



How Ad Exec Nancy Reyes Became Undeniable

After Alicia's conversation with advertising superstar Nancy Reyes, she wanted to make t-shirts that read, "I am undeniable." That's how inspiring this trailblazer's story is. From learning that "everything feels better when you earn it" to "dealing with a massive career failure" and making the decision to go from "good to great," Nancy's success is a testament to what happens when grit and tenacity meet opportunity.

Alicia Menendez:

As a kid, Nancy Reyes was focused on daily survival. She stumbled into advertising as an account manager, and two decades later, her drive and expertise earned her the title of president at TBWA, an international ad agency that prides itself on disruption. Sitting in her offices on Madison Avenue, we talked about the college prep program that she says saved her life, what she's learned from failure, and what it takes to go from good to great.

Nancy, I was gonna ask you if this was the office where you do Don Draper-style presentations, but we're really just in an office office.

Nancy Reyes: This is an office office. There's no Don Drapering in here.

Menendez: It struck me as I was walking over here from 30 Rock, where I work, both how near we are to Long Island City, and how far you've come from where you grew up. Your dad drove a taxi. Your mom worked as a housekeeper. What did you learn from them about work?

Reyes: Work ethic. Work hard all the time, and then you see the rewards of that hard work. The hours of a taxi driver are whenever there's demand, and I remember my mom would never say no to cleaning a house, so there were some days where she would clean three houses in the same day, three to four houses in the same day, which is just an enormous amount of cleaning. I did learn that everything feels better when you earn it. That is, to me, the best immigrant lesson, and that has carried me my entire life, is I want to know that I earned it, and if I put the hard work in, then I can say, "This is mine."

Menendez: I've heard you say that you retrospectively realize you never had the time or space to think about what you wanted to be when you grew up. What were you thinking about instead?

Reyes: Food. Money. Will we have food today? How much money do we have? How many more bottles do we need to collect to be able to buy groceries? How many more grocery bags can I fit on my arms to carry them home? Because we didn't have money for a taxi. It was always short-term stuff. Very, very short-term stuff, and I suppose there was some benefit in that, in that I felt like I was always solving a problem. Always.

Menendez: Yeah, that's a skill.

Reyes: That's a skill. Always. There was always something to overcome and there was always a solution to that. But yeah, I do feel badly that I didn't... I don't remember times when I said,

“When I grow up, I want to be an astronaut, or I want to be a lawyer, I want to be a doctor.”
It was, “How do I get to tomorrow?”

Menendez: When you look back, were there signs that you would be a natural at what you do now?

Reyes: No. I don't know.

Menendez: In some ways, I think that's helpful.

Reyes: I don't think so. I think the one thing I knew I would be good at, and I feel slightly guilty about it now, is being incredibly articulate. I remember growing up, and I grew up in a time where assimilation was valued, which is very different than the time we are now, where bringing your whole self, whatever that self is, is the most important thing. So, assimilation was about how do you blend into everybody else? And in order to do that, I didn't want to speak Spanish. I didn't want to have an accent. Not a Hispanic accent. Not a Long Island City accent. Not a New York accent. It was like, “How articulate can I be?”

So, I knew that whatever it was that I was gonna do, I was gonna be really good at speaking, really good at presenting.

Menendez: Did that message come from your parents or from somewhere else?

Reyes: It didn't come from my parents, because I remember hurting my mom's feelings a number of times when I said, “Speak English. This is America.” I must have picked that up from somewhere. I mean, I think I was five. I remember where I was when I said that to her for the first time. She was barking orders at me to do something, probably my chores, nothing harmful, and I just had had it. Not necessarily with the chores, but just with... I imagine with this, “Why do I speak Spanish here, but speak English someplace else? Why do I not know enough English? This is America. Get your act together.”

You know, I had that kind of an impatience with it, which I of course feel terrible about it now, but I was five, you know? It's a different time.

Menendez: Where were your parents from?

Reyes: My mother is from El Salvador and my father is Puerto Rican.

Menendez: It's funny, the Puerto Rican seems to take over your narrative in the little that I could find online. I think that's probably a New York thing in part.

Reyes: It is.

Menendez: Fifth grade, you start going to Prep for Prep, which is this program that prepares kids from communities like yours, so that they will be leveled up academically with other kids. There must have been someone who said, “This girl's very smart.” Do you remember who that person was?

