



How Peloton's Robin Arzón Found Her True Power

The litigator turned ultra-marathoner and fitness instructor shares the personal trauma that helped redirect her from law into fitness, her commitment to showing up fully present and fully committed, and why her new children's book, *Strong Mama*, is a call to reimagine self-care.

Alicia Menendez:

If you have ever worked out with Robin Arzón, the vice president of programming and head instructor at Peloton, you know she accepts nothing less than your best. She talks a lot about being fully present and committed, and that is exactly how she showed up for this conversation. We dig into her pivot from litigator to ultra marathoner and fitness instructor, the series of personal traumas that put her on this path, and how her new children's book, *Strong Mama*, is challenging our ideas about self care. You talk a lot about both your parents. When you think about your mom, what were the lessons you got from her, watching her, about what it meant to be a woman and what it meant to be a mom?

Robin Arzón:

Gosh, I think I'm discovering the answer to that every single day as I'm very early in motherhood. My baby is only eight months. But I think I absorbed a lot by watching my mother just create boundaries and step into her power and really small ways. For example, one of the main stories that I latched onto that my mother told me growing up was about how when she was in high school. She went to a high school, a Catholic high school in Philadelphia. She wasn't really grasping the language. So, she was only doing well in math. But English-based classes she wasn't doing well in. And they were going to try to put her in a trade school track that would not have allowed her the opportunity to apply for college, at least not through the traditional route. And so, she basically made a bet with the Monsignor that she would have a B average in all of her classes. And she bet on herself. And there are a lot of examples in my mother's life of moments when she steps into her power as a Latina, as a woman, as a mother. And they were maybe more subtle than I realized. Growing up, I thought you had to be like historic with a capital H. And now, I find it comforting that we can create legacies that are important with maybe subtler, more consistent action, which is what I learned from her.

Menendez:

That feels consistent with your entire theory of change.

Arzón:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez:

That little steps that individual choices can lead up to bigger change.

Arzón: Yes.

Menendez: 1999, your mom is diagnosed with MS. Do you remember being told about her diagnosis with that conversation was like and how that shifted things in your family?

Arzón: Oh, gosh. So I was away at college already. I was a freshman at NYU. On the one hand, we were devastated. But on the other hand, we were a little bit relieved because MS is such a hard condition to diagnose. That at least we had something to work towards some type of solution care, some type of framework to work with. And it took a while. It took about 10 years for my mom to get into a groove of her care and her medicine. But thankfully she did figure it out. But it was a lot of trial and error. I don't remember the initial conversation, but I do remember the aftermath of just being like, "How is she going to be today?" And I just have to accept that and be her ally and be the strong one. For me, it was a little bit more distant and that gave me been less control over something that was uncontrollable. That actually contributed to my running greatly because that was something that I could control. I could sign up for a race. I could raise money. I could get the word out on social media about this condition and what it's like to live with this condition through my mother's experience. All of my college years were really mom's diagnosis, the death of a very close family member. My cousin committed suicide. We were 18 years old. And then, myself being a victim of trauma, like held at gunpoint. So those few years really catalyzed a lot of change and a lot of pain. It was like a fast track into the value system that I hold dear today.

Menendez: It was a fast track and in the retelling now it is very neat, which tends to happen with public people. But it actually took a while for you to make that pivot. And there were a number of steps that took you from what seems like a pretty long held dream of becoming an attorney to then where we find you today. So I want to dig into that a little bit. What was it that drew you to the law in the first place?

Arzón: My father was a lawyer and he was also a law professor when I was growing up. So, I was always enchanted with it for some reason through his experience. And I remember sitting on stacks of blue books, which is literally there were blue, like pamphlets that people used to write in to do their law exams. And I would sit on blue books and watch him grade exams and think it was mundane. But to me it seemed interesting because he was really wrestling with, why would this person get an A? Why would this person get a B? What are the arguments that you could make with words that would have value? So, I think that was my first illustration of that kind of meritocracy. And I decided at a really young age, that's what I'm going to do. So I think I was like 10 or 11 years old when I said I'm going to be a lawyer.

Menendez: I have a very similar story. My dad is an attorney. I thought I would grow up, go to law school. He's an elected official. I thought I would run for a public office. And for me, it was more about hitting a wall where I realized I was just trying to replicate someone else's life, instead of figuring out what it was I wanted to do for myself. And you've said something that resonated with me, which is, it's not like you go to bed one day being like, "I'm going

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to be a litigator." And then, you wake up the next day and you're like, "No, that's not right. I'm going to pursue another path." It is death, as you say, by a thousand cuts. And I wonder if you can talk me through some of those moments where you begin to process that the path you are on is not the path that is actually meant for you.

Arzón: It wasn't as much in the practice of law. It was in the moments that I wasn't practicing. So, I think I could have been a reasonably okay, in terms of like the happiness quotient, attorney. But it was in the absence of the law and the little, little small moments where I was lacing up to go for a run, and the small moments where I was picking up weights, where I had the flow state that we read about. And I was like, "Oh, that, more of that. How do I do more of that? How do I monetize that?" Those were the breadcrumbs.

Menendez: What was it about Peloton that made you believe it was fitness of the future?

Arzón: Gosh.

Menendez: Because you were right. So, I'd like to know where that clairvoyance came from.

Arzón: I got my spin certification when I was still a lawyer simply because I geek out on... I love school and I was like, "I want to learn more about this thing that I do for fun." And so, geeked out on the science and the programming and the music and all that. So, I had my certification and I had so much time, honestly. Because when I left my law firm and nobody was... Shockingly, nobody was writing me back because they didn't know who the hell I was. I was teaching classes for a local spin studio. And I thought to myself, "Gosh, this is a lot of work to teach five people sometimes." I mean, I was the newest kid on the block at the studio. And so, I was teaching, like 8:30, 9:00 at night, to two people sometimes, to one person. And I willingly did it and I was glad to have the experience. But as I started getting my groove, I thought this doesn't make sense. There has to be a way that this scales. That my love for this can scale. So when I read a very short article about Peloton and about John Foley, our CEO, I thought, "Oh, okay, they've done it." So, I believed immediately. And I believed exactly how John talks about it now. I was in, like I totally got it.

Menendez: What was it you said in that email that made him know that you were legit?

Arzón: So it was a cold email to like info@peloton.

Menendez: No.

Arzón: Or it was pelotoncycle.com then. It wasn't even one Peloton yet because we only had bikes. I don't even know who received the email. It wasn't to John's personal email. It was like, hello @ peloton ...

Menendez: You got to find the intern that passed that along.

Arzón: There were only like 25 employees at the time, so it wasn't... And they all sat... Literally, everyone sat together. So, it would've been like a shot across the room, but it didn't get lost in the server somewhere. But yes, to your point, I would love to dig up that email. But it was literally like I'm buying what you're selling. I'm the one. Let's go. And I had an audition, I think, two days later.

Menendez: How do you go then from being an instructor to becoming the VP of programming? What was it you were doing? How was it you were showing up that sent the message that you wanted to be a part of the infrastructure and the business of the place?

Arzón: So I was promoted about three years in. It was certainly my law background contributed to connecting the dots, which is seeing what stakeholders needed across different areas of the company. And as the company was growing, we did need someone who was at the central point, at the nexus of being in front of the camera, being in partnership with our production team, on our content team, reporting to the chief content officer, which is what I still do. The chief content officer is my boss. And then, across the company, whether it's marketing products, other departments and teams within the company, giving the perspective of a fitness professional. But also, as someone who experiences our product and really has an ear to the ground to what our members are saying. I just did it organically and then folks took notice. I would really own kind of the position of being a brand ambassador. And that's a huge part of what the instructor role is. I stepped into that very early on and leveraged that outside of the Peloton walls as well in writing my book and partnering with some of the biggest athletic brands in the world. And in doing things that are part of the job pretty normally now, I was one of the first to do them.

