I'm a Latina tech founder and you can be too

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Submitted by Natasha De Leon Rodriguez [2] on 15 December 2016 - 10:37am

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I'm a Latina tech founder and you can be too

by: Alana Matos, from Parallel18 Gen2

Me: "I'm not applying to jobs after graduation. I'm doing a startup."

My mom: "A what?"

The day I told my uber traditional Puerto Rican parents that their Harvard educated daughter was not pursuing any sort of traditional career, I knew their hearts sank. This was not what they had envisioned when I told them I wanted to go to graduate school.

And, in fact, this was not what I had planned either. When I was younger, I had plans to pursue a career in Psychology. This was based on the fact that my sister was also psychologist, and on the fact that I did not like math (hence removing Business and any sort of related field as viable options). Growing up in Puerto Rico, I was exposed to extremely traditional views of the type of life a young Latina should pursue. All around me, I observed as the most important female figures

in my life married young and generally retired early to take care of their children– including my mom.

When I graduated from high school, I moved to Boston for college. There, I experienced my first taste of freedom. Soon enough, I decided I wanted to live by myself. I worked, I cleaned, I cooked, I studied– everything on my own. I coveted the time I got to spend quietly in my apartment. Yet, the dichotomy between my independence in Boston and my life at home came to life every holiday I spent on the island. Conversations would go something like this:

> Abuela (Grandma): Mija, how is school? Do you miss home?

> Me: Sometimes, but I'm very happy! School is great, I have a new job, I'm living by myself.

> Abuela: ¡Ay bendito! ¡*Estás sola*! Mira mija, do you have a boyfriend?

> Me: No, I don't.

> Abuela: ¡Ay bendito! *Tu tan bella*, go get yourself *un novio*.

You get the idea. Although I knew there was more out there that I wanted to experience, these types of interactions always brought me back to everything I learned while growing up. I saw as many of my friends were in serious relationships, were starting to have children, and I felt as if I was bit out of place. Most of the time I felt left out of what was happening in Puerto Rico.

And then came graduate school. By the time I made my way to Harvard, I was more confused than ever. I had left my job to pursue a Master's degree, wanting to do more with my life than I had been before. I knew that I cared about helping teenagers, and about working in Education, but wasn't sure what direction I should go in. Should I work at a school? Should I go get my PhD like I had planned? Since I was already there, I decided, I would go to random events and see what stuck.

Everything changed the day I went to the Harvard Graduate School of Education's annual Hackathon. I showed up to this event with zero background in programming, business, design, or anything that is valuable in the startup world. I did, however, show up with lots of heart and an eagerness to learn. The first night of the event, I walked up to a group of guys who were diligently pitching ideas to each other. And, among those, I met the person who would later become my co-founder: Sergio Marrero [3]. He told me about this crazy idea he had about making the iTunes of higher education, about his plan to create modular, affordable pathways to careers, and about his passion for living in a world where everyone can attain the education they need for meaningful and profitable jobs.

My eyes glistened as he spoke. Immediately after he asked: "do you have a background in design so you can help me with this?" and I said "yes, of course!"

I did not.

And yet, I knew that even though I didn't have the skills I needed to pursue this venture yet, I would find a way to learn — every inch of me ached for it.

One year later, Sergio and I are working full-time on our startup ALEX, Anyone's Learning Experience [4]. During that year, I sacrificed all of my free time and took classes in programming and design, and the rest of the time I spent on ALEX [4]. I became obsessed with this venture. I lived and breathed for it, and in the end, I couldn't see myself letting it go. I couldn't leave it to pursue a regular job. I realized that all of my experiences growing up had led me to this. I was always a bit of rebel, and now that I've found my passion, I can confidently leave behind all of the things I was told I needed to be.

I am a young woman. I am a Latina. And I am also a startup tech founder. There aren't too many of us out there. And with my venture, and in my life, I want to make sure other girls are able to put aside everything they have been told they have to be and create their own unique path.

A special thank you to Rough Draft Ventures [5], Parallel 18 [6], Points of Light Civic Accelerator [7], the Harvard iLab [8] and to all our family, friends, advisors, and mentors for your support.

This article was originally published in https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/im-latina-tech-founder-you-can-too-alana-... [9]

About the Author: Alana is an entrepreneur, developer and designer with a specialty in innovation and "startups". She studied at Northeastern University where she majored in Psychology and Neuroscience. For four years, she worked with preschoolers and High School students, first as a teacher and then as a researcher at Boston Children's Hospital. There she spent three years doing research on the effects that different drugs and illnesses have in the brain development of children and teenagers. With this experience, her passion for the field of Education grew and she left her job to go to Harvard University and complete a Master's Degree in Education.

She finished her Master's at Harvard Graduate School of Education on May 2016 with specialties in Psychology, Neuroscience and Education. During that year, she learned about the brain, behavior and the way to bring equality to the education system through science. She was also involved in many "startups" and in the field of technology. In her free time, she learned about graphic design and web developing. While in Harvard, she founded a company named ALEX, Anyone's Learning Experience, focused in creating accessible college education through a model of exchange economy. She is the leader of the product and design developing team in which she specifically works in creating innovative products for her clients.

Alana was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico where she spent the majority of her life. Now she has come back to the Island to join the accelerator Parallel18, and she is very excited about finding new ways to help Puerto Rico's education system using her business model.

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