



How Ona Diaz-Santin Became the Hair Saint

The celebrity hair stylist, curl expert and owner of 5 Salon Spa shares how a fortuitous offer forced her to early up her ten year plan, the ways the pandemic tested her business and her faith, and the importance of never being “too good” to be of service.

Alicia Menendez: Owning a mega salon was in Ona Diaz-Santin's ten-year plan. But when a golden opportunity presented itself to take over 5 Salon & Spa in New Jersey sooner than Ona had prepared for, she relied on her training and her faith and got ready, learning how to manage personalities, profit and loss, and manage everything that comes with evolving from employee to employer. Then the pandemic hit and Ona's business and her faith was tested again. Now the curl expert and celebrity hairstylist and client-appointed hair saint shares how her humility, her obsession with restoring hair's integrity, and her trust in God has shaped her success. Ona, hi. Thank you for doing this.

Ona Diaz-Santin: Thank you for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

Menendez: Ona, you grow up in salons because your mom owns four of them. What is your earliest memory of being inside one of those salons?

Diaz-Santin: Probably I definitely was a toddler. Maybe two, three. There's one picture that I can remember seeing of me in my mother's chair. I remember that. I can remember being at the salon, watching my mother do her clients, and how many people waited for her. People wanted to just chat with my mom and the people that were sitting in the next chair with other stylists were talking to my mom and then talking to their stylist, and then the stylists talking to each other and then the clients talking to each other. So I remember vividly how that made me feel. Number one, I felt like I was on the inside of something listening to these women talking about their life or an amazing recipe that their mother shared or their husbands or their children and what they were up to.

That's when I knew like, "Wow, we're onto something. We're onto something pretty amazing." And my mom, I would say, was the vehicle, her space was the vehicle to experience that. And I was so happy that... When you're young, you say, "Man, I don't want to be here. I want to be out in the park. I want to be on the phone," whatever. I remember being there, and now I look back and I said, "Wow, that was my training within the training." I'm so grateful that I had that time with my mom.

Menendez: Did you always know that you wanted this to be your professional path?

Diaz-Santin: No. I don't think I always knew. There are pictures of me doing my aunt's hair, makeup, anything beauty, nails. I always thought it was fun. I think it was during high school that it really like, "This is what I want to do." I had an opportunity to either do fashion or beauty. I had a great opportunity and I, in the end of it all, talking to two teachers that I really loved. I ended up with beauty and my mom in the beginning was not very thrilled with that decision. She felt that I could do better or it's a lot of hard work and you don't eat and then your fingers hurt and you stand all day and then you end up with back pain and I'm like, "Mom, this is what I want to do." And it was hard to make her see that.

Menendez: How did you come to the decision to open your salon?

Diaz-Santin: So I worked in Englewood for a while at a small shop, and I worked my way up. I was 17 years old. I had gotten my license. I was so pumped and excited. I always knew I wanted to be an entrepreneur, obviously looking at my mother and learning from her what to do, what not to do. I worked for four other owners. The opportunity arose six years ago. Larissa was the last owner of 5 Salon & Spa, and Larissa said, "Listen, I am throwing in the towel and I really need to talk to you." And I said, "Let's chat." And she goes, "You've always been my right-hand girl. I trust you. I confide in you a lot. I have somebody and I really need you to talk to the team." And I said, "Oh, okay." And she goes, "I need you to work with me."

And I said, "Listen, so long as the other people that come in are kind and they're good and they let me do what I love to do and I don't really have any problems, I'll do my job. I'll come in, I'll stay. I'll go, whatever they need, I'll do it." That happened for two weeks. She couldn't sleep. She couldn't sleep, she couldn't sleep. And then she goes, "Oh, and I have to talk to you." And I'm like, "Oh my God, another meeting." So I'm sitting in the office with Larissa and Larissa goes, "I can't sell the business." And I said, "Okay, great." And she goes, "Because I don't want to sell it to the person that I have." And I'm like, "Okay, so what are you going to do?" And she goes, "I want to sell it to you." And I said, "Ladi," I call her Ladi. I said, "Ladi, that's in my tenure plan. We still have a couple of years for that. I'm organizing and I'm doing this."

Menendez: How old are you at this point?

Diaz-Santin: I was 39, actually end of 38 because this was a long process. It was about a year and change. So I'm talking to her and I said, "Ladi, this is my tenure plan. You know how I am. I have my three months, my six months, and I love to do that." And she's like, "Well, think about it because I can't sleep. You've never said no to me. You stay late for clients. You come in early when you need to. I never had to worry about you." And I said, "Okay, and let me think about that. I have to talk to my husband."

Menendez: What type of capital is she looking for when she's coming to you and offering you this opportunity?

Diaz-Santin: She doesn't own the building. She owned the business in the building and she was selling it for the full amount, the full amount. So I'm like, "Well, this is a lot to think about." It's a big place. It's 5,000 square feet. It's a lot of people, a lot of

personalities. At this point, I'm in the industry maybe 20 years. So I go home and I talk to hubby and I said, "Joe, we have an opportunity." And he goes, "Oh, boy." So we're chatting and I said, "Listen, it came about. It's a big undertaking, a lot of paperwork. We would have to start now." And I'm going through the whole thing with my husband and my husband goes, "Ona, if this is what you want to do, I will support you 101%." And I said, "Are you sure?" And he goes, "Anything you need, you can count on me."

So now it was actually the ball now is in my court again. I was thinking about it for about a week and I decided, "Yeah, I'm ready." If the opportunity came to me, God wouldn't plant a seed if He didn't think He was going to see it through and make it come to pass in my life. I had been preparing for this with training wheels for a very, very, very long time. I knew it wasn't going to be easy, and I knew that I had to be crazy enough to believe in myself. God was like, "This is what I'm presenting to you. You either take it or you leave it, but this is all on you." So I had gone back to Larissa and I said, "Ladi, I'm going to do it." And she was ecstatic. So we started the process. There was one problem after the next like, "Oh, now I have to go through this process, and now they have to see this, and now the bank needs to see that."

It was like one thing after the other. And I do remember saying to myself, "God, if it gets too hard, I'm not moving a finger. You're going to have to show me that this is for me." And every time something came up where it was like, "Oh, this is it. This isn't for me. Nope." It was like God parted the Red Sea like this again. And it was like, "Oh my God, how did that disappear? How did that problem disappear?" And then we finally got here, I became an owner. Now I'm like... First it was the process, and now it's like, no one gives you a handbook saying this is how you do it. This isn't how you do it. And a lot of praying involved. For me, that is my peace. My sanity is kneeling and humbling myself and saying, "God, I can't. But I know that with You, I can." And that's what it's been. That is what entrepreneurship to me has looked like for the past six years.

Menendez: Has there been a time where your faith was tested?

Diaz-Santin: 2023. 2020. 2021. 2022. 2023. Yes. 2020 was rough. I had only been an owner for a couple of years. I was terrified. I remember not getting out of my bed for a full 10 days. I was stinky. I was crying. I probably had crap in my hair. It was ugly.

Menendez: Talk me through that. Because it means that you have what coming due? You have the payment for the building. Rent is coming due.

Diaz-Santin: Taxes. Also stripped of my pay. I work behind the chair, not every day, but I need to eat. I need to feed my children. It was a sense of devastation for me. I'm a loner to begin with, so oh my goodness. It was scary. I felt like a failure at one point. 2021, the doors are open now. Now it's like I have to hit the ground running and I got to get the team energized to run with me. Communication was key. I sent out like 55 billion emails, what we did to make sure that the space was safe, what we were doing during their visit. Forms. Everything that I'm sure many of the companies around me and everywhere were doing. We jumped on that. 2022 was

like, "Okay, we're growing and now we just have to make sure that we have the space for the growing."

2023 came, and it was like, "Oh my God, I want to be an entrepreneur. You make it look so easy. I'm going to just get my own suite." And now it's like, "Oh, people are leaving." And my faith was yet tested again. But here's the one constant that I've learned through these few years of my faith being tested and growing was that I got closer and closer and closer to God. The more I was being tested, the more that test was a testimony, and the more that I was terrified, the more that I went to God and said, "God, I need You." And the better I felt right after. Just the other day I was telling my husband today about a prayer that I did not too long ago where I said to myself, "You know what?" And that's when I knew there's growth there.

And that was God. "God, if you are purifying this vessel and you have to let it go through fire and whatever else to encompass something so sacred like the Holy Spirit, and I have to go through all of this and so be it, then so be it. And I will gladly do it again 10 times, 100 times, 1,000 times." And I know that that's growth. That's growth because no one in their right mind would ever say, "Yes. I want to go through pain, struggle, sacrifice, all kinds of stuff to get to that next level." No one. No one ever wants to be uncomfortable. And I know that I will get to that top, the tippity top of the top, whatever that top looks like for me, so long as it's according to His will, and I'm ready. I'm ready.

Menendez: Faith is something you came to as an adult.

Diaz-Santin: I've always had my siblings and their share of like, "Ona, you have to pray. Let's pray." I always believed that there was a God. It wasn't until about 12 years ago, it was about 12 years ago when a missionary knocked on my mother-in-law's door. And that's when everything changed. My husband was missing for an hour and I said, "Well, he went to open the door. It must have been one of our friends, but they're not coming up. Let me go down." And it was a young 18-year-old Christopher, I'll never forget, Dominican missionary. And he was talking to my husband and I'm like, "Okay, I certainly don't know this young boy." And we started talking, and then he just invited us to a small group, which was in someone's house, and you just kind of study the Bible for an hour, eat, hang out. I said, "Oh, we'll go." And my husband looked at me and like...

And I'll never forget, Christopher was like, "Are you sure that you're going to go?" And I said, "Listen, Christopher, you don't know me. But when I say I'm going to do something, I do it." A couple hours later, we show up at this house and it was awkward. I had never gone to a stranger's house to study with a bunch of strangers and then eat the food people made that I don't even know. It goes totally against what you're taught, right? Don't take stranger's foods, don't talk to strangers. And I don't know, it just felt okay. It was a little awkward. Then it was the next day, it was another stranger's house. And then the next day, took a whole week of small groups. And then I ended up in the church on a Saturday. And at the time, I had just given birth to my third.

She was a newborn, she was little, and I was nursing. So I'm like, "I got to take her with me." And we end up in this church and the pastor's talking about, "You think

that you got here, you drove here by yourself, and you got here by yourself." And I'm like, "Well, clearly. We got in the car, we drove here." And here I am talking to myself. "Well, clearly." And he goes, "You think you were looking for God?" And I'm like, "Yeah, well obvious. This is all obvious." And I'm talking, I'm having this self-talk in my head while this preacher's talking, this pastor. And then all of a sudden he goes, "But God brought you here." And I'm like, "Okay." And then out of nowhere, Alicia, I started hysterically crying. Out of nowhere. Out of nowhere, I started hysterically crying. And that was it.

Menendez: Your testimony is one I could listen to all day. I love it. I love it so much. Thank you.

Diaz-Santin: Thank you.

Menendez: I also love that being the hair saint has nothing to do with your love of God.

Diaz-Santin: Isn't it crazy? That's another story. My clients dubbed me that, it's because of the love of the integrity of the hair. I do my work and I really try my hardest to keep the integrity of the hair intact. And that's where the nickname came. Maybe that was the nickname I was supposed to, I don't know, get, but that was my client, a client of mine that's an artist. And he goes on tour or whatever, and he came back and he goes, "Ona, my hair is distraught. It's terrible. It's falling out. It's sitting out. It's breaking off." And I said, "Oh my God, let me see." And I was like, "Man, you did a number." And he goes, "Yeah." And after we fixed him up and treatments and all of that, he goes, "You're like the Santa of hair," is how he said it. Then he just started calling me the hair saint, and then it stuck.

Menendez: Ona, thank you so much for being so generous with your time.

Diaz-Santin: I want you in my chair. Come by whenever. Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at Hola@LatinatoLatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or on Threads and TikTok @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop, and remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Good Pods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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