Reyes: The principal. I remember a principal; his name was Phillip A. Zimmel. I remember thinking his name was so grand. You know, Phillip A. Zimmel. And I remember I was putting away books in our library. I say that with air quotes. It was like a shelf, a tiny shelf of tattered books, and he came over to me and he said, “I hear you're very smart.” And I think that carried me for ages. It's like somebody noticed. Somebody saw that. It was great.

Menendez: It's amazing the way someone like that can change a kid's life.

Reyes: It was one sentence. I remember obsessing over that sentence, and every single word in that sentence, and so if he heard it, it meant somebody else said it, so somebody else thought I was smart, so people were noticing. Somebody noticed. Somebody talked about it.

Menendez: Were you hearing that at home?

Reyes: No. No. I can't quite remember hearing any of that stuff at home. I remember that I started in kindergarten. I didn't go to preschool. That was just not a notion for our family or even our community, and somehow, I could understand. I spoke English, but my parents both spoke only Spanish, and I asked my mom at some point, "How did I go to kindergarten if I didn't speak English?" And she said, "Well, we used to put you in front of the television to watch Sesame Street." So, I remember thinking, "My God, I must have learned all that I know in this language watching TV and watching Sesame Street."

I think that was as far as I could remember conversations about education or intelligence. Home was about working. It was about chores.

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Menendez: So, then for high school, through Prep for Prep, you end up going to prep school on the Upper West Side? Culture shock. What specifically do you remember? What stood out to you?

Reyes: So many things stood out. None of them commuted, or they took the crosstown bus, and I thought, "My gosh, what a privilege, to take a crosstown bus." I thought that must be a rich person thing. They went skiing. Lots of ski trips. They all had country houses. What is a country house? And they all went every weekend to a country house, or they went to the Hamptons. Every time there was a break from school, there was a vacation.

Menendez: It's one of the complicated things about making these leaps, which is even when you have the programs like Prep for Prep that are making up the academic differential and the resource differential in many cases, there still is an emotional and cultural thing that's already happening in your teens, right? Like even if you don't have the upheaval of moving between worlds, those years are hard, and they are harder when you're also trying to understand things, like why some people have those things and some people don't, and who you are in a world in which you are, from the get, positioned as an outsider.

Reyes: It's so true. I think the times I think about it now, I feel like there are two sides to it that were not addressed, that if programs like this are gonna continue, and they are very successful. I've said many times I owe my entire life to Prep for Prep. I really do think it saved my life. But if we're really gonna see long-term growth and an impact from programs like that, two sides to address. One is the sociological impact for the person of color entering those private schools. What should I expect? How do I answer questions about, "Do you have a country house? Do you ski every weekend?" It seems simple to say, "I don't have that, and I don't ski. Do I look like I would ski?" But that's not what you say when you're 13 or 14, when I remember feeling I don't look like anybody here, so I felt ugly, I don't have anything that these people have, so I felt not worth it, and I felt that in many occasions I was probably robbing a spot of somebody else that fit in better than I did.

But then the other side of that is who told those kids about me? Who told them I was coming? Who told them why I deserved to be there? Who told them that I had earned it? And that conversation was never had with those guys, so as much as maybe in my teens I felt like I didn't like anybody there, I didn't like the school, now I know, well, why would they have treated me any differently? They didn't know. No one spoke to them about it.

Menendez: I hear a tremor of hurt in there, and I wonder, is there a moment you look back on in terms of the way you were treated that captures for you what it meant to not fit in, or to not feel accepted?

Reyes: I think there was a moment when I felt amazing, that then maybe put the finer point on the hurt. Our senior year, we had our yearbooks, and you go around and you ask everybody to sign your yearbook, and I remember racing home to just read the messages, because I just wondered what people said, and there was this one girl who wrote, "Dear Nancy, I always thought you were one of the prettiest and funniest girls in our class." And I remember thinking to myself, "My God, I wish I knew that, because I would have said funnier things. I would have done funnier things. I would have... I just would have been happier."

And by the way, I don't think anybody treated me poorly. I just don't think anyone knew what to do with me. I didn't know what to do with myself. But yeah, those little comments, those little things that I've collected over the years of the one person who said the one thing. My God, somebody thinks I'm pretty.

