



## Why Nathalie Huerta Founded the First Queer Gym in the Country

An athlete who loves the gym, she began presenting as more masculine and locker-room interactions became so stressful she stopped going. Then she took a \$50 Target gift card and founded what would become The Queer Gym, the first LGBTQ gym in the nation.

---

Alicia Menendez:

Nathalie Huerta was always an athlete, so the gym was like a second home, but as she started to present as more masculine, the locker room and gym floor both became much more complicated. She looked for an inclusive option, couldn't find what she was searching for, and so she opened her own, The Queer Gym, the first LGBTQ gym in the country.

I have never been comfortable at the gym, but I always assumed a lot of that just had to do with the fact that I am not an athlete. I'm like a theater kid who would futz around on machines trying to figure it out. Was there ever a time where you felt comfortable at the gym?

Nathalie Huerta:

I felt comfortable the entire time up until I started looking gay, because my background was in... It's actually kind of how I got lured into the whole fitness thing, because originally, I'd gone to school to study physical therapy and I wanted to go more the clinical route, and then I discovered late in my studies that that's not exactly what I wanted to do, so then I was just graduated with a degree and like didn't know what to get into at that point. And so, the person who hired me at the gym was like, "You love it. You're an athlete. You grew up in this. You get to do that in this setting." So, that was actually one of the things that attracted me about being a trainer, is that I got to spend time in a space that I found safe, and enjoyable, and comfortable.

However, at this point, I had long hair, I was feminine presenting, and I would say up until six months, a year after I started training, I started to present more masculine. And that's when I was like, "Whoa. And if I feel like this, and I'm a trainer, and I'm an athlete, I can just imagine what another queer person who is not an athlete, who has no idea how this fitness thing works, plus they're queer... Yeah, I can understand why they're not coming in here."

Menendez: When you say it got weird, what did that look like?

Huerta: From the very beginning, like walking into the gym. It's already a big feat to walk in those doors, period, and then to walk in and then be misgendered. You're like, "Do I really want to take the time this morning at 6:00 AM to correct that I'm not a sir? No, I'll just let it slide." You know, and then just adds day, after day, after day. I also had experiences in the weight

room with guys. It's always a pissing contest in that weight room anyway with guys, but then you throw in a butch, and then their like hot, feminine girlfriend, and then it becomes a different dynamic. One in which me and her never felt safe working out because you could just feel the energy was bad. Just them making little side comments, and then I would say definitely the locker rooms were the weirdest. "Are you in the right locker room? Do you know this is the women's room?" You could tell, like people wrapping up, covering themselves, and then going into the men's room doesn't feel safe for me, because I don't identify as a man, and in my head still a woman in a man bathroom, that's unsafe. So, it's basically like timing your pee so that you don't have to go in there, period. You know, like-

Menendez: Which is really hard when you're trying to hydrate.

Huerta: Yeah. And it was all these little micro things that ultimately, I was just like, "You know what? I'm just gonna work out on my own. Just gonna go to the park. I don't want to deal with it."

Menendez: And then you start looking for inclusive gyms. What did you find?

Huerta: A lot of porn. A lot of porn. Yeah. I remember I was like, "Okay, I can't be the only person. There's this thing called the internet now." And I just figured it didn't seem like a groundbreaking idea, so I was confident I was gonna find things, you know? And literally, lesbian personal trainer. Porn. Gay gym. Porn. I'm like, "What the..." Seriously, there's no one? There's nothing like this? That initial seed was planted at that point, where I'd be looking and just be like, "No one's done this? Where do the gay people work out? Do they not work out?"

Menendez: Well, I think part of what it shows you is that a lot of people have just gotten accustomed to working out in spaces that are not actually built for them or with them in mind.

Huerta: Yeah. Like my big hang up with the work out piece is like for me, I understand that when you work out, when you invest in your self-care, that opens you up to do greater things. And so, my big hang up with queers not having a safe space is that like, wait, if we don't have a space to work out, we don't get to feel all that good stuff about ourselves that then further empowers us to live our true selves. And so, that's where I was like, "Okay, it's one thing not to have it, but it's another thing to have the community not have access to any of this empowering stuff because people are weird working out next to me because I'm gay? That's a you problem. But in the meantime, I need to fix this because no one else is doing anything about it."

Menendez: You say you started the gym with a \$50 gift card. What did that look like?

Huerta: I love Target. Oh, man.

Menendez: It's like two kettlebells? What was that?

Huerta: No, not even. Workout stuff was expensive even back then. It was literally like a mat, a jump rope, and a set of 10-pound dumbbells. And then the rest of it I just relied on body weight movements, like things that I've known are effective ways to work out without the equipment stuff. And yeah, it was literally like, "Okay, I know that I don't need equipment to get in shape, period, so I'll buy a little bit and then that's it." I mean, even our first location, I subleased it. It used to be a physical therapy office. And so, it looked like a physical therapy office. I remember like I took everything out and then I went and did a burpee and then I was like, "Boom. It's a gym."

- Menendez: Which is what everyone's bedroom, living room has become at this point during quarantine. Because you didn't start with a physical space. I mean, you really just started by offering the services and trying to connect with the right type of client. How were you finding your clients during that period?
- Huerta: This is 2010, so this was like 2010 doesn't sound that long ago, but there wasn't any dating apps back in 2010, okay? And if you were queer and you were online trying to connect with other queers, it was through Craigslist in the Women for Women section, or the Men for Men section. At this point, I was living in the Bay Area, which I'm not from the Bay Area. I didn't really know a whole lot of folks out here and I was like, "Well, if I'm looking for lesbians on Craigslist, I know other lesbians are looking for lesbians on Craigslist, so I'm just gonna move all my advertising to the Women for Women section."
- So, the week I did that I got like eight clients that first week just by moving it from the Lessons section in Craigslist over to the Women for Women section in Craigslist. That's kind of how I got my first little handful of clients, was just, "Well, where do lesbians go? They go on Craigslist."
- Menendez: Once you sort of had the group, right? And the group is working out together and you're beginning to develop community without having a space, what were those initial learnings?
- Huerta: I guess my first taste of it was just the need for community. A lot of my initial clients in the beginning were newly single lesbians and my original first concept after training a couple clients and kind of getting to this point was like I think I need to be a wingman/trainer, because all of my clients... I know, this is how I got to this conclusion. Because a lot of my clients were newly single lesbians and I wasn't single at the time, but I've always been really social, or really extroverted, and so I would come to our sessions and I would have these stories about, "Oh, this good time this weekend." And a lot of the clients were like, "Can you invite me next time? Tell me. I'll meet you there." Just wanting to kind of get out and hang out.
- And they've been in these relationships for X amount of time, and they're out, it's a new thing, and so I was like, "Maybe that's a thing. Let me look into that." So, I went back to Craigslist and I put an ad, "Wing woman for hire." And what I learned was that there was definitely a market for that. People started hiring me to be their wingman at the Castro, and they would just kind of like feed each other, like, "Oh, wingman feeds into the training. Training feeds into the wingman." And it kind of was just... People were paying me 30 bucks to go take them out, and buy my drinks, and pay my covers, and I was just like, "This is what I can help you with tonight, this is what I can't help you with tonight."
- Our community is still pretty disconnected. If you're newly single and all of a sudden, you're not connected to that community, you don't necessarily want to hit the clubs, or you don't want to go alone, and so that was my first initial like, "Hmm. Yeah, people want to work out, but people want to connect."
- Menendez: It's just so universal, that need for community. That desire for community. And that I think is so often what gyms become, is really like you go to work out, but you go for some sense of community, and I think it can manifest in lots of different ways. You say no homophobia, no transphobia, no fat phobia, no xenophobia, no mansplaining, no gym creepers. Those are big promises. How do you actually make all of that a reality?

Huerta: Yeah. The current way that we do that right now is actually up for questioning because it's not scalable, because how we get a member is every member that joins our gym has a one-on-one with mainly me or one of my coaches before they join. We get a little bit of criticism because we don't sell our memberships online. You can't just go to our website and sign up. I just protect the community because I want to make sure that people are entering our community for the right reasons.

You know, the main things I'm looking to keep out are any form of hate. I don't want that in our community. And then we're not a hookup gym. And I don't want someone coming in here like on the prowl, like that will come as you build connection, and you better yourself, and all that good stuff, but definitely we're not that kind of gym. And so, those are the things that I'm looking for when we let somebody in. And yeah, the great thing about that is that we get to hand pick some amazing unicorns of people with good hearts, good intentions, and we see that develop through their time at the gym. The bad part about that is that you can imagine talking to 12 people for half an hour every day can get pretty crazy.

Menendez: Yeah. My voice is hoarse just thinking about it.

Huerta: We're trying to figure out a better balance for that where we can still maintain good quality in the community but also maybe not be on the phone for 12 hours a day.

Menendez: Well, some of this ethos is built into your programming. It's built into the way that you've actually imagined the physical space once we get back into physical spaces. You tailor all of your services to create a safe space for members of the queer community. What do those pieces look like?

Huerta: You know, when we were first talking about this 10 years ago, this was like a big thing, like pronouns and updating your forms were like a big thing. Now, 10 years later, it's a given. If your organization's trying to be any type of tiny bit inclusive, you've heard about pronouns, you've updated your forms, you probably have gender neutral restrooms, so these are a lot of changes to physical spaces that even though they're not groundbreaking anymore, they're still probably a good, inclusive practice for anybody to get going.

But beyond that, it's more of like tending to your garden of inclusivity than like, "Put these systems in place." Because the crops change, right? The people in that garden change. It's just about learning how to call people out with love, and just being like, "Hey, I know that you refer to coach as she, but coach Andrea actually uses they/them pronouns. Just heads up for next time." You know, and then coaching that trainer and being like, "You know, if you see them get weird, this is what you do. If you see them okay with it, this is how you do." And so, teaching them how to manage those interactions that people may make a mistake and not know it or not mean it.

We still want to use that opportunity to grow, and to use it as a learning moment, and foster a safe space.

Menendez: Not being trans yourself, how did you come to realize as a trainer there are specific things you want to be sure that you are doing for a client who is going through a gender affirming surgery?

Huerta: This shoutout has to go to my very first trans clients in the very beginning. It was through my curiosity about wanting to learn, wanting to grow, wanting to understand. It was through their willingness to have conversations with me. It was through their opportunity to

allow me to try and get it right. And so, there's like a couple pieces to it. One piece is just the clinical stuff, like how do you train someone who's on hormonal therapy versus someone who's not? An easy one to kind of talk about is top surgery. If you're going through top surgery, a lot of people think that you want to focus on working your chest. Partly true, but when you complete the surgery, you're not gonna be able to move your upper body at all, so you are dependent on your legs and on your core for mobility for the first couple of weeks post op.

So, we want to make sure that we are including endurance training for your lower body, and stability training for your core, because that's all you're gonna have for two or three weeks after that.

There's also the cultural side of the community and what they've experienced, what they've gone through, where their traumas come from, getting a better understanding of that, and I think that for me has been the biggest challenge.

Menendez: I want to admit to you that I was super excited to talk to you because it is really incredible what you have built, and fascinating that it is the first queer gym in the country, and that we haven't seen this model widely replicated. What are the questions you're asking yourself? How are you walking through this process of deciding where to go from here?

Huerta: I think a big piece for me, you know, in these last couple of months where the mental health has been really shaky for me, I think a saving grace has been reconnecting with my inner child. I was actually working out the other day and I was like, "Oh my God. Fitness is where your inner child and your adult come to hang out." Because as an adult, you need to be responsible and take care of yourself. As a child, you just want to play. And so, I was thinking about that. I was like, "Okay, if fitness is where adulting and inner child meet, most people aren't connected to their inner child, number one. Two, how much... If you know that your inner child likes to go jump off bridges and into the water, that counts as fitness. You're satisfying your inner child and you're satisfying your adult."

And so, I started thinking about that and I was like, "Ooh, that kind of made fitness a little bit more special for me when I made that connection." The other piece of it is just I know that I'm gonna win at whatever is in front of me anyway. I know that I will do well if I decide to go any other route. So, that helps me decide. That helps me take a little bit of the anxiety away. But then what I go to is finding people that are a step or two ahead of me. Actually tomorrow, I have a meeting with a gym owner about an hour and a half from here who has 11 private locations, and they're on the brink of franchising or not. So, I'm meeting with them, and what I'm coming in is being like, "Okay, here's my track record of what I've done. Here's the numbers. You've been doing this for 30 years. You've been doing this for 20 years. What would you do? With your experience, how would you guide this? How would you guide me?"

So, inner child, knowing that I'm just the type of person that will win at whatever's in front of me, and lastly is learning from people that have done it before me.

Menendez: Nathalie, thank you for your time. I'm very grateful to you for not just showing up, but showing up.

Huerta: Thank you.

Menendez: Thank you.

Huerta: And thank you for allowing the space to do that, because not everybody does that.

Menendez: And thank you to your 12-year-old for being so well behaved.

Huerta: I know, right?

Menendez: I don't know what you bribed him with, but-

Huerta: Well, we're gonna go buy some more... We're gonna go get some confetti cannons with powder. We got some plans for today.

Menendez: Thank you for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you when you email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com), when you slide into our DMs on Instagram, when you tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe, follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, I know I ask this all the time, but do leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow.

**CITATION:**

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why Nathalie Huerta Founded the First Queer Gym in the Country." *Latina to Latina*, Lantigua Williams & Co., May 30, 2021. [LatinatoLatina.com](http://LatinatoLatina.com)

Produced by:

