



## How Attorney Melissa Gomez Nelson Stayed the Course

Growing up in the Rio Grande Valley, the daughter of migrant farmworkers, she knew she wanted to acquire skills to protect her family. That motivated her to fast track her way through college and law school, make partner at a big law firm, and now handle complex litigation as the Associate General Counsel at Booz Allen Hamilton.

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Alicia Menendez:

We have spoken with so many recovering lawyers on this show, but I don't know that we have ever spoken with someone who is still in it. It's why when I connected with Melissa Gomez Nelson, I knew we needed to hear her story of plowing through college and law school, becoming partner at a big law firm, and choosing to go in-house at Booz Allen Hamilton, a management and technology consulting firm. We're going to talk about the big picture, but also about how a girl from the Rio Grande Valley learns the cultural nuance of legal life.

Menendez: Melissa, thank you for doing this.

Melissa Gomez Nelson:

Thank you for having me, Alicia.

Menendez: I want to start with you growing up as a border kid.

Gomez Nelson: Yeah.

Menendez: Tell me about some of those experiences as a child that led you to want to become a lawyer.

Gomez Nelson: My family, we were migrant farm workers. My dad was a labor contractor, and in the sixth grade we started migrating to Indiana to work in the fields. And so my father would draft these contracts with the farmers for his own payment and also for the payment of the workers. And he was obviously bound by local labor laws, and he did his best to understand that and make sure he was following it. He also did his best to make sure that he was compensating all of his workers very fairly, that was very important to him.

Gomez Nelson: But he was often selling himself short because he just wasn't equipped with the tools that he needed. He wasn't a lawyer. And not only was he not a lawyer, there was no one else in our family who was a lawyer. I'm the first in my family to graduate from college. And to this day, I'm the only lawyer in my family, either on my mom's side or my dad's side, so even extended family. For me, I knew that knowledge was power. I knew that if I became a lawyer, I could help protect my family.

Menendez: You go to St. Mary's in San Antonio. Was the idea to push through in two years?

Gomez Nelson: Yes, and it actually started before that. I graduated high school in three years. I did dual enrollment courses, and I knew that the more college credits I could rack up either for free or at a much lower reduced rate, meant that I could go to a more expensive school for less

time. And I could still have enough money left to go to law school. It was all part of my plan and it was very calculated. I knew that was what I wanted to do.

Menendez: When you then go to law school, did you already know that the law firm path was your path?

Gomez Nelson: I don't know that I knew exactly what kind of law I wanted to do. The law firm route, it just kind of happened for me. When I was a first year, I was afforded a very prestigious summer associate position at a big law firm in Houston. Which are typically reserved for second years, but I was afforded it after my first year because my grades were high enough. And so after I had that experience, I realized, "I think I'm setting my standards and my goals too low, so I need to reach higher."

Menendez: What surprised you most about that experience, being a summer associate at a big law firm?

Gomez Nelson: When I say I was a fish out of water, I really was. There were so many firsts for me. Not only have I never even been in an office like this before, I had never been in a room full of all white people, where I was the only brown person. Growing up in the Valley it was the opposite.

Gomez Nelson: And that experience was really challenging because I think this is true for all minorities, quite frankly, in big law. No one prepares you for this. They don't teach you this in law school. No one can teach you about law firm politics or what it's like, what exactly you have to do to survive, what you need to do to climb the ladder. No one prepares you for the 70 hours a week that you're going to work, and the fact that you're going to have some days all meals at your desk. No one prepares you for that.

Gomez Nelson: And the attire portion of it is a separate hurdle and challenge. You take Latinas and we have our own culture and our own sense of style as it is. And understanding that for some folks in a very conservative environment, that may not be celebrated in the same way that it would be celebrated for us. I was a quick study and I learned very quickly what I needed to do to survive and to make it work and to be successful.

Menendez: The quick study, what did the quick study learn?

Gomez Nelson: Well, the quick study learned that you definitely can't wear hoop earrings when you show up in a meeting. The quick study learned that you needed to have the right suit, and you needed to have the right shoes. And you needed to have a silk blouse under your suit, because if you don't have the right one then that will be frowned upon.

Gomez Nelson: And not just frowned upon, that means you're not going to get put on the right case. You're not going to get the top opportunity that you would, and you're not going to get to sit in the meeting with the client. And ultimately that was your goal.

Menendez: You don't end up in Houston though. You end up at a firm in Washington, DC, which is a lot farther from the Valley than Houston is. And so I imagine that in as much as there was culture shock number one, there then is a second wave when you land in Washington.

Gomez Nelson: Absolutely. Here I am at Am 100 law firm in Washington, DC, and-

Menendez: I don't know what Am 100 means.

Gomez Nelson: It's American law, 100 rankings. And what it stands for is a ranking of the top 50 or 100 most profitable firms in the country. So I land in Washington at an Am 100 law firm, which is comprised of about 300 lawyers in the DC office alone. And I look around the room and I am the only Latina in my class, in my summer associate class. And I quickly think to myself, "Okay, you've been here before, but this is different."

Gomez Nelson: And to your point, Alicia, Washington is a different place, it is not Texas anymore. I have colleagues and contemporaries from all of the Ivy Leagues. And it is very easy when you're sitting around that room to start to doubt yourself. "What am I doing here? Do I really belong here?" And now you have the culture shock of having to learn everything that the Northeast and the Mid-Atlantic does and says, and what the law firm politics are here. In some ways it was a little bit easier because DC was a little more liberal than in Houston. And in that way it was helpful.

Gomez Nelson: The way it was more harmful is that I think there was a lot more value placed on the name brand of your school. There was a lot more value placed on where your families summered and where your families went on vacation. And value placed on travel, on international travel and experiences. And I couldn't connect with folks on any of that level because I didn't have that. I didn't have that. So I had to find a way to connect with people in a different way so that they saw me for who I am. And they learned about me, and they trusted me enough with the assignment, with the project, or with the meeting with the client.

Menendez: What's the playbook. What did you do, how did you make it work?

Gomez Nelson: First and foremost, it's listening, being a very active listener and trying to ... We talk about code-switching a lot, and so there was definitely some code-switching involved. But I would couch it a little differently and say that it's more about adapting. Because if folks are not interested in hearing about whatever story you want to tell them and you pick up on that, and you recognize that instead you may be able to connect with them because you also like sports and they like sports, or you can connect with them because you also enjoy walking and taking a look at the cherry blossoms.

Gomez Nelson: You have to find some common ground. And it's hard for me to articulate exactly how you did it because you do it over time. It's small moments. And you learn to earn people's trust over time. You do it by showing up when you need to on time, and you do it by establishing a personal connection slowly over time. You can't force these things, sometimes they just have to happen naturally. But if you try to pretend to be someone you're not, it's not going to work.

Menendez: There's a lot of people graduating from school and realizing, "I have this incredible degree, but I don't want to use it for the thing I thought I was going to use it for." And then there is the road to partner and people dropping out along that road to partner.

Menendez: I have lots of friends who've left firms in order to go in-house somewhere because it is a more sustainable lifestyle. I have friends who've left to go into the public sector and remain attorneys. And then of course, there are the people who are like, "I want to do something completely different." You stayed.

Gomez Nelson: There were several points throughout my career as an associate where I was either offered a job or I considered leaving. Then I left my original law firm and went to a larger law firm, Dentons, which was the largest law firm in the world. And I realized at that point in time that I wanted to stick with it. And I wanted to try to make partner, because I felt like there just weren't enough of us and I needed to.

Gomez Nelson: Less than 1% of partners in Am 100 law firms are Latinas. It's something like 0.06%. And in the US, 2% of lawyers in the entire country are Latinas. I remember reading that stat and I said, "This has to change, and I have to help make it change because this just is not right." So I decided to stick with it. And I went through the very tedious process of going up for partner, I was nominated for partner. I had to get presented to the entire partnership and

everybody votes on you. And it feels a little bit like a sorority, I think. It's like, "Are we going to let her in? Is she good enough to be a partner?" So it is a grueling process, a taxing process.

Menendez: Where in there do you become a mom?

Gomez Nelson: I became a mom in 2014, about four years before I became a partner. And as every professional woman deals with, I was dealing with the nursing and the traveling and the nanny and the mom guilt. And then I got pregnant with my son, my second child, in 2016, so right before I became partner.

Gomez Nelson: And that was extremely challenging. I knew I was coming up for partner and those years, right before you get presented to the partnership, your numbers and your stats and your book and all of it matters. And so it was an intense period of my life, where I was just churning at all ends and burning the candle. And it was really hectic.

Gomez Nelson: I will say that it's manageable and it's doable. My husband is absolutely incredible and so supportive. My mother, she would fly here and stay with my kids. I would pick up the phone and tell her at the last minute, "Mom, I need to go to Germany for a week," or two weeks, or, "I'm going to be in the UAE." And she'd be like, "Okay, I'll be there tomorrow." And it would help make me feel comforted because I had my babies at home, and if my mom was there, I at least felt better and I could focus on work. So that was incredible.

Gomez Nelson: And so the advice I would give to any woman out there who's trying to pursue this is make a plan. Find a way, you can do it. You just have to figure out where your boundary is and what you're going to feel comfortable doing, and work right up against that.

Menendez: You're not at the firm as a partner for very long.

Gomez Nelson: I'm not, about two and a half years.

Menendez: Okay. What's the story?

Gomez Nelson: I get recruited by a Latina, a friend, to come in-house. I've worked so hard at this point in my career to get to where I am as a partner in a big law firm. And I'm about to leave all that behind to go work for a corporation and be a corporate lawyer in a publicly traded company. And I really was unsure as to whether or not I should do this and I thought about it for quite some time. But I've never worked for a Latina before, I've never had a Latina boss. And I wanted that experience so badly.

Gomez Nelson: I also wanted to see what it was like to follow in her footsteps or to have the day-to-day mentorship or sponsorship from somebody like that. So I decided to do it. I worked in-house for about a year and a couple months, and then I got promoted. And I'm the director of litigation at Booz Allen Hamilton. I oversee all litigation for the company. And it's been an absolutely incredible experience.

Menendez: Melissa, I want to loop back to something we talked about at the beginning of our conversation, which was this idea that when you are just starting out as a lawyer, you get the message that there is an appropriate way to show up. And that elements of your Latinidad may need to be reserved for the weekends or the time when you're not in the office.

Menendez: You said you have found a way to bring some of that now that you are more seasoned. What does that look like?

Gomez Nelson: Now that I'm more seasoned and I'm a more senior attorney I feel more empowered to be authentic and genuine in who I am. I'm so lucky that I currently work for a company that encourages that and doesn't frown upon it. And I think it's important as Latinas that we realize that our history and our stories and who we are extremely powerful.

Gomez Nelson: And whether that translates into connecting with a client who happens to be from Argentina or Spain or Mexico, or whether that's because we can speak another language. Or whether that's because there's a female CEO sitting across the table who, by the way, also loves to wear red lipstick. Whatever that is, we shouldn't shy away from it. There's power in it, there's value in it. And it's something that I've stepped into over time.

Gomez Nelson: The consejo I would give to any Latina out there who wants to go to law school or who wants to practice law, is really never to let others define the art of your possible. Don't shrink yourself. Set your goals high, achieve them. And when you get there, if you decide that you want to change the rules for yourself, that's okay, but don't let others define it for you. Make a plan and go for it.

Menendez: Melissa. Thank you so much.

Gomez Nelson: Thank you, Alicia.

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. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode.

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