



UNSTUCK: What Media Mogul Nely Galán Can Teach Us About the Art of Reinvention

The television executive turned entrepreneur took a major detour—mid career—to go back to school. She shares how that decision changed her life, as well as her insights on how to find your true purpose.

Alicia Menendez:

I cannot tell you how many conversations I have had about my own career, that include the question, "Have you spoken with Nely Galan?" "Why?" "Because she is a mega connector, a generous mentor, and all around OG."

She's a media executive, an entrepreneur, Emmy Award-winning producer, founder of the [Adelante Movement](#), and author of the New York Times bestselling book, [Self Made](#). See, it's not just that Nely is, as her book title would suggest, self made, it's that she has made and remade herself over and over again. What I take away from her is that, very often, on the other side of being stuck is an opportunity to reimagine our lives and ourselves.

The Nely Galan, thank you so much for doing this.

Nely Galán:

Alicia, I'm so proud of you, and I'm so happy to be here with you. You're my next generation, my Mini-Me. This weekend, I was in New Mexico, and I turn on the TV, and who's there? My little Alicia, who's grown up, my little Cubanita.

Menendez:

No me diga. I'm at that age where for someone to call me little about anything makes me very happy, so thank you. Tell me about a time in your own life when you felt stuck?

Galán:

Oh my God, Alicia, I feel stuck many, many, many times, including right now. I think this idea of rebooting, this idea of being stuck is part of life. I always say I've had to turn fear and failure into my best friends, which is true. You have to, because it shows up so much. I think feeling stuck shows up, maybe the next most amount of times. I was you 20 years ago. When I was your age, I had a lot of the issues that I'm sure you're having right now, right?

A lot of the issues with diversity, a lot of the issues with Latinos not being seen, and it got better for a bit, yay. Your ego comes in. "I'm doing this. I became the first Latina president of a network, I did it. And I worked my way up."

Then it kind of starts going backwards. It sways the other way. Then you wake up at 50 and you go, "Oh my God, we're still talking about this?" And it's not resolved. So I learned

at this early age, and maybe it's also my Cuban background, that if I really wanted to change the world, I had to change myself first.

Every opportunity to change yourself, so let's talk about being stuck. Being stuck is an opportunity to look inward. And I'm not saying it's easy. It's not easy for me, and I've done it over and over and over again.

I mean, if you look at my trajectory, I ran a network, I became Tyler Perry, and then I stopped, and I went back to school, and got a doctorate. I mean, kind of a crazy move.

Menendez: As you made each of those moves, were there core questions that you learned to ask yourself?

Galán: Yes. Great question. I think the number one question is, "What is my true purpose on this earth? What am I uniquely good at?" I look at us in TV, right? And I think I kind of, in a weird way, fell into TV, and I was good at it, because I'm very organized and also, I love storytelling. It had so many of the elements that I really enjoyed.

But I guess, when 2008 happened, the economy crashed. My son was eight years old, he was not doing well in school. He said to me, "Mom, I hate school. And you know what, I'm not going to go to college, because you never finished college and you've done really well."

I thought to myself, "You know what, maybe I have to take a really big detour in this moment". And it was always my dream to go back to school. I mean, I didn't drop out of school because I didn't like school.

I dropped out of school because when I was a teenager, I was basically Lisa Ling. I was offered to be a reporter on the teenage version of 60 Minutes. So I got into TV in this circuitous way.

Then I lucked out, because that job led me to getting on this producer network correspondent program at CBS in Boston. But that really wasn't my path, either, because then I got offered to be a station manager of Channel 47, which was not Telemundo yet. It was a local station.

That sort of spoke to me, because I wanted to go work for Norman Lear and Jerry Perenchio. So I had always made these decisions based on people pursuing me, in a way. In 2008, I thought, "What do I want? If I were going to die in a year, what would I regret?" And by the way, I'm asking myself that question now.

In 2008, I thought I'd regret that I didn't go back to school. Even if I go back for a year, and I hated it, at least I gave it a shot. And because I'm an overachiever, I thought, "What do I want to learn?"

I thought, "I don't want to learn business, because I already know business. I've learned it on the job. I don't want to learn journalism or anything, because I did those things." I've worked for so many messed up people in the entertainment industry, I want to understand the psyche, and I also want to do my own work.

I also realized I have damage from my childhood, from being an immigrant, from having these Cuban parents. I want to work through that. Because I see a lot of people, they get to an older age and they're successful, and they're rich, but they're messed up.

So I went to psychology school, and when I got there, I found that there was a program that was a six-year program master's and doctorate that you could do in four years, year round. And I basically said to myself, "Can I really leave my security blanket of TV for four years?" And I go, "I'm going to try."

Menedez: But tell me, what was the risk assessment there? Because you had to be assessing the risk.

Galán: The risk assessment, number one, was if I stay in TV, because that was such a bad year, that we were all being asked to do shows for a lot less money. So I was going to take a smaller quote from my work. And I always think I'm broke, and I'm going to die, because that's what immigrants do.

In fact, it's so weird that we're having this conversation, because this weekend I went to see one of my best friends in New Mexico, who's the same person I went to see in 2008, and I said, "I'm going to be broke if I don't keep working."

She's like, "Let's write down how much money you got. Let's write down how many assets you have. Let's do the math, even at the worst case scenario, and multiply it at that time."

So multiply it, if you live to be 100, you don't have to work another day in your life, because I have bought buildings. I have done everything that I preach in my book, *Self Made*.

She said, "You need to walk through the fear of this pain that you have of being an immigrant, thinking, 'It's all going to go away,' and you need to do something for you. Maybe that's part of your lesson, is to walk through that fear, and go to school for four years, and feel the pain of being afraid that people won't call you anymore, or that you won't get anymore business, or that you're not important anymore. Go through that work."

I did it, and I had many panic attacks. I got a call from my agent at the time, who was the number one agent in T.V. I was the only Latina that had an agent that big.

He's like, "Are you having a nervous breakdown? Are you having a midlife crisis?" Because he came to me with an offer of a very big show. I said, "I have to turn it down. I'm in the middle of this degree, I have to write a dissertation."

My professor in school said to me, the first month I was in school, said, "You write like a rapper," because I wrote like a marketing person, and he goes, "Here's Strunk & White, you need to learn to write all over again." And I loved that he said that to me, because nobody has the balls to tell you the gaps in your education when you become president of a network.

So my agent goes, "Are you insane? You're going to turn this money down, and you're going to do it?" I said to him, I'll never forget, I threw it right back at him. I go, "You're so rich. Do you really need to sell me on doing this crappy show for money?"

And he got it. He goes, "Oh my God, you're right." I stayed, and I completed, I wrote 97 papers. I wrote a master's thesis and a dissertation.

I figured out what I was supposed to do next, because what I realized is I peeled the onion of who I was. And I said to myself, "Is really being a TV producer my goal? Is that really what I'm best at? Is there something I came on this earth to teach others? Is that it?"

And I thought, "No, Mark Burnett is better than me. This one's better than me, that one's better than me. What am I uniquely better than anyone at?" By 45, I could make decisions, because I want to, not because I have to.

One of my best friends is Sandra Cisneros, the writer, and she said to me, "In life, life is about doing the 10 x 10. Write down, what are the 10 things that make you unique in your family? What are the 10 things that make you unique in the world you work in? What are the 10 things that make you unique in the town you live in? What are the 10 things that make unique from your political party? What are the 10 things that make you unique from your religion?"

Anyway, and you come up with 10, and then say, "Circle the things that keep coming up." For me, I did that exercise with Sandra, and I took a writing class with her. I wrote about being in the seventh grade, and my parents couldn't pay for my school. Then I went and sold Avon, and pay for my school.

Menendez: You're skipping the best part of that story, though, which I appreciate is for brevity. But I just loved that the woman who in your neighborhood sold Avon sort of recruited you. You had one set of standards for that deal.

Galán: Oh, yeah. She said, "Why don't I give you some free lipstick, and you sell Avon?" I go, "Uh-uh, 50-50," because I'd seen it on a TV show. But the point is that at that age, I remember thinking, and you know this, Alicia, because you have a Cuban parent, that our parents have trauma because they lost everything.

Other people don't understand why Cubans sometimes act the way we act, even politically. But I said, "My parents had a lot of trauma," so I was very good at making money at an early age.

So I came out of school, I wrote a book, I toured the country, teaching Latinas, and then other multicultural women, about financial literacy, and really telling them the truth, real talk about why we have to be economically independent, and we have to be empowered, not just economically, but in all ways.

And I realized that was my true calling. So in these moments of stuck is when you find, if you dig, if you do the work, it's when you take yourself to a higher place.

Menendez: I want to ask you something which you sort of alluded to. But as someone who has changed paths, redirected a number of times, there's the work you do internally, to get clear about what it is you want to do, and the next steps. But then there's also what I find to be some of the hardest work, which is getting everybody else on board.

Galán: Yeah.

Menendez: That when you say, "I think I'm going to go back to school," and your agent and your manager says, "That is absolutely bananas. What are you thinking?" When your partner says that, when your mom says that, how have you navigated that tricky piece?

Because I think the first time you switched paths, people are like, "Okay, that's fine." I think when we start to alarm people, those of us who are polymaths, is the second, third, fourth iteration, where to us, it presents as, "I have so many things I am passionate about, and so many things I want to do, and I want to eat the whole world." To people who don't operate that way, it can look a little bit like we're just all over the place.

Galán: Yeah. I think you have to really listen to your inner voice and intuition. And I think that when you're younger, and I would say, when I was your age, I didn't listen to my inner voice.

Also, I have an entrepreneurial gene. Not everybody has that. I feel very comfortable being self-motivated, reinventing myself and getting up every day, and doing the work it takes to do, and not everybody can do that. And the people that can do that should find a partner, or find someone that is that person, that they can be the number two person, or the person that actually gets things done for that crazy person.

In that part of my life, it came easier to me. In my personal life, I made really bad choices, like super, super bad.

Believe me, I've had to live with those bad choices. Because in your personal life, if you marry the wrong person, if you have a kid with the wrong person, those kinds of decisions, you kind of are stuck for the rest of your life, because that person's going to be in your life. And that kid is going to have trauma from that.

I would say, I wish I had figured that part out sooner, right? But the truth of the matter is that the way that I do it, I'll tell you exactly what I do. I think that I've always had that little voice that says to me, "Red flag, red flag."

We laugh about it in the office. I mean, I don't want to tell you all the stories, but I mean, I'm like a bruja. I get up in the middle of the night. Obviously, I sleep very well, I sleep eight hours a night.

I wake up and I go, "Ah," and it's like, somebody telling me, "This is bad." Okay? In the past, when I was your age, I didn't act on it, because I questioned myself. And now, I follow my voice, period.

So I think it is cultivating your inner voice and loving it like it's your little child that's there to protect you. Listen, I'm going to tell you a weird thing. I was on the phone this morning with my friend, who I've known since grammar school. And she lived in the building that fell in Miami.

She said she had just bought the apartment a year ago. She said that six months ago, she woke up in the middle of the night, and said, "You've got to leave this apartment." She said, "I told my mom, I'm going to sell the apartment."

I even told her, I go, "Are you insane? I mean, that's a bad business move. You're going to lose money." She's like, "I don't know why, but I'm supposed to leave this apartment." And she called me this morning. She goes, "I am sorry, I don't even know what to say," but I think that we all have that ability to tap into our intuition.

Mine is very clear, because I tell it, "Tell me, tell me why. What is it? I feel it. Something's wrong." So, to answer your question in a very long way, I don't care what the agent says. I don't care what my parents say.

I'll listen. But I also know this as a therapist, the reason you can tell people in your life, really, what you're thinking is because they project their own issues onto you, and they're not clean in relation to you.

The reason it's important to go to a life coach, to go to a therapist, to go to a spiritual, whoever it is, to get advice that's really good, it has to be someone that's clean, that doesn't have a vested interest in what your decision will be. As much as your parents or your lover or your mate or your friend, they already have an idea about you that may not be the right idea.

It's like, when they say there's three sides to every story, "Yours, mine, and the truth," when I was 30, I was on camera. And at the time, E had started, I covering all the trials for E.

I also was doing all these pilots, network pilots. And I was also doing, I mean, I was doing a lot of TV, but I kept getting given a lot of entertainment, movies, which was very fun, by the way. Because I'd go to premieres, and I met celebrities, and blah, blah, blah.

Then I get offered this gig to go launch HBO in Latin America, because I also had experience running a TV station. Think of it as Netflix today, but back then, it was cable channels.

I remember thinking, "What am I going to be when I'm 50?" Then Rupert Murdoch called me and said, "Do you want to launch seven channels for me? But it's a full-time thing." I said, "I'll do it if you fund my own company," and I basically got funded to launch a business, doing channels, and I had to quit E, and all of my on-camera stuff.

And it was hard, because my ego was torn between, "This is more fun, this gives me a lot of access. I get free clothes, I get my makeup done. I'm 30 years old, blah, blah, blah."

I go, "Where am I going to be when I'm 50 over here, and where am I going to be when I'm 50 here?" And I made the right decision for me. Doesn't mean it's right for everybody.

My goal was not to be Barbara Walters. If I wanted to be Barbara Walters, then I would have taken a different tack, right? I made a shift there, and that shift really served me. It really did.

I would never have been president of a network. I would have never been Tyler Perry. I would have never been able to take all the money I made at both of those things, and turn it into something else.

I would never met the people at the level I met them. Because I was operating on a much higher plane, than if I worked for other people as talent.

I feel like what I really learned in that time was macro and micro, the big picture and the small picture, the chess pieces and the game plan. At times, I'm a chess piece, and I've been a chess piece. And at times, I've been in the macro, planning.

And I think that in this journey of doing self-made and writing a book, it was me also deciding, "What is the brand I want to create for myself, for old age?" And it has been the right move for me.

My book came out in Spanish, English and Mandarin, it sold 2.1 million copies in China. I've toured China twice. So it put me in a conversation that is a world conversation, versus an entertainment business.

By the way, lucky for me, Alicia, when I was doing all the content, I own the IP. Right now I'm selling all my IP to the streamers of the world. So I still get to play in that world, on a different plane.

I'm no longer producing shows, I'm the owner of content, I'm the owner of IP, that gets to have a little bit of fun in that world as an asset manager, like I was selling stock. I also think that's important to say, that you have to elevate yourself, to the place where you are in your life now, and not keep doing what you were doing years ago.

Menendez: Nely, thank you so much for this.

Galán: You know what? I will tell you, I will leave you with one thing, how to break all this down on a daily basis. I think I say this a lot, but it is what I live by.

You have to write down, "What are the three things I'm going to accomplish this year? One of them could be a career thing, one of them might be a personal thing."

One of them is just laser hair removal. It takes a year to do it, something really mundane. Then every month, you wake up January 1, February 1 ... I'm telling you, routine is a great thing. "What are the three things I'm going to do this month, to get to finish those three things at the end of the year?"

Then every Sunday, "What are the three things I'm going to do this week to get to those things?" And every night before you go to bed, "What are the three things that's triaging yourself?"

And I feel that I'm a turtle, I don't do anything fast, but I do little bits. I take everything into little bites.

I write down my things every day. I keep my diary, which I at least write in once a month. And it is my self psychology. I know what I'm supposed to do, I know what my guiding light is.

And by the way, when a problem happens like a pandemic, you pivot, you look at the list again, and go, "Oh, got to change the list mid-year. This isn't going to happen this year."

But you don't try to do 50 things, and give yourself New Year's resolution of 50 things. Or you will fail, and you'll feel miserable.

Menendez: Okay, here are my takeaways from this conversation. We've asked a lot of powerful questions throughout this series. Nely offers us two more. "What is my true purpose on earth? What am I uniquely good at?"

And I want to highlight the word "uniquely" there, because I'm going to guess that you are good at a lot of things. The question is, what can you do, the way that you do it, in a way that almost no one else can?

That, I realize, is not always the easiest question to answer. So one way to answer it, Nely, or maybe I should say, Sandra Cisneros's 10 x 10.

Find 10 different facets of your life, and ask in each of them, what makes you unique? What makes you different from other people who also share that identity? Notice which words keep popping up, regardless of the context.

In life coaching, there's an exercise where you ask a few people who know you well, what shows up when you enter a room? The words, the pop-up again and again, that is so much of who you are, and what you need to dig into, to find the answer to what it is that makes you unique. What is it, that is your purpose?

Okay. Nely also talks about a diary, writing it all down, so that you have perspective. I want to be honest, I am terrible at journaling, but this advice from Nely made me, at least when I get back into bullet journaling, since as Tefi Pessoa once told us, "Hard to journal without trying to impress yourself."

Guilty as charged. When you can talk about the goals, take the goals, the laser hair removal really made me laugh, and then break them down. So take the goal, year by year, month by month, week by week, so the path feels more manageable.

I am going to admit here, I kind of winced when I heard this advice, because it is halfway through the year, and I didn't do this on January 1. And there is a part of my brain, very symmetrical, that wants to wait until January 1, to do this exercise, and do it right.

But I am going to fight that instinct, and I'm going to begin right now, mid-stream because, why not? I hope you'll join me.

Hey, thank you so much for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua, and me, Alicia Menendez. Sarah McClure is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Stephen Colón mixed this episode. Jimmy Gutierrez is our managing editor. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead.

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CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "UNSTUCK: What Media Mogul Nely Galán Can Teach Us About the Art of Reinvention." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. August 19, 2021. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by:

