



MSNBC National Correspondent Mariana Atencio

After experiencing violence and media censorship in her native Venezuela, Mariana Atencio embarked on her journalist career in the United States. An early opportunity at Univision gave her the chance to hone her skills before making the leap to English-language television. But soon a personal tragedy tested ethics, faith, and her place in the world. She put it all in her new book, *Perfectly You*.

Alicia Menendez: Hey, for those of you who follow us on Instagram or Twitter you may already know this, but for those of you who don't, we have merch. We have a brand new mug, perfect for your morning coffee con leche, or matcha tea, or whatever it is you're into. We've got these canvas pouches that you can use to organize your bag, put in your headphones, your lipstick. Then, we have these sticker sets that you can put wherever you want. I have mine on my laptop. I love it, and the laptop feels so much cooler.

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Clip (Mariana Atencio): *What's the point of coming over from South America, crossing over, if you are not going to add this value that you bring to the table, so that it becomes about much more than this Mariana or Alicia? It's about other Marianas and other Alicias. They are going to be seeing on screen being like, "She made it. I can be there too."*

Menendez: Mariana Atencio, I met six years ago when we were both hired as hosts at Fusion TV. Mariana was making the crossover from Spanish language television, a nearly impossible feat, and has since become a national correspondent on MSNBC. She has a new book out called *Perfectly You*. It's the story of finding her passion as a journalist, and the dramatic life events that forced her to return to her native Venezuela.

In *Perfectly You*, you write, "My mission would be to change the game from within." What does that look like?

Atencio: It looks like the Mariana who goes on the air and says, "This is Mariana, live for NBC News," does live Spanish to English translations on the air, and inspires other young people to be themselves, and to know that they too can make it on that

screen, even more so than that, that we their authentic voices to really reflect the stories of our community.

Menendez: Tell me about what your childhood was like in Venezuela.

Atencio: I was born in this beautiful, majestic country. It has the beaches. It has the Amazon jungle. It has part of the Andes. It was a place that was prosperous. It was one of the richest countries in the world, one of the richest countries in the Americas for sure. There were seeds of discontent that later gave way to Hugo Chavez and the crisis that we're going through now. But, my parents always made sure that we grew up in a home of values and giving back to the community.

I went to a Catholic school where we basically gave donations and finance to schools of underprivileged children, alongside ours. When I wrote the book, I said, "What is the place that encompasses the contrast, and the colors and sounds, and aromas of my childhood?" It's going to the beach in Carnival, which is like our Mardi Gras, in La Guaira, Venezuela. It is the sort of encapsulation of Latin American magical realism in one place.

Menendez: As a college student, you'd go on to engage in protests against the Venezuelan government, Hugo Chavez's government. How did you get involved? What did you learn through that experience?

Atencio: You know, I went to this big university where you were in touch and befriended people from all backgrounds across the country: young political leaders, people that I just... In my little world of an all-girl Catholic school, that didn't exist for me. This was like being open to the world, and the real sort of troubles that were brewing in Venezuela. When the government of Hugo Chavez shut down the biggest television in our country, it was the equivalent of turning off ABC, CBS or ABC from one day to the next.

The station was called RCTV May 27, 2007, when I was a junior in college, he pulled it off the air. As a communications student, as someone who dreamed of becoming a journalist, it was amazing, Alicia, to see our classroom kind of burst out of it's cocoon and become a butterfly. It was friends of mine who I never thought of as political leaders, who led a movement where we challenged the government on this front. We went out... I had my younger sister and my younger brother in school with me at the time.

So, it was marching along your brother and sister for democracy and freedom. And it was ugly. We got tear gassed. We got reprimanded. Students go shot at with pellets. What we see now happening every day in Venezuela, that was sort of the beginning of it. That was the moment where I realized if I want to tell the stories that I want to tell, if I want to be the kind of journalist that I want to be, I have to flee.

Menendez: If not for that media censorship, would you still be in Venezuela?

Atencio: I think so. I mean, if not for that media censorship and everything that came with this increasingly repressive and authoritarian government, we had a flourishing television industry. This network that got shut down, RCTV, had been on the air for 50 years. It had I think the longest running variety show in the world, and a great

many journalists that really came out of that school, if you will. When Hugo Chavez shut it off, it was just sort of the beginning of something that I knew was not a good path.

Menendez: Tell me about the tipping point, the event, that led you to decide that you had to leave your country.

Atencio: It was something that I kind of decided to not talk about. That's what happens with trauma.

Menendez: Mm-hmm.

Atencio: One day I just told my mom, "I need to go out on a hike." I live in a neighborhood that's very close to the Ávila Mountains. It's a climb that's kind of similar to the climbs in LA, for people who live out there, do the hikes up there. So, I just literally left my keys in the flower pot, put on my sneakers and I just started working toward the mountain. Started making the climb. Beautiful day.

All of a sudden, I noticed that there was a man sort of sizing me up and down, and it kind of gave me the shivers to the point where I said to myself, "You know what? I'm going to pretend tying my shoelaces, so that he passes me." There were other people on the trail too. This is a narrow trail going up the mountain. So, I bend down, me amarro los zapatos. In my mind, I'm like, "Good thinking, Mariana." You know? "He's passed you. It's all good."

Then as I go up the mountain, and as I'm coming down, I don't know why there was a corner of the trail that had no one else on it. This man literally came out of the woods, pounced on me, and held me at gunpoint, nozzle pointed at my forehead. He said, "Cuenta hasta cien!" Like, "Kneel down, count to 100." For me as a junior in college, with everything that was happening in my country, with sort of these scenes and protests and being tear gassed with my brother and sister, I said to myself, "What am I really meant to do with my life? If I survive this moment, what am I going to do with this chance?"

I vowed if I survived that I would leave for the United States, and I would try to shed light on what was happening with my platform here, which is ultimately what I did.

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Menendez: You said that it was a long time before you talked about what happened that day on the mountain, that's a trauma that you buried. What did it take to unearth it? Was it the writing of this book that got you more comfortable telling that story?

Atencio: Absolutely. But, what really led me to say, "I have to do this," was the tragic passing of my dad. Mi papi, who I lost last year in amidst of the Venezuelan health crisis. I made a list of the things that had marked my life: the positive and the negative. In the positive, it was a scholarship to Columbia University, my beautiful family, marrying my husband who's amazing. Then the negative list, I had these things that had been very public about my life, and then I remembered this trauma that I had buried.

I had talked to a very good friend of mine about it, and she said, "You never told me about this." I just literally burst into tears remembering it, because I remember that after being held at gunpoint I went home, I showered- I shared a bathroom with my sister. She walked in and she said, "Are you okay?" And I was shivering. I couldn't, as much as I bathed myself, I couldn't cleanse myself of that moment. I never even told my sister about it fully, until I spoke to my friend about it when I was beginning to conceive the book.

She said, "This seems like the start of a book. Your entire life flashing before your eyes." And that was the moment where I decided to leave my country. It is essentially where my life took a turn.

Menendez: Let's talk about some of the things that you just brought up. When we were at Fusion, life was sort of on it's little path. You get a call that your sister has been in a horrible accident. Can you tell me what was on the other end of that call?

Atencio: It was one of the worst moments of my life. I was headed to the studio to record our show, driving. My parents were in New York with my sister because it was the 2014 protests in Venezuela. I had begged them, "Please come to New York. Take a little breather." It was Easter break. It was my mom's voice, "Are you on the air? Cómo que estás al aire?" And I was like, "What? What is it?" It was just a tone that I had never heard from them before.

When she said, "Your sister's been in an accident," my sister, as you know, is very close to me. We're Irish twins. We're inseparable. It was the only time in my life- this didn't even happen to me when my dad passed away- where I lost complete sense of reality. I almost swerved off the freeway. I had to stop, get out of the car and the first thing I asked was, "Is she going to make it?"

Menendez: What happened?

Atencio: She was in a hit and run accident in New York City. Basically, my parents got a call from the police and the ambulance, and they were literally taking her to the hospital. A big SUV ran her over, and then fled. The biggest damage was to her feet, but there was still the possibility of internal hemorrhaging. We didn't know if she was going to walk again or not. It was a moment where you question why her

and not me? I would have given anything to have been in New York City that day, and not her.

I had gotten on a plane with the clothes that I had on, not knowing what I was going to see in that hospital in New York City, and I remember leaning forward against the seat of the plane in front of me and saying, "Please God, make her survive this. We will deal as a family with whatever else happens. Just keep her here with me, and we'll deal with it."

It took Alicia two years and 15 surgeries. My sister even... As a family, we considered amputation. It was that bad. Her feet were hurting that bad. If you saw her today, she's a walking miracle. Every time that I complain about anything in life, I see her and it's like immediate perspective. It's like you have nothing to complain about.

Menendez: I remember about four years ago you got married to Jose, and in your vows... I don't remember, but did you say she's the only person you love more than him, or the only person who-

Atencio: I love her more than him, I do. I talk about my wedding. It's one of my favorite chapters. It's chapter nine of the book. It's the only one that my husband wanted to read through and through before anyone else. When he asked me to marry him, my family was dealing with this. I said to him, "Si, mi amor. I want to marry you but I need to give my sister time to recover because I want her to be my maid of honor. There's no scenario where she's not walking down the aisle on my wedding day, so I need her to be able to walk."

We waited for something like a year-ish, two weeks before the wedding or something, she needed another surgery because a prior one didn't work out. She was still in a wheelchair the day of the wedding. We didn't know, it was like 50/50 if she was going to be able to walk or not. She had walking boots, like those moon boots basically. This beautiful cream-colored dress that covered them, but she was in a wheelchair.

We got married at the Fairchild Botanical Garden here in Miami. She's in her chair on other end of the aisle. I'm looking at her on a little balcony with my dad, and she just got up and put one foot in front of the other, and it was like the entire church- everyone there understood the weight of that moment. After that, I'm like everything is fine. I told my dad, "Papi, you know what? I don't want to walk down the aisle. I am so happy. Let's dance down the aisle."

We danced to Signed, Sealed, Delivered. It was the perfect wedding. And yes, my husband was the supporting character.

Menendez: He's the supporting character, and also very clear, your dad was your number one fan.

Atencio: Oh, mi papi, we had one of those relationships. Ours was like a love story for the ages. He was such a feminist, such a supporter of my dreams and my projects. Looking back at my life, a little girl growing up in South America, watching Good Morning America on that little TV set that he set up, he always knew that I could

make it there. He always, always worked so hard to give me the tools and the opportunities to be able to make it to that world stage.

Menendez: 2018, the holidays have just passed, and you got a call from your brother.

Atencio: I was in Pittsburgh. I had spent a beautiful holiday with my family. My dad was one of the healthiest people I knew. Worked out every day. They had just returned to Venezuela after we'd spent the holidays in Mexico and in Miami. I got a call from my brother at 6:00 in the morning being like, "Papi se lo llevaron a la unidad de cuidados intensivos." I was like, "What?" "He's been taken to the ICU." I'm like, "In Venezuela? In the midst of this health crisis where you know that hospitals are crumbling, and there's no medicine?"

I immediately knew what that meant, and what that implied. Unlike what happened with my sister's accident, here I did become paralyzed. I didn't lose a sense of reality. I immediately said, "We need to make a plan as a family." I had six Mayors. I was doing a panel on Millennial Mayors. I had six Mayors in a coffee shop waiting for me, staring back at me, with camera lights being like, "Okay, ready to roll?"

I couldn't get out of Pittsburgh immediately. Because of the health crisis in Venezuela, I needed to stop by Miami, give a pharmacy here enough time to be able to take medicine that my dad gravely needed. So, at that moment with those people staring back at me, I said, "I actually have time," while they prepare the medicine in Miami, "To conduct this interview. And I'm going to do it." It was a moment where I realized how much I had grown as a professional, to just swallow hard and sit down and conduct that panel.

I later flew to Venezuela. I arrived at Simón Bolívar International Airport with over \$5,000.00 in medicine, and faced a battle for my father's life for survival for the next month, unlike anything I had ever witnessed before, or even covered before. I lived the health crisis firsthand. There's nothing that can compare to it. It's a desperation where they tell you buy it on the black market, and you're like, "Who do I have to call? What do I have to do? Who do I have to text? And, how do I know if it's good?"

But, you're so desperate, and it's realizing you're turning on the TV, there's people protesting for lack of medicine. You're on your Twitter feed, and it's people begging for dialysis treatment. It's a sense of isolation that engulfs you, and you realize at the end of the day, it's almost like the rest of the world doesn't care, doesn't get it, you know? When I lost my dad, and that's why that chapter is so devastating because it's called Losing My Dad in my Country, I realized I lost Papi, but I'm leaving millions of people behind here who don't have medical care, who can't even afford buying anything on the black market like I did.

So, it was a sense of I lost my dad, and I lost my country, and there is no hope for me left.

Menendez: How did you find the strength to get back on that plane and come back to the US?

Atencio: In the beginning, I lost so much weight. I didn't know if do I was going to be able to do what I was doing before, to jump off planes and report, and just the daily grind that is our job. But, I had forgotten that I had committed to hosting a gala for

the Bronx Museum of the Arts in New York City. The purpose of the gala was to give underprivileged children access to arts education. My dad opened my eyes to the world, to the English language, to jazz and museums, and arts and this would be a chance to give kids that opportunity.

So, I said, "I know you would want me to do this." So, I got on a plane and bought myself a black and white dress, and got on that stage and said, "Papi, this is for you." It just gave me the strength to keep going. This book, every single page that I sat down and wrote, it was thinking of him in the back of my mind, and how this would enable young Latinas and young people like ourselves, to have much needed conversations. I said to myself, "If I can give one person the strength, the *de salir para adelante*, to find their purpose and get through whatever hurdle they're facing right now, I owe it to my dad to do that."

Menendez: We have to talk about Venezuela today. How is your family? What do you make of what's happening in the country right now?

Atencio: My mom is still there. So many of my childhood friends are there. I go there all the time. In fact, the epilogue to the book, I wrote down there. My dad, having already passed about nine months before, it's seeing my mom in a new place that is not our childhood home, seeing her pick herself and try to make to a new life for herself in the midst of that crisis, and it was me sitting down on her porch every afternoon trying to find my country.

I would close my eyes and try to listen to the sounds of my childhood: the ice cream truck going by, or the birds, or just the laughter of my friends. And I couldn't find the country where I grew up anymore. For me, it was the realization of I don't belong here anymore, and I'm trying to make a new home and a name for myself in the United States. So it's that realization of I will always be an immigrant, and I will have to make a space for myself wherever I go, which is the essence of this book also, right?

We're creating spaces for ourselves as new immigrants, or as Latinas in America, without ever forgetting where we came from, and without being apologetic about it.

Menendez: Let's talk about one of my favorite stories from the book, one of my favorite stories from your life. You get invited to the White House Correspondents' Dinner, which for those who don't know, is a big event in Washington, DC. Historically, the President has come, gives a sort of cheeky speech. There are journalists, largely DC-based journalists who-

Atencio: It's like the Academy Awards of journalism.

Menendez: Yes. Nerd Prom is what it is called in the industry. You get invited. You're super excited. You're going to wear a dress that has the colors of your national flag, and you get a call saying, "Mariana, don't look too Latina."

Atencio: Can you believe that?

Menendez: Can you?

Atencio: I still have a tough time going through what happened. I wanted to include it in the book because I could not believe that it happened to me. I want us to realize that these are things that still happen in the workplace with minorities, and I want us to have these conversations. That's why I included the anecdote in the book. It was a moment in my life where I had already attended the White House Correspondents' Dinner. I was so excited to sort of showcase my culture and where I came from. I had, as you mentioned, this dress that was gold with blue earrