me when I worked at Fusion, which was of course a Univision ABC cable station aimed at English dominant Latinos. And I was really immersed in the world of Univision. One of the fundamentally different things about Spanish language news and English language news is that Spanish language news, journalists, presenters, they are treated as celebrities.

Luciano: Oh, my God. Yes.

Menendez: I mean, just fundamentally different on the cover of People en Español, on red carpets, and that can seem really glam and fun and it can be.

Luciano: Not when you're 23.

Menendez: Right.

Luciano: I mean, yes. Yes. Yes, when you're 23, the one caveat is for me, when I went to UM and decided, "Oh, I'm going to pursue journalism." I wanted to be Christiane Amanpour. I wanted to be a war correspondent, I still do. I didn't want to do entertainment. I remember when the opportunity presented itself where they gave me a shot at this newscast it was as the entertainment reporter. And I was like, "Okay, great. I'll do that, but this is not where I want my career to go." And so I worked really hard. I mean, I remember the week of the Latin Grammys was always insane for me. It was, I wouldn't sleep for more than four hours in the entire week. It was seven packages a day, every day leading up to that day. And then as you said, because you're a celebrity, then dressing up and walking the red carpet.

Menendez: There was a pattern where basically anytime you would interview a male celebrity, there would then be a two week turnover before you were in some magazine framed as a home wrecker.

Luciano: A hundred percent. I started at 20, I signed my contract at 20 years old. I was still in college.

Menendez: So young.

Luciano: And I had all these big responsibilities, and this big spotlight. And I felt so seen in just the worst ways because all I wanted to do, my goal, all I wanted to be was respected and taken seriously as a journalist. And so that's when I was like, "I need to get out of this." And I had the opportunity of going to the World Cup Art Izquierdo, who ran Univision Sports at the time, or TeleFutura Sports, was preparing a team to go to the World Cup in South Africa. And I was a huge fan of soccer. And I remember, I would sit with the commentators and watch the games when they were covering [foreign language 00:06:05]. And I remember they said, "Why don't you come to the World Cup?" And I said, "Well, that's intimidating. I love soccer, but I don't know enough." And they're like, "Well, obviously we're not going to put you there to make commentary on soccer, but you could do other stories." And run around all of South Africa and pick whatever story I wanted to do and do a piece on it.

I think we shot 30 stories throughout that month that I was in South Africa, and I put together a reel with some of my favorite stories. And that's what I sent around. And Jose Andino, who is now at ABC news, was at NBC at the time, and he sent it to some people

and said, "Oh, my God. Yeah, her, news, let's do it." And so that's the next lucky break, the one where it's like National Correspondent at 25.

Menendez: Which at 25 you feel like that's not that young. Retrospectively it is-

Luciano: So young.

Menendez: ... so young. And the thing that I love about you, Lilia, is you get that call and there's no self doubt, there's just a lot of, "Hell yeah."

Luciano: Yeah.

Menendez: Like, "I'm going to do this."

Luciano: Yeah.

Menendez: "I'm going to figure it out." And you get, to me, thrown in at the deep end of the pool.

Luciano: Yeah. Well the thing is, I had come from entertainment in Spanish to National Network correspondent in English, I had never worked in English. And I'm very proud of the way that I did things, I actually was able to swim. I was able to do the thing that was required of me. But of course, every day that goes by, you're reminded in one way or another of how little you fit, and how insane it seemed to some people that I had that opportunity at that time, and then you start believing it. And that's where the imposter syndrome sits in. But the way that I digested that was not to freeze, but to just do more. If I felt like I wasn't sure about something, I would go out and do more reporting.

Menendez: You've talked pretty extensively about walking away from NBC, walking away from The Today Show, the circumstances around that. I am more curious about what the lesson was from that experience, and what it took to begin to rebuild.

Luciano: The biggest lesson that I learned from my experiences at NBC News were that, look, you like me, were in front of the camera. And the work that we do for the most part involves the work of a lot of people. And so because we're getting the credit for the work of a lot of people, we also have to be responsible and grown up and say, "You know what? Take it for the team team and take the blame for the mistakes of a lot of people." And so it's important that when you're enjoying your job, that you're obsessive, and I've learned to be obsessive about facts, and details, and sources, and where something came and to double and triple fact check. Because at the end of the day when we as a team get something wrong, it's my name that is out there as the person who made a mistake. Even if it wasn't you technically or directly making it. A big lesson is you take the credit for the work of a group, you got to be willing to learn the lessons and take the blame.

That's said, reinventing yourself requires having a really honest conversation about what it is that you want to be doing. So I said, "I'm just going to go back to the drawing board. I'm just going to learn." So some of the Vice stories came out, and the documentary comes out, and there's this energy that I'm like, "You know what? I'm actually a really good storyteller. I know what I'm doing. I'm passionate about it, but the opportunities are not materializing. So I'm just going to go back to school."

So I applied to Columbia, completely broke, had emptied out my 401k because I couldn't... But not willing to quit. I had actually gotten engaged and broke off the engagement and the relationship so I could come to New York and start over. The program had orientation day on a Saturday. I think it was Saturday or Friday, but the day before I'm walking to a job interview to be a hostess at a restaurant in The Village. And I get a call from my agent and he's like, "Hey, so there's an opportunity in Sacramento, they're looking for an investigative reporter." And I say, "Yeah right, we've been here before. I'm going to start school

tomorrow. This is a thing that's going to build me back up into the industry." And they're like, "No, no. No, you're going. You are going, this is a sure bet, they want you to go." And I take this opportunity and just move to California and start there over, I was able to do all the stories I wanted. I went to Puerto Rico, I went to the border. It was such a beautiful opportunity because it was the one that I didn't want to take where I was like, "I'm not doing this." That's where I realized it doesn't matter the platform. I hadn't worked locally before, and that's what made that magic when I got to the station to ABC 10, a big part of what I do and why I love what I do, it's purpose. It's feeling like you're contributing to changing the things that bother you about society.

But another big part of it is adrenaline. I love the adrenaline of it, so I knew that I wanted to be... like, if I could be climbing the fence with somebody who is coming into the US and interviewing them at the same time and talking about what their hopes and dreams are, I would do it. I knew I wanted to be embedding with traffickers, or cartel members, and trying to understand why they do what they do. I wanted to be on the frontline.

Menendez: Tell me about that because that is a difference between the type of work I do and the type of work you do, which is you do get the 2:00 AM, "Pick up your bag and leave," calls, so I want you to tell me both what is in that to go bag, and can you tell me about a time when you did get that call in the middle of the night and you had to go?

Luciano: Oh, my God, first one that comes to mind, that call at 2:00 AM was Astra World. It's like, "Go, you got to be on the next flight." So the first thing I do is I pick up my phone and I call travel. And then you have to calculate, like my go bag has underwear, socks, microphone, IFB, which is the earpiece that you connect to your devices, makeup, basic makeup, and a few shirts, buttoned down shirts that I always wear the same stuff because they're already in the go bag when I'm in breaking news stories and these wonderful all terrain pants. However, sometimes the breaking news is weather. So then you have to start thinking about fire gear, goggles, masks. Or, if it's winter, I haven't even bought snow boots, and today I got a call about covering snow, and I was like, "Ah, okay, where's REI?" Before I calculate how far LaGuardia is.

But at the same time, the only thing is happening to me is wait, what happened? What is a crowd rush? Who was playing? And so you have to put those questions to the side while you get yourself there. And then hope to have wifi on the plane, or in the Uber, start Googling and searching what's going on and figure out what your sources are going to be, how to think outside the box. Because guess what, when you get there, it's five bookers from ABC news, plus two correspondents, plus seven other reporters, or three, or two, or whatever. And the same goes for CNN and ABC, and now you're not just on the ground trying to understand what's happening, but getting it right and also competing with people. And the worst part of the job. The thing that I always say, and this was obviously a huge thing in Uvalde, is so I'm here, you're going through the worst day of your life. Why in the world would you want to talk to me? And I can't imagine it, I can't imagine doing it myself, you're still in the shock.

Menendez: I want to ask you about Uvalde because you've done some of what I think is the most important and exquisite reporting out of that tragedy. And when you have a story like that, that is so important period, and is so important to you in ways that are personal and sometimes hard to describe, how do you advocate to make sure that that story gets the continuous coverage that it deserves and gets treated the way you want to see it treated?

And then how do you also, I know this sounds trite, but take care of yourself so that you can continue to do the work of showing up and telling that story?

Luciano: How I protect myself is more logic. This is not happening to me today, this could happen to me tomorrow, this could happen to my family. It's being aware of the reality that this is not something that's happening to me and it's not my responsibility to put myself in that position because that is selfish and narcissistic. And that doesn't make for a good story. I'm not part of this story, I am an open vehicle for conveying what I'm witnessing here. And in order to be open enough and have open eyes and open ears to witness my surroundings to notice little details that will be more accurate and impactful, I can't be in it. I can't be struggling with the pain as if it's something that happens to me. And that to me is the most respectful thing to do.

If I'm there... And it's funny, I had this conversation with Mariana Salinas in Uvalde, we were having coffee, breakfast, we're staying in the same hotel and had a long conversation and she was like, "You know I've only cried twice on television." Once when Esprit De America the followed her to go to take her daughter to college because that was a personal story, it was something about her. And the first time was covering 9/11, but not as a reporter, but in a special that Don Francisco had done where he brought Willy Chirino to sing this song and it made her emotional. And forgive me, Mariana, that was meant to be between us. But I think that to me it was a big lesson in like, "Yeah, exactly." Like, "Who am I to cry?" It's not my child, it's not my mother, it's not my home. The most respectful thing is to be present and withdrawn in the sense that... And look, it's not that you don't cry, it's you can cry, but you don't have to use it. You don't have to put yourself in the story. And to me, that's really important.

Menendez: What did I miss, Lilia?

Luciano: It's really good to be reminded that I'm not preparing for perfection, I'm preparing for confidence. What I gather from people who respond to my work, and having the privilege of living in a time with there is social media and hearing from my friends and my family members. What I hear a lot is, and it's funny because at first it bothered me. It's like, "Oh, I love watching you because you're like... You don't care if you slip, or if you stutter, or if you mess up, or if you say 'like' too much." And I'm like, "Crap, I didn't know I was doing that."

Menendez: You're like, "I'm not sure that's a compliment. Thank you."

Luciano: Yeah, they're like, "You sound like yourself and you speak from the heart." And when I've heard that, I go back to like me in the edit booth trying to edit out all the, ums, and buts, and uhs, and like, "Oh, that's a dumb question." Or, I smiled too much, right? That perfectionist me is the one that I'm retiring little by little and trusting that retiring her does not signify less opportunity, but more so. I think we as women, as Latinas, need to continue celebrating our differences and imperfections, if you will. Because every time I see someone sitting up too straight, and trying to sound perfect, and look perfect, and smile perfect or... It's like that is not going to convey what the most important thing of our job is, trust. Or, inspire trust. The only thing that we're here to do is to communicate something that is important and be trusted and then trust when people say, "You know what? I trust you because you seem authentic." And the only way to be authentic is to be okay with not being perfect.

Menendez: Thank you for doing this.

Luciano: Thank you for the invitation, I'm so excited about this.

Menendez: Thank you as always for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua, and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Trendel Lightburn mixed this episode.

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