



How *Canticos* Creator Susie Jaramillo Built an Inclusive Kids' Brand

Susie Jaramillo created several lines of award-winning children's books, animated series, and merchandise. And she made the first board book prototype *by hand* while easing her child into daycare. It's no wonder when Alicia spoke to her, Susie was celebrating a \$2-million seed round for her Encantos Media. She tells us what it takes to thrive as a creative in the corporate world, and build the confidence to grow from what you know.

Alicia Menendez:

Susie Jaramillo knows how to build a brand. For years, she led one of the top multicultural creative agencies in the US. Then, she decided to apply that expertise to a brand of her own, Encantos, a media company that designs, develops, and distributes animated films, books, and apps. Today, I'm in Susie's home in Brooklyn, hoping to absorb her wisdom on branding, pivoting midcareer, and staying focused on the purpose that drives her business.

Susie, I was planning on starting this interview by telling you that because I knew I was interviewing you, I've been singing Los Pollitos, and we sing that at my home all the time.

Susie Jaramillo: Awesome!

Menendez: But wow, I'm with you on a big day for you.

Jaramillo: Yeah. It's a very exciting day.

Menendez: \$2 million raised in an oversubscribed seed round.

Jaramillo: Yeah, it's very exciting.

Menendez: That's gotta feel good.

Jaramillo: The important thing is it's really... It shows how people really get the opportunity. It shows how the investment community really understands the need for content and for brands that appeal to diverse markets, diverse kids, diverse families.

Menendez: What was it like to walk into those rooms and make those pitches?

Jaramillo: I'm not gonna lie. It was a little intimidating, because I don't come from finance. I've never raised money before. I got to walk in with my partner, who's amazing, and I have a fundamental belief that if you be true to yourself, everything else will follow. It was my job in those rooms to tell the story. That's all I had to do. I also really felt, I walked into every single room thinking, "If this is meant to be, it will happen. If this is not meant to be, it will not happen." And that is a wonderful way of letting go of all of your fears. I've always believed that fear is for rich people, right there with insecurity. Those are luxuries I can't really afford, so I would just walk in like, "Okay, this is what we're doing. This is where we're doing it. It makes complete sense to us. If you would like to be a part of this and help

us build, you are welcome. If you have... If you really question this opportunity, if you question this market, if you don't believe in what we're doing, we're probably not the right fit for you."

Menendez: You say your premise is simple, when in reality, what you're trying to do is very complicated. Build beloved brands and tell authentic stories, create content inspired by a world of culture, use media and technology as a force for good. Those are not simple goals, Susie.

Jaramillo: You know, one at a time. I like to say you can do everything, just not at once, not all at once, and you put one foot in front of the other. If you're gonna build a brand, it might as well be a beloved brand that stands the test of time, right? If you're going to build a brand, it might as well have substance. It might as well have stories. If you come from a diverse culture, you might as well tell your story. You might as well elevate your community. And if you are an artist, if you're a creative, I think you do your best when you serve, when you are true to your community, when you're true to your values, and when you are true to the message that you think needs to be told at a given point in time.

And I think right now, it's really important that our stories be told the way we want to tell them.

Menendez: You say you knew what was missing in the market. What was missing?

Jaramillo: Well, it's kind of funny. So, I came from the advertising space, and I'm gonna just do the setup first, and on a regular basis I pitched the multicultural markets, the Latino opportunity, and how much, how powerful this market was. The purchasing power.

Menendez: Did you ever get to a point where you would say, "They're the most brand loyal group in America and almost gag from the fact that you had to-

Jaramillo: Oh my gosh. My frustration with the Latin community is that they don't demand more, that they don't demand more from their media companies, more from the companies that they buy from. They're a market that gets taken for granted completely, and that was a massive source of frustration for me. It's like sure, they watch the Hispanic media outlets, because they're the only ones that cater to them, that want to tell their stories. And I was like, "But I love these cultures. I live these cultures." And so, I felt that okay, so here's a business opportunity now, because on a regular basis I'm pitching this business, and yet I know that these... Most of my clients were not really gonna do much, because they kind of just want to do what's good enough.

And I was having babies, and I was kind of done, mentally done with advertising. I was like, "Okay, this is what... I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do." I know that you have this little inside voice. It's the little voice that tells you, "This would be a really good idea. You could do this really well." And I wasn't drawing. I'm an artist by trade. That's what I studied. That's what I'm best at. And I was like, "You know what? There's a massive opportunity to do wonderful, beautiful, illustrated stories, animated projects for, in my case, in the Latin community, and I'm not gonna do it here in the advertising agency. Let me at least in the low-hanging fruit, I mean where are my board books that celebrate my Latin culture? Where is Los Pollitos? Where's Un Elefante se Balanceaba?"

And I was like, "If I don't do this, someone else is gonna do it. They're gonna do it badly, and I'm gonna be so pissed." I'm gonna be so pissed!

Menendez: I can tell you, there are a lot of people that have done it badly. I mean, when you... I've had the experience of going to buy Spanish language books for my child, and just, first of all there's not a lot on the shelf. A lot of what's on the shelf feels like it was an afterthought. Sometimes my husband's like, "Did they run this through Google Translate? Did they have an actual Spanish speaker who wrote this?" What, when you actually looked at the market, what wasn't there?

Jaramillo: So, most of what you would find in terms of board books were translations of American nursery rhymes, or translations of American classics, the Boynton books, Eric Carlisle, Dr. Seuss in Spanish, right? But you couldn't find the witty, wonderful nursery rhymes that actually come from that culture. And I was like-

Menendez: Which also matters, because those things are written to rhyme in a way that helps you learn some basics of language.

Jaramillo: Exactly. Exactly.

Menendez: That doesn't work in transliteration.

Jaramillo: Exactly, so that was my challenge, right? Because if we can sing Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star in Spanish, why can't the American markets sing Los Pollitos in English? Why can't our nursery rhymes be American classics? We're a part of this tapestry now. So, part of my challenge as a kid who grew up on Dr. Seuss was let me take all of these wonderful nursery rhymes and interpret them in English. And I want American kids to sing, "Little chickie squeal, **pio, pio, pio.**" You know what I mean? And understand these nursery rhymes, and sing them in English, and this way the Spanish will be closer to them. The culture will be closer to them. Because part of our responsibility as cultural ambassadors is to bring the cultures closer together.

Whether it be through language, whether it be through culture, our... It doesn't matter. If I have a little American kid singing Little Chickies in English, a little Latin kid will get excited. They know it, right? Even though it's in English, it's familiar to them. Anyways, I just wanted to make it easier for everybody.

Menendez: So, how did you start?

Jaramillo: I didn't know exactly what this would look like. I knew it would be a brand. I knew it would celebrate all these adorable little characters, starring Little Chickies. I mean, it's pretty cute, right? But I didn't know how I was gonna do it. However, it just made sense to start with board books, and I wanted the board books to be reversible, and lift the flap.

Menendez: So, for someone who doesn't have a child, a board book is?

Jaramillo: A board book is a thick, heavy book that a kid will not tear easily.

Menendez: This is a critical thing to understand.

Jaramillo: They can slobber on it, and it will survive.

Menendez: They can chew on it. It's like the durability is important.

Jaramillo: Chew on it. And here's another part. This is a book that has very few words, so if you're an artist, it's low-hanging fruit. It's a book that relies heavier on art than it does on written prose, so you can do a board book with one nursery rhyme. So, I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is a series." It's Mother Goose for the Latino community. But I personally find bilingual

books oftentimes to be cumbersome, because it's two languages that they throw at you, on the same page, and it's cumbersome, and I wanted to do this in a different format. I wanted reversible board books.

Because with reversible board books, you can read it in Spanish, in one language, and when the kid goes, "Again! Again!" Okay. Again. Let's read it in English. So, you get to read to the child one language at a time, and you instill them in the love for languages with the repetition, and then they're able to appreciate things like phonics, and music, and early literacy skills, one language at a time. So, I wanted to explore that new format, which I've never seen with books here in the United States. And I had it in my head, like, "I gotta do this. I gotta do this." But of course, life takes over, right? At the time, I had two little kids. I had a four-year-old and a two-and-a-half-year-old, and the two-and-a-half-year-old was starting pre-pre-K, like two days a week, two and a half days a week in a little play group in a church basement. And she did not want to go to her group, and she was throwing all kinds of temper tantrums, and being the sucker that I was, I decided, "Okay, I won't leave. I'll sit here for four hours, or at least maybe half an hour until you let me go."

And I was in a church basement where there was no internet, so I couldn't read the news on my phone, which is normally what I would have done. So, I grabbed some construction paper and I started mapping out my Little Chickies book, the first book that we did. And when I saw how the format actually really worked, and how I could lift the flap into **pio**, and how I could make the... I could create a wheel, and make the hen run to go get the corn, I got really excited. And that was just the start. I had a fully illustrated book two weeks later, because I got so excited, I just immediately started drawing and illustrating.

And then after that, I just started the next book. Okay, now I'm gonna do elephants. Because one thing that I knew from my time as a creative is that you can talk all day long, but if you don't show people something, they cannot imagine it themselves.

Menendez: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Jaramillo: You know? And if you can't do the due diligence of believing in yourself, and flushing out your idea yourself, well then, it's not their responsibility to project a made up vision of what you could do into the air. So, it is important that you just do it, that you just... You know, it's funny, because oftentimes people will tell me, "Well, how did you find the time to do it? And blah, blah, blah." I just think it's important to know that you will never find the time. Nobody ever finds time. You make the time. If you really want to do something, you just do it, and everything else has followed since then.

Ad: *Have you tried H2rOse? We saw it all over Instagram with backers like The Real's Adrienne Bailon, so we got curious and tried it, and now we love it. H2rOse is rosewater infused with saffron and real fruit juice. Rosewater is a favorite of skincare enthusiasts, who credit it with improved complexion, and saffron has traditionally been associated with improved sleep and better moods. H2rOse comes in four delicious flavors: Peach, Apple, Mango and Wild Berry, a team favorite. If you want to give it a try, you can find it in stores, order a pack online, or sign up for a subscription at drinkh2rose.com. Use the promo code LATINA and get \$5 off your first order. That's drinkh2rose.com.*

Menendez: One thing I've not been able to deduce from reading all about you is 2015, you launch this. Are you still doing advertising at that time, or had you already sold the advertising agency?

Jaramillo: So, again, for me it's really important to be true to yourself. The whole Ikigai model of what's your purpose. You find what you're good at, you find what you really love doing,

how you serve, and how you make money, and I looked, and where those four circles overlap, right? That's your purpose. Your reason for being. So, while I was good at advertising, I didn't love doing it, and I didn't think it served my community, so I really felt like I needed to do a shift where I could do something I was really good at, that I really loved doing, and then would also serve.

So, when I left advertising, I didn't look back. I completely unplugged, because there's so many distractions.

Menendez: Tell me about the decision to leave, because it's a hard one when you're having a successful career.

Jaramillo: It is. It is. And it was like as Heidi Klum would say, "When you're in you're in, and when you're out, you're out!" So, basically, I took myself out, and it was like, "Okay, no FOMO. I'm gonna miss out."

Menendez: So, you left, no salary.

Jaramillo: No salary! I mean, I was lucky. We sold the company, so I was lucky to have some savings, and I was lucky to have a wonderful partner, and we had a conversation about it and I said, "Sweetie, I really feel like I need to do this. I'm not being true to myself. I'm not being true to my purpose unless I try. And if I fail, I'll go back to work. Give me two years."

Menendez: Two years. I was gonna ask how long it took.

Jaramillo: Yeah, so he gave me... We made a deal. I could stay home and still have household help for two years on a part-time basis and get off the ground. Well, in two years I met my cofounders, and I had... We had all this press. We had the first books published. And so, in two years, there was enough there to where we agreed that I would keep going. I would keep doing it.

Menendez: Encantos is designed to be a house of brands that is creator-led. What does that mean?

Jaramillo: So, we believe that stories are authentic when the creator tells them. There's nothing worse than corporate brands. Do you know what I mean? It's like this corporation that's like, "We're gonna make a kids brand."

Menendez: Have you noticed even a lot of these kids books, they start out with one original author, but as they sort of become syndicated, they're almost like processed by machines, like there's not even an author name on there.

Jaramillo: Yeah. Exactly. Exactly. So, there will always be author names on our books, for sure. So, it's important for us that things not be manufactured, and that they be grown, and we're more farmers and gardeners than we are manufacturers of product and brands, if that makes any sense whatsoever.

Menendez: Yeah, and you don't want to be big agri.

Jaramillo: Yeah. Exactly. Exactly.

Menendez: Encantos specifically now has so many iterations. There's a Nick Junior series, there's an app.

Jaramillo: The house of brands that is Encantos, so Encantos is the parent company and we have three brands. We have Canticos, which is our nursery rhyme brand. We have Tiny Travelers, which is our travel brand, it's like fall-in-love-with-the-world brand. And then we

have *Esqueletitos*, which is kind of like our... You know, I don't want to call it a Day of the Dead brand, even though it definitely has the iconography of Day of the Dead. It's more our brand that tackles anxiety and the things that happen when you sleep. Your dreams.

Menendez: We talk to lots of CEOs. I think you've made it clear to me why that wasn't the title that fit for you. I've actually not spoken with many chief creative officers. Where does your responsibility and your jurisdiction begin and end?

Jaramillo: So, I think it's my responsibility to ensure that every single piece of creative, or content, or even brand that we build is world class. That we always compete with the best in the business. It's really important, especially as a Latino, that when you go out and you put something out into the world, know that you compete with the masters. Don't compete with your friend next door. Don't compete with the other Latino brands out there. Compete with the best in the business.

And so, I think it's my duty to ask the question on a regular basis, "Is this fun? Is this smart? Is this beautiful? If I was a mom and walked into a store, would I buy this, or would I buy a book from Chronicle Books?" You know, "Would I buy this, or would I buy a Disney princess thing?" I really think it's really important that you ask that question. Because at the end of the day, Latino moms, and every other mom out there, they make that decision on a regular basis. And they're not gonna buy you just because, "Oh, you're Latino, you did it." No. They don't care.

So, I think it's my job to make sure that everything we do is truly the best we can possibly put out in the world, and that includes working with the best possible partners. That also includes only working with really talented creators that have a super strong vision, but also have an eye, and have taste, and understand how to put things into the market. So, I feel like... Yeah, I may not... I think it's just as important to understand the direct-to-consumer business, and audience building, as it is to understand how to build beautiful product. Steven and I have a joke, it's sort of like I get it made, he gets it paid.

Menendez: Love that. Love that. That pretty much does define the responsibilities of a CEO and a CCO.

Jaramillo: Yeah.

Menendez: When you're creating campaigns for big brands, where do you start?

Jaramillo: You start with the customer. So, what's the customer need? And honestly, I still start there, so advertising is the best school in the world to train creatives to how to use their talents to solve a business problem. You know, punto y final. It's where if you're a creative person with a vision, you get to understand brand needs, market opportunity, and then you think, "Oh, I can do this, and I will deliver on this brand need and solve this business challenge." And you start with the consumer, and then you build the brand according to what's out in pop culture, and what the consumer need is, and what you think, and then your vision, what you think the brand should be. Your experience.

And I learned all of that in advertising, so in the case of Tiny Travelers, we looked at the market and we thought, "You know, there's really a strong need for a brand that introduces the cultures of the world, so that kids, they don't grow up thinking China is a bad thing." Instead, they think of these different countries as rich sources of culture." So, we have now created a book on China, a book on Mexico, a book on Puerto Rico. Our

next book will be on India, and then Japan, and the point, the purpose of all of these books is to really have you fall in love with the world. The purpose of this brand.

So, we know that parents, there's plenty of parents out there that want their children to be global citizens, right? And we want to deliver on this need and have... give parents a tool, a child-friendly tool, to help share the cultures of the world with their kids. Right? So, we'll start with like what's that parent yearning that we as parents can relate to, and that we think is important, and now what kind of brand can we build to make it easier for them to do a certain thing? Whether it's share their culture with their kids, whether it's share their love for the world with their kids, whether it's help their kids tackle their anxiety and dreams, this is kind of how we look at things.

Menendez: I have a really self-serving question, which is can a person really launch a brand from the start, or does a person cultivate something that becomes a brand as it earns an audience and space in the market? I'm like really torn up about branding these days, because now everybody's got a personal brand. Everybody has a personal brand, everybody's on Instagram living their personal brand.

Jaramillo: I don't have a personal brand.

Menendez: You do.

Jaramillo: I make brands.

Menendez: Okay, look. Susie Jaramillo, that is such a lie. I looked at every headshot of you. You have various headshots that are meant to convey all the same thing.

Jaramillo: Are they?

Menendez: Yeah. You realize you have your hands on your face in every photo that is taken of you.

Jaramillo: No, I'm just trying to look skinny and pretty.

Menendez: What it says is warm, approachable, just a mom trying to make a book. Like it's got a whole-

Jaramillo: That's funny.

Menendez: Yeah, your artist vibe is on strong display.

Jaramillo: I try to keep my artist vibe on strong display, because I don't want to be... I don't own a suit. I've never worn a suit. And I went to Pratt, and it took me a long time, like even going to work in advertising, I had this guilty feeling of, "Oh my God, I'm betraying my artistic legacy." And then I was like, "No, you're not. You're being dumb! Like honestly, here. If you're an artist and you display something in a gallery, okay, maybe a couple hundred people will see it. Maybe if it's a big gallery, a couple thousand people will see it. If you put a message, an amazing brand promise out into the world, millions will see it. So, you can actually take these people's money, and put good messages out into the world in a really creative way." So, that's how I sold to myself

Menendez: I was about to say, I was like, "That sounds like late-stage capitalism, Susie."

Jaramillo: That's how I sold to myself that it was okay to go into advertising. No, but you do. You elevate stories. You have this platform that goes way beyond... I mean, at the end of the day, what is the platform the filmmaker has and how does that compare to someone who's doing a show in the most prestigious gallery or the largest gallery in the world? They just

don't compare. We're talking millions and millions of people versus you know, couple thousand, maybe couple hundred thousand if you're really, really, really lucky. Right?

So, yeah, it's really not about me. It's really about the work that I'm able to produce. It's always about the work, and if I have a brand, it's the brand that is behind all of these other wonderful brands.

Menendez: Born in Venezuela. You grew up between Venezuela and Florida. How does your childhood show up in the work you create for children?

Jaramillo: I think it shows up pretty much everywhere. I was an avid reader. My mother was half-Irish, half-Ecuadorian, and she was a staunch Catholic, and she did not believe in TV. So, we had no TV growing up, and so I read books, and I read a lot, a lot, a lot of books, and book were my companion, and I loved being whisked away into different worlds. And so, I was never whisked away into a Latin world in all of the books I read. It was... and I don't think I even got to know any Latin American stories or literature until we very abruptly moved to Venezuela, and I moved there when I was 10, right?

And so, all of a sudden I'm in Venezuela, and I'm learning about this whole culture that was a part of me all this time, that I really was immersed in, because my dad commuted from Venezuela to Florida like... Many Venezuelan's dads decide to do. I don't know how common that was, but I don't know what my parents were thinking. Regardless, my dad commuted. I didn't get a lot of the culture at home. When I moved to Venezuela when I was 10, and I was enrolled in Venezuela in schools, basically immigrated into emigrating to Venezuela, I was immersed in this amazing culture and I started to get to learn all about what it meant to be a part of this culture. And then when I came back to the United States, I missed that culture tremendously, and I felt that that culture was really misrepresented in this country.

And this is, of course, before Chavez, because I was there in the Eighties, when Venezuela was fun, and then when I got to art school, and at the time I didn't identify as Latina, I just identified as Venezuelan, very Venezuelan. Very Venezuelan, very American. Not particularly Latina. The whole Latina thing didn't call to me, and it wasn't until later that I decided, "No, no. I absolutely am a Latina. I have so much in common with this girl from Mexico, or this girl from Puerto Rico, and all these different people." And I started to get the US Hispanic experience more, and then I realized, "Oh my goodness, I know this culture so well. I'm really well poised to serve it."

So, you could say that my childhood comes into play in the sense that I know what kids love. I'm very much in touch with my inner kid.

Menendez: Here's my last question for you. You're four years in now?

Jaramillo: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Menendez: What do you know now about building a business that you wish you'd known at the start?

Jaramillo: So, this answer's gonna sound really cocky, and you're gonna have to really forgive me.

Menendez: That makes me love it already. Go ahead.

Jaramillo: We're right. We're really good. You know, everything inside of my gut was completely right. We can do this. We can do this at a world-class level. We were so intimidated. When we did these animated videos, we were like, "Oh, I hope they're good. I hope people like them. Blah, blah, blah, blah." We're Emmy nominated! You know what I mean? Going up

with the best, the best in the business. It's like, so I feel like we know what we're doing, like I feel like if anything, I've gotten just so much reinforcement that walking in the room as if you don't necessarily know anything, and learning from every single person who is next to you is the best way to absorb knowledge, and listening to your gut and holding yourself to the highest standard, and constantly critically looking at everything and making sure that it is what it should be is the way to make things, and I just really feel like really validated, like we were right and what we're doing is amazing. And we're gonna... It's just we're gonna keep making amazing things and it's exciting.

Menendez: Thank you, Susie. This was awesome. Thank you so much.

Jaramillo: Thank you.

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 mixer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. We love hearing from you, we really do. 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 leave a review. It is one of the quickest ways to help us grow as a community. Finally, be sure to follow us on Instagram and on Twitter. We're @latinatolatina.

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