



Why Reina Rebelde's Founder, Regina Merson, Chose Herself Over Everything Else

The successful owner of makeup brand Reina Rebelde talks about how she chose to leave a high-profile law career to find her way back to herself. And how she convinced her family that starting a business was the right path for her.

Alicia Menendez:

We talk a lot about changing careers, but wow, Regina Merson really switched it up. She went from being a bankruptcy attorney to founding and running a cosmetics company out of her spare bedroom. Now her Reina Rebelde products are on shelves at Target and Walmart. We talk about an early life crisis, the challenges of carving out space as an independent brand, and my favorite part of the conversation, the idea of normalizing failure.

2008, you were an associate at a prestigious law firm in Dallas. You worked on lots of high profile corporate bankruptcy cases. What did that look like?

Regina Merson: I was at the office till 2:00 or 3:00 every morning. I'd go home. I'd sleep with a BlackBerry under my pillow. I'd wake up at 5:00. I'd go back. There was one year where I didn't go home for dinner for like 345 days in a row. I was actually hired out of law school to be a Lehman Brothers real estate attorney for their law firm. So, I did that for a year, and then we put Lehman into bankruptcy, so I became a bankruptcy lawyer. So, that was kind of the first sharp turn where things did not go the way I thought they were gonna go, the way I imagined they were gonna go.

Menendez: Why? What did you imagine?

Merson: I always wanted to be a transactional attorney. You know, I wanted to work on mergers and deals. I didn't want to be stuck in litigation for decades of my life. When you're working on bankruptcies, the psychology of that is very different, and then you combine that with the 2008 financial crisis and what was happening around the country, it was devastating.

Menendez: That has to be especially difficult when you have your entire life wanted to be an attorney, right? When you had an idea of what being an attorney was going to be. So, how did the reality compare to your imagined reality of what being an attorney would be?

Merson: I had a lot less agency over my life in the early stages of my career than I thought. You know, and I think that's the rookie mistake, right? Like you go to these schools, you have agency over your day to day, you have some pathway towards creating your major, what you're gonna write your thesis about. I went to law school. I got to pick my own classes. I'm embarking on this amazing career. Every case I'm working on is on the cover of the Wall Street Journal. It's amazing. But by the same token, I have no control over my life. I

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can't tell you how many vacations were canceled. And at one point, I think my desire to step up to the plate with respect to what was being asked of me resulted in me actually having a pretty severe health crisis, which is not uncommon in the legal world, and associates get burned out, and I... My body literally started falling apart.

Menendez: What did that look like?

Merson: I was breaking out in hives every single night. Like head-to-toe hives. I was waking up; my entire face was swollen. I went to 100 doctors. No one could figure out what was going on. In order to work these hours and work them on a consistent day-to-day basis, and the amount of pressure, I had disassociated myself from my body, so there were all these symptoms emerging, like stomach issues, mouth ulcers, all of these things that just started sort of melting my brain, but I didn't associate at any point that anything had to do with the stress and the pressure I was under.

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Menendez: I'm a person who took the LSAT and then once I knew I did well enough on the LSAT that I could apply to law school, was like, "I'm not gonna do that." And there are moments of doubt, and then there are moments where I speak with someone like you and I'm like, "Okay, that was the right decision."

Merson: Absolutely. Look, it's the right thing for a lot of people. There's no doubt about that. And I actually enjoyed a lot of parts of it. I just didn't know how to keep myself in check. I didn't know how to put up boundaries. I didn't know how to say no. I'm an immigrant who worked tooth and nail for every opportunity that I got along the way. And nothing was handed to me. And so, I felt that all of those tendencies were amplified in that environment. Plus, you're a woman, which is already a minority within a law firm. You're a Latina. You're an immigrant. There were all these psychological internal pressures that really unseated a lot of things and exposed and revealed a lot of things that were operating under the surface, a lot of which were my internal issues, but it was just a place where it was like the match was lit and everything that was combustible became sort of combustible.

So, you know, that was tough, and I think I realized pretty early on that even though I could do it, didn't mean that I should do it. Of course, I stepped up and billed all the hours, and I got all the results for the clients that everybody wanted, and I was performing really well, but it was costing me this price internally, psychologically, physically, that I think something

about the immigrant experience, you feel you never have a right to say, “Hey, that’s enough. Time out.” Like my health is okay. You just kind of sacrifice so much of yourself to a point that’s unhealthy, frankly. I felt that getting to that point, I had already defied so many odds that I felt there was a lot of internal shame around this notion of like, “Whoa, wait a minute.” But like I’m only 30 and I’ve got all sorts of health problems developing because of this job. And that’s not okay with me, right? I put myself first.

I have a right to say no. I have a right to say enough. And I have a right to do and spend my life doing what I want to do and what makes me happy, not what’s externally validated all the time.

Menendez: And it’s not as though there’s a clear turning point in your story, because there’s sort of, as I understand it, months, maybe even years of recognizing that there was a need to get out from the situation, soul searching about what it is you would want to do instead. What did that period look like? What were the questions you were asking yourself and where were you looking for those answers?

Merson: Yeah. It was what I love to call my early life crisis, because I... Like, I knew, my whole life. I was gonna be one of those people. I was gonna have a total midlife crisis at some point. It ended up coming very early. But it really started with this unrest. There was an internal unrest about waking up everyday and really struggling to understand what was motivating me to get out of bed, really struggling to be present places. I started sort of self-medicating by overworking, to try to quell the unrest. But it was very clear that my psyche was starting to rebel.

I was self-sabotaging in really bizarre ways, none of which were your traditional, what you think of as self-sabotage, right? It wasn’t drug addiction. It wasn’t drinking too much. None of those things that we hear about. It was a different type of self-sabotage that showed up almost in the form of workaholicism, in a way. I couldn’t stop and I thought if I just worked myself to death, I can quiet this sneaking thing that was in my gut that was sort of saying, “Girlfriend, you’re on the wrong path.” Because who wants to say, “Hey, you’re on the wrong path.” I’d spent an entire decade in higher education, like I went to University of Chicago Law School. Their admissions rate is like less than 4%. It was inconceivable to me to sort of turn my back on that experience and that opportunity that I’d worked so hard to create for myself.

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Menendez: Well, because what you chose was radical. I mean, I have a lot of attorney friends who either are partners or on their way to partner, and it does seem that there is, even for those who love their work, always a crisis point. And of those who have left firms, most of them have chosen to go in-house somewhere. In-house at a startup, in-house at a media company. None of my friends have chosen to launch a makeup brand. I mean, that is a radical departure from what you were doing. How did you get there?

Merson: I started going to therapy, which I'm sure you know, and some of your listeners know, is like the end-all be-all for Latino families. Like you do not air your dirty laundry to a therapist. But I had a friend, who's not Latina, who was out to dinner with me one night and said, "You don't look right. You don't seem right. I'm giving you the name of three people. I need you to go talk to somebody." And I just trusted this person implicitly and I was like, "Okay."

So, I find this woman and I remember the first day, I just sat on her couch. She's like, "Why are you here?" I was like, "Well, I don't know." I just started crying. It was just like a litany of this doesn't feel right, that doesn't feel right. And through it we sort of unraveled that I had sort of lost my way, but the way to find my way back was to very subtly and non-judgmentally detach myself from the path I thought I was on, and instead really focus on what I enjoy doing. What did I naturally gravitate to when nobody was watching, nobody was counting my hours, nobody was evaluating my work? Anything?

She's like, "Anything. Do you like to bake cookies? Do you like to clean the house? Do you like to read books? Do you like to doodle in a notebook?" So, I was like, "Okay." And the key part of that for her was the non-judgmental part. Because we all kind of set on this path, and at that point it was so loaded. It wasn't just me that was invested in me, the lawyer at the high-profile law firm. It was my mother. It was my parents. It was my siblings. There was so much of this like projection onto me that I felt I was carrying on my shoulders, which was hard, and so the non-judgmental part was key, and so I did. I underwent this exercise for several months.

I started keeping a journal, like when I have quiet time, I love doing my makeup. When I have quiet time, I love watching YouTube videos on how to perfect my liquid eyeliner, how to perfect a smokey eye, how to contour. When I have free time, I'm buying makeup at Sephora. And of course, there were other creative outlets that I had, but that was the one that just kept coming up, and coming up, and coming up. And so, then of course immediately I was like, "Do I want to be a makeup artist? Is that what this means?"