Menendez: As you're having all of this exposure at school, how is changing the dynamic at home?

Reyes: I'm getting exposed to things that I don't have, and by that, I don't just mean the material things. I mean I would go to my best friend's house, Michelle, and I would sit down to have dinner, and her mom would say, "Nance, how was your day today? What did you learn? How was that physics test?" And I look around thinking, "Wait, you guys talk about this stuff? You talk about this? Okay. I've never talked about it before." I notice those things. The conversations that kids have with their families. The interaction of the family. And I thought I much prefer that dinner conversation than the dinner conversation of, you know, how many houses am I gonna clean tomorrow? How do I pay this? How do I pay that? Can you come with me to clean this house, because I won't be able to finish it?

And I'm thinking, "How am I gonna go from school to Lower East Side to help you clean house? I can't get there in enough time. When will I do my homework?" And I would worry. I would feel guilty eating lunch in the cafeteria, because I'm eating lunch. It's free, because I was on a scholarship. I get to eat this. What is my mom eating? Is she eating? How does she have the money to eat? How many houses does she have to clean to make sure she

has lunch? How do I get to her? Maybe I can bring her a little piece of this sandwich and meet her down at the Lower East Side. It just was one worry after the next.

Ad: *Hey, today I want to tell you about a new podcast I am loving. It's called Dear Young Rocker. Remember the 14-year-old version of you? Awkward, insecure, the weirdo in you, fiercely independent, but longing to connect? In this narrative podcast, join host Chelsea Ursin as she relives her teen years, struggling to feel cool enough to exist, and finding a home in music. Each episode dives deep into teen Chelsea's journal entries as she navigates school, family, relationships, and joining her first band. And occasionally, adult Chelsea chimes in with advice for her younger self. At the same time that it offers a poignant, funny look at what being a teenager is like, Dear Young Rocker also creates honest dialogue around the issues of body image, gender power dynamics, and mental health, and it shines a spotlight on the way those are magnified during our teen years.*

Menendez: Come home from school, bunch of big envelopes, including one from Harvard. Did it feel like, "Okay, this has been hard, but this has been worth it?"

Reyes: This one is a hard memory. It's a hard one. Yeah, I came home from school, I walk up to the front door. I'm the first one home and there was a stack of eight fat envelopes, and I know what that means, and I open them up, and I sit on the step, and I make a circle of all of the letters, and I say, "You did it. You earned it." Because as soon as I walk in that door, it doesn't matter. I still have to cook the food. I still have to clean the house. I still have to iron the clothes. I still have to worry about the money, the bottles. How many bottles? You know, how many bottles do I have to collect to do this or that?

So, there was a moment of, "Make yourself feel that, Nancy." It was a sort of a rational emotional thing. I knew that it was an important moment, but it was really hard to be in touch with it. It's really hard. But I forced myself to sit there, and look at it, and be like, "You got into Harvard. You got into all these schools. You did it. You earned it."

Menendez: We have this tendency to mythologize immigrants, and to mythologize immigrant parents around this idea of just being perfect and having to be perfect. I'm sure you look back now and understand why they couldn't be what you needed them to be in that moment. Have you done that work? Have you done that unpacking?

Reyes: I have. I have. I do think... I know that they did the best they could. I know that somewhere in there, they're proud. I think as a mom, it is still very painful to think about what I wish I heard, because every... I got all the stuff that filled me up someplace else. And as a mom, my kid gets a good grade, I go nuts, you know? I go nuts. But I just want them to smile, and be happy, and not worry about money. If I ever hear them say, "Mommy, you're working so late. Are you getting enough sleep?" I'm getting lots of sleep. Yes, absolutely. And then I pay attention to that, and then I'm home, and then I get some sleep.

Menendez: You're now the mom that you used to sit down with her daughter and have dinner with.

Reyes: Yeah. I am that. Yeah. Exactly.

Menendez: You get into Harvard. You go. You graduate. What led you into advertising?

Reyes: It was a total non-intentional thing. I had a consulting job in Boston. I had a boyfriend in Boston. I thought I was gonna stay there. It was all great. And then Prep for Prep called, and they said, "There's an advertising agency named Ogilvy who wants to diversify their student body. We think you should meet them. And I said, "That's okay. I already have a

job.” And they’re like, “Come on. You never know.” I went, and they flew me on a plane, and they picked me up in a black car, and-

Menendez: I mean, I would do a lot of things with those accoutrements. Just sign me up.

Reyes: I mean, incredible. And I walk into this place with a red carpet. I get into an office on my own. I get fed. And people come in to see me. I’m like the guest of honor, and I had maybe 20 or 21 interviews, and I was really impressed. And I left, and they gave me an offer for what was a lot of money at the time, and they were doing it because they knew how important money is to someone who has gotta figure out how to pay student loans, and I’ve gotta send money back home. I don’t have money. Money, again, becomes an issue.

Menendez: How did you get good?

Reyes: I think I got good... There was one major moment, I think, that I think I was fine is what the real answer, I was fine for about five years. I was adequate. And then I moved from New York to San Francisco, and I started working at a... at the time, it was the best advertising agency in the world. A place called Goodby Silverstein & Partners in San Francisco. I’d been there for a year. Maybe I was a little bit arrogant, and my boss called me into his office for a one-year review, and I’m sitting her expecting sunshine up my ass, and he said, “You’re not as good as I thought you would be.”

And I remember thinking, going, “Neither are you. I’m not impressed by you.” I went home. I was mad. I was so mad.

Menendez: Wait, did you say that, or did you just swallow it down?

Reyes: No, I said it to myself. But when I remember it, I like to remember that I said to him, but I didn’t. I said it to myself. I go home. I’m really mad. But I had a minute to think about it, and I said, “I haven’t been as good. I haven’t been. I feel like I’ve just been floating through this thing. I haven’t been great.” And that turned me to be great.

Menendez: Because what is the difference in what you do between being good and being great?

Reyes: The difference is authority, respect, compassion, fight. The fight that you can muster up. We’re constantly trying to convince brands and the organizations to do things. We’re looking for bravery. Brave partners. And many, many, many clients and many, many brands are brave, but the difference is do I help them be brave, or do I help them play it safe? And if I’m really good at my job, it’s the brave side.

Menendez: You spent 11 years at Goodby, is that right?

Reyes: Something like that. Yeah.

Menendez: 11 years. In their San Francisco office. You thought you’d retire there. What happened? As I sit with you in a New York office of a different ad agency.

Reyes: Yeah. That didn’t work out. Yeah. That didn’t happen. Well, let’s see. I get pregnant with my second kid, and I decide I need to move to New York, because our families are both based in New York, and Goodby says, “Open up New York for us.” So, we open up the New York office.

Menendez: The dream.

Reyes: Dream job. It was incredible. Best of times, worst of times. It was really hard. It is New York, after all. And it eventually shut down. We found everybody jobs and it shut down, because

the business was just not the same. The environment was just not the same. The hustle was different. It was just different.

Menendez: Did that feel like a failure?

Reyes: 100%. It still feels like a failure. It still feels like a failure even though, again, I can rationally tell myself, "Well, these were the conditions that you were dealing with. Well, this client fell through. Well, this thing happened, that thing happened," and I can make a pretty good argument as to why none of it is my fault, but it feels entirely like my fault.

Menendez: So, then what did you learn from that?

Reyes: I learned to fight for myself a little harder. I was going through a really rough time. I was trying to keep this office open. My husband had been diagnosed with cancer. I just had a second kid. I was breastfeeding in the bathroom. And I was trying to help the San Francisco office be great. I was trying to help New York be great. I had a two-hour boat ride every night to and from work. I think it was a moment where I did that thing, where how many things can I do? Right? How many chores can I take on? And it was one... It was just, I don't know, five too many. So, I learned not to do that again.

I remember my husband was waiting for me to finish a pitch meeting with a client, that we didn't end up winning. He was waiting for me before... He would not let the doctors take him inside the operating room, because he wanted me to be done with my pitch, because he was trying to be nice to me about that, and he wanted to say he loved me before he went into surgery. And I rushed home in all this ridiculous traffic, and he said what he said, these wonderful things, and he goes in there, and then he comes out and we find out he has appendix cancer. And I think, "Did I really just spend my time in a pitch meeting? What is wrong with me? This is all wrong. It's all wrong. All wrong."

So, that's the thing I learned, is just rebalance. Refix. This is not right. What do I care about? What do I want to be around?

Menendez: Did you find that? Were you able to rejigger that?

Reyes: I did. I did. I had a little stint on the client side.

Menendez: Is that Verizon?

Reyes: That's Verizon, and it was an incredible experience, but I did not find any relief from anxiety, or pressure, or stress, and I felt really alone. It was a great company, great organization, lots of wonderful things about it, but it just wasn't for me.

Menendez: Can you explain for those of us who don't know what the difference is between being in house and being at an agency?

Reyes: Yeah. I can tell you what my experience is like, but most clients who work on the in house, as you referred to it, often... I guess it's changing these days, but have been clients for quite some time, and many of them in the marketing world tend to be incredibly creative, incredibly strong, and they often have to make very big presentations and sales presentations to their internal product companies, because marketing is a discipline on its own, so you often have to fight for that money. It's an investment, not a cost, and that argument is sometimes difficult to make.

The agency side is more known as the creative, just the creative side, and it just has a different approach to it. We don't deal as much with the corporate world unless we're

interfacing with our client, so it gives us the ability to have perspective, and be super creative, but we're not in it. And it was a valuable lesson to me to be on the client side, to have true understanding of what a client goes through. Advertising is one twelfth of their job, the pressures they face, the culture that they live within, the constant challenge to the investment, the discipline, the staff, the impact of marketing on business, I mean that is a bigtime job. A big, bigtime job.

And a creative agency is best equipped to respect that. Once we respect that, and we understand that, we're gonna go a lot farther than we do if we just think all they do is advertising. It's a different world.

Menendez: I have to ask you, is your husband okay?

Reyes: My husband's okay. Yeah, we just got our six-month scan, another six-month scan, and he's cancer free.

Menendez: Congratulations.

Reyes: Thank you. Yes.

Menendez: We sell ads for this show, and nothing drives me more bananas than when someone will come to us with an RFP, and then will come back and say, "We decided to just go general market." Because I have the most powerful buying force in the country, brand loyal, listening to this, and we are still not considered general market. That sounds upside down to me. Am I the one who's off, or are they off?

Reyes: They're off. No doubt about it. No doubt about it. I don't get it. You know, I don't get why-

Menendez: Do you contend with this?

Reyes: I don't think we contend in it the way that you just expressed. I often think that while I want to make sure that Latinas and Latinos are represented, I do think that sometimes the mistake that marketers and brands make is that they do believe they need to speak to them differently because they're Latina, and that, in my opinion, is racism. That's the whole point. When you start to speak to somebody differently, and there is no real benefit to that specific product, or to that specific person, think bigger. Think higher than that. Think about how do I speak to this person at a much higher level? I'm not just defined by being a Latina. I'm a much deeper person.

Menendez: Part of the reason that you caught our attention is because there aren't a lot of women of color who've ascended to the levels that you have ascended to within this industry, so in as much as you are clearly very good at advertising, you have also figured out how to navigate these internal structures, and I wonder what your biggest takeaway or lesson is about being in a behemoth like this, and finding your way to the top.

Reyes: I think I've always gone back to the values that I learned when I was little. I really do believe that when I work hard, I am pretty unstoppable. And as soon as I believe that I have earned it, then there is no questioning that I have earned it. That's very important to me, and I think that has carried me each step of the way. I never dreamed of being in advertising. I never dreamed when I got my first job that I would be president of an ad agency. I really did look at it in that same maybe small way I thought about stuff when I was little. If I can see the next step ahead of me, then I'm just gonna keep going. So, I feel like I worked hard, and I was undeniable. I was undeniable each step of the way.

And I will always welcome a battle based on respect, intelligence, authority. I will always. I will welcome that, because I can win there. That's where I put my energy into, is not representing, not trying to accommodate, but really am I adding value? Did I earn this seat? Did I earn this conversation with you today? Did I earn the conversation I had with my client earlier today? Did I earn it? And when I think like that, the answer is almost always yes.

Menendez: Nancy, thank you so much.

Reyes: Thank you so much. This was great.

Menendez: T-shirts that say undeniable. That is good.

Reyes: That's a good one.

Menendez: Thank you as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Cedric Wilson is our sound designer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. Manuela Bedoya is our intern. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or wherever you're listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the quickest ways to help us grow as a community.

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