Menendez: It's one of the things I find very interesting about your career, which is as a fellow left-brained person, is that you are both a principle or talent in the way that you are an instructor. But then also you have this behind the scenes building role. And similarly, the fact that you were both building your own platform, RobinNYC is a platform in and of itself. Peloton is adjacent to that. But you're never subsumed by the bigger brand. I feel like you uniquely have found a way to allow them to live and to grow side by side. And I think that is both unique and hard to do. Did you build all of this by yourself, Robin? Like did you sit down and write a five year plan? Or was there someone who helped guide you along the way?

Arzón: Nobody does it by themselves, right? No, I didn't do it by myself. But did somebody guide me? Also, no. I think it's thousands of small decisions that build of themselves. And it is having an understanding of who I am and what message I want to get out there. I realized early on that I am a fire starter. I want to light fires in people's lives, whether they're engaging with me through my book, through social media, through the Peloton platform, through a business partnership that I have. I want to light fires and I want to use movement as a vehicle for that, because I believe that movement enables us to be both at peace and on fire. I was very intentional. I do vision boards. I journal. I do five-year plans, one-week plans, one-day plans. I love plans. I love planners. I love journals. I love all of it. And I allow myself... You mentioned right brain, left brain. I allow myself the ability to dream as big and

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as fanciful as it could be. And then, use a work back approach. Or begin with the end in mind and be like, "Okay, so if I really were to do this crazy thing, what would I do today to make that even 0.1% more real?" And that is I think what trips people up is that folks can do the dreaming thing and they can do the list thing, but they don't necessarily meet in the middle. And I think all the right brains and all the left brains can learn something from each other, right?

Menendez: I think that's exactly right. I found you at a pretty pivotal point in my own life, where I had moved from Miami to New Jersey. I'd had my second baby. I have my own show on MSNBC. And the feedback I kept getting about anchoring the show was that they needed more of me. I kept asking what that meant, but no one could give me a clear answer and I was really frustrated. And then, watching you lead your classes helped me understand how you have to give a little bit of yourself. A little bit of personal narrative. A little bit of backstory. And it doesn't have to be a confessional...

Arzón: Yeah.

Menendez: ... in every show. But yes, you show up because someone runs you through a rigorous ride or because you feel better at the end of their workout. But really what you're looking for is connection.

Arzón: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez: Especially when you're doing it in a virtual environment. So, I tip my hat to you because there is true mastery of that and as a producer, I have some questions about. And do you script all of that? How much are you doing extemporaneously? And how much have you outlined in advance?

Arzón: No, it is not scripted. My classes are not scripted. No instructors classes are truly scripted, but we do have notes. Some folks might have more robust notes than I do. I always know the class plan. Of course, I make the playlist. I do everything for the class. I make the playlist. I do the class plan. And the framework of the class is already set. So, I know what song this is going to be a climb, or this song's going to be intervals, or this song is going to be a recovery. So, I know that in advance. And for certain special classes like classes on Thanksgiving or classes that might be for Latinx Heritage Month, of course, I have themes. And those are more bullets. If I want to talk about gratitude, I literally just write gratitude. But everything else is truly I'm speaking in the moment.

Menendez: That is incredible to me. It's incredible because you never miss a beat. You never say I'd like a doer. And that's the other thing, which is you're doing it live, which is like doing the crossword in pen. It's like if you mess up...

Arzón: Great analogy.

Menendez: ... we are all watching you, which also is what part of what makes it thrilling, right? Is that, it's like the stakes feel high.

Arzón: Yes. It's the ultimate focus. Mm-hmm (affirmative). But it's incredibly impressive. For me, the magic is in the moment. And I can feel intuitively like, "Gosh, that beat just dropped or the music dropped out and this is the moment." And I can feel... Like in my mind, I can feel millions of people on the other side of that camera sweating with me and feeling that emotion with me. And I'm a member as well of Peloton. And I've been on the other side of that screen, happy, crying, grieving, joyful, all the emotions. So, I get it. I really do get it. When we break through that fourth wall, I have both experienced it and then architected it, co-created it as well.

Menendez: So strange talking with you because we have such an asymmetrical relationship, where I have spent so much time with you. And I know so many of your stories, including... It feels like I watched you announce your pregnancy. And then, I watched you come back. And so, I feel, and millions of other people feel, very tied to this story. What was your greatest trepidation about becoming a mom?

Arzón: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I bought a little bit into the narrative that... Like I would be giving up so much of who I am, in order to become a mother. And this whole, like people would say to my husband, "Oh, just wait. Your life is over." This like chicken little thing, which in no area of my life has that ever applied. And it doesn't apply now either. But I had this feeling like, "Well, I don't know. I've never been a mother, so I guess maybe that is what happens." And that's not what has happened for us. I think we've become more of who we are and really stepped into a vastness, an expansiveness. I mean, yeah, like our time is constricted. There are definitely sacrifices and difficulties. But I'm glad I didn't let that narrative go too far in my head and realize I actually write this story. It's not been written for me yet.

Menendez: Is there anything since Athena's arrival that has surprised you?

Arzón: I am more laid back as a parent than I thought I would be. I am more willing to surrender to all the ways that parenthood and motherhood requires you to surrender and bend, so you don't break. So that has been really interesting that my husband and I were intentional. We create boundaries. Like obviously, we're going to have rules in our house. But I don't freak out at every little thing. And I trust that the environment that we've created for my daughter is the right one, because it's the one we've created. And she'll tell us one day what's not right, I'm sure. But I trust and that has surprised me because I am so... I am a Virgo. I'm a former lawyer. I love lists and rules. And I just want to know at 9:02 what's happening. But it's literally impossible.

Menendez: You said something in your recent interview with Parents Latina that hit me hard because this is the way I want to show up. And I'm not sure that I always do. And that's... You said, "I will show up with full presence, full intention, full energy, ready to slay, ready to partner, ready to collaborate." And I was like reading along. I was like, "Yes." And then, of course, I was like, "And how do I do that Robin?"

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Arzón: Yeah, exactly.

Menendez: If you could please teach me how, I would love to hear it.

Arzón: I decide what my primary identity is in any given moment. Literally, right now, I can hear my daughter crying in the other room. And I have to trust that she's with our nanny and she will be taken care of in that moment and she'll be okay. And right now, I'm engaging with you as Robin, not just as mom. And I have to make that choice. And sometimes that choice is easier to make than others. But I do feel better about myself when I am not intentionally splintering myself into a million pieces. Life is going to splinter us. We are going to be fragmented in some way, shape or form by life and all of the identities that we have, especially in this multi-hyphenate existence. But what I try to do is truly show up with the intentionality of that collaborative spirit of what am I here to do today and what does success... How am I going to define success in this next hour, in this next 30 minutes? Literally it's in those small chunks. And I try to give myself grace when I go off track. But I do try to approach every hour of my day with what is the primary part of my identity that I need to honor right now.

Menendez: Like what have you never been asked, you never get to talk about?

Arzón: I guess I don't get asked often about the importance of play. One of the best conversations I've had this year was with Lin-Manuel Miranda before *In the Heights* came out. And he said, he wrote *Hamilton* on vacation. He was reading a book about Alexander Hamilton and he started to think, "Oh, this would be an amazing show." And boom, that was like... You're talking about like somebody's opus landing in their, on vacation, like while you're sitting there with a mai tai or something on the beach, like you have one of your biggest, most pivotal career moments. So, I guess I don't get asked, just talk about play enough. And I think that ambitious folks... We all know burnout is real and burnout is bad. But we still work like hell and we're still just running ourselves into the ground. And I think it's incredibly important to make space for play. Not just rest, not just going to sleep at night and having a nighttime routine, but it's true play. So, make time for play.

Menendez: I love that. And I am in need of that message, so thank you so much. Robin, thank you so much for your time.

Arzón: Thank you. This was such an enjoyable conversation. It was great to meet you.

Menendez: Same. Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Stephen Colon mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at *Latina to Latina*. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember please to subscribe

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