But there were other things I enjoy, too. At one point, I said, "You know, I want to create something. I want to give something back to my community." I noticed that I was joining nonprofits that really focused on young Latino girls. I did one that was like dealing with micro lending with young women in Latin American countries, and I thought, "I feel like I've lost my touch point with the community, and I want to give something back, and I want to inspire people." And so, it was kind of a combination of a number of things, and at the end of the day she said, "Well, would you ever consider starting a business? That can be very creative."

And I said, "I don't know." So, I took a class at a local college and I would sneak out for two hours every other day for like three months and come back to work, and it was all about starting a business. And I did it again in a non-judgmental way. I didn't announce it to anybody. I just sort of privately went and said, "Okay, I'm just gonna go listen to several

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months of what it would be to start a business.” Could I do that? And then I just sat on the books for like 18 months and didn’t do anything about it. And little by little, there was a slow building to an aha moment, and the aha moment was, “Oh my gosh, this isn’t creative enough.” And I could find a creative outlet and find a way to help the community that I came from, and use all of this, but also have this intellectual side of trying to build a business, which is highly taxing intellectually.

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Menendez: A round of layoffs at your law firm ultimately pushed you into full-time entrepreneurship. How did you initially fund the company?

Merson: I had savings from when I was working as a lawyer and I raised some money from some friends and family, and I took a year figuring out really what cosmetic chemistry was about, how complicated it was, the volume of product you had to order, and through that I was also trying to be very thrifty. I had done some projections and some numbers as I was amassing data on how complicated this was gonna be, and it’s very expensive to start a makeup brand.

Menendez: How expensive is it? How much capital do you need?

Merson: I mean, I think to get started, you probably need like \$100,000, \$200,000 to start. Yeah. It’s not a joke. And then all of these things start coming up. I knew nothing about marketing and how expensive cosmetics photography is. I knew nothing about kind of the process if you work with a chemist and you do several rounds of iterations on a lipstick formula, and then you have to go source the ingredients to make that formula in a larger volume all over the country and the world. And that is like any other market, the prices are volatile. So, what this ingredient might cost you today is gonna be totally different in six months. There’s a whole economics of it that’s mind-blowing.

I entered at a time in the market where indie brands were popping up everywhere. And they were really starting to kind of blow up, and the theory at the time was as long as you could have a website and an Instagram handle, you could make it. Since I launched, things have changed dramatically. It’s not as simple and cookie cutter as that, and that was a point of my entrance into the market that was drastically overwhelming, when I realized how quickly that environment was changing. It isn’t that easy. You can’t just have a website. You gotta figure out how to drive traffic to that website, and Google, and Facebook.

It became a whole side education in social media marketing, and digital marketing, and that can become very expensive.

Menendez: What personal sacrifices did you make in that first year?

Merson: Sleep, dating, food, I mean literally, like it was an all hands on deck. I was doing every package. I was figuring out every Instagram post. I was doing every customer service email.

Menendez: I have to ask you about that, because 2017, a year in, you were handling every order, sometimes with help from your mom, and your mom was quoted in the Dallas News as saying, “From lawyer to packer,” as she watched. I couldn’t tell if that was pride or some serious Latina mom shade.

Merson: Latina mom shade. Latina mom shade, which you know, is a whole part of this journey that’s so underestimated in our community. You’re not just managing your own psychology while you’re going through this, you’re managing the naysayers, and usually the biggest naysayers in a Latino household are your own parents. I mean, they’re the ones like, “M’hijita. ¡Qué chiflada!” You’re not gonna be that. Like, “You’re not gonna do this.”

She’s definitely supportive, but she’s nervous, right? I mean, my parents sacrificed a lot to get me to go to these schools, and develop these careers that were safe, right? Like you’ve made it, there’s nothing left to prove, let’s just let it lie. The priority of me going out and doing what makes me happy isn’t probably a top priority, and it isn’t in most Latino households. It’s like, “Toe the line and let’s leave it at that.”

And I think that is one of the things I don’t love about our community. I think it is a huge disservice, particularly to young women, because there already is a glass ceiling that the outside world’s put up there. We don’t need the household telling us that there’s also one inside the house. And so, I really fought that. I’ve struggled with it, right? I’ve struggled with if this fails, how am I gonna show face? And at the same time, I also feel that the part of the damage that I’ve tried to unwind through this process is this fear of failure. Latino families, especially when you’re an immigrant, it’s like failure is not an option. Period, end of story. Like everyone worked really hard to be here.

I moved to this country when I was 10. I didn’t speak English. Failure is not an option. And now I’m like, “Failure is an option, and is failure so bad?” Like failure can’t be that bad, right? It’s scary, but it’s not gonna be the end of the world. It’s not gonna end you. And I wish that was the more prevailing attitude, and whenever I meet young Latinas who ask me, “How do I do this?” I’m like, “You just have to not be afraid and go for it and know that if you fail you’re gonna be okay.” Because I think the fear of failure prevents so many people from doing amazing things.

Menendez: Reina Rebelde is often called the first makeup line by Latinas, for Latinas. Why does that matter and how much of your consumer base is actually Latina?

Merson: Why does that matter? I think it matters because at the time we launched, we were considered to be very disruptive to the space. The only people making niche lines for what’s considered a small segment of the population are huge companies, like L’Oréal and Estée Lauder, that have the funds to put towards something like that. But they’re missing all sorts of authentic understanding. As much emphasis and studying as they put into the Latino segment, until they decide to hire like an all-Latino workforce, they’re not gonna get it.

Menendez: One of the lessons of your own career is that it’s okay to change your mind. Sometimes, I think our greatest resistance to that, as you said earlier, is worrying what other people will think and worrying that we’re disappointing others. What do you do to block that out?

Merson: I think I did so many things early on in my life that were not for me, they were for other people, and I excelled at them, and then I’d be really resentful because whatever payout I had told myself was there in the end never came. And so, it was brutal. It was
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psychologically deflating to think, “Oh my gosh, I just spent three years killing myself in law school and I thought it was going to mean XYZ and R to all these people, and instead I got a that a girl pat on the back and everyone moved on with their lives.” And so, I didn’t realize that within that, you’re really making a bargain with yourself. You think that there’s this payout.

And when I started really shifting and doing things for me, the interest in what other people felt or thought greatly diminished. I’m not gonna tell you it’s not there. Of course, it’s there. We’re human. We’re social animals. We want to be validated for what we do. But I do it for me and I use my internal compass as a guide for what feels right for me, and I apply that to everything. You know, I learned a technique through this therapist I started seeing about watching how my body feels in certain environments. Whether you’re sitting at a business meeting with a banker, or a manufacturer, or you’re on a date, or you’re sitting at Target deciding whether or not you want your brand there, and really paying attention to what your body is telling you about it. That’s my guide.

And I hope, cherry on top, it makes my mother proud. But you know, a lot of things I’ve done don’t. It’s also retraining our parents that it’s not the end of the world if we do something that they don’t adore. We still love them, they’re still gonna love us, I’m still showing up on Sunday for eight hour lunch. Like, no pasa nada. It’s okay. You’re still gonna love me whether you think you are or you’re not. You are. And that’s tough, but I think it’s imparted in me loving other people in my life in that way.

When I became less judgmental of myself, I also was able to become less judgmental of other people in my life, and sort of just love them for whatever mess up they’ve done. I think that’s important. You know, and I want more Latinas to be fearless. One of my biggest pet peeves about having become an entrepreneur is the pressure that if you don’t show everybody that you can succeed and that you will succeed, it’s not a story worth telling, when really it’s like sometimes I’m like, “Guys, this may become a total failure. It doesn’t look like a failure today, but it may, and I would never want that to discourage another Latina from trying something bold and brave.” In fact, I’d want her to take that and say, “Well, Regina tried it, and she failed, and I’m gonna go try it because she seems to be doing just fine. She woke up the next day and life went on.”

Menendez: I love that in the depths of my soul.

Merson: Yeah? Good.

Menendez: Yes. Yes. I love it. There’s always a piece of these interviews that I take with me and carry forever. That will be the piece. Regina, this was awesome. Thank you so much for your time.

Merson: Thank you so much. Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you’re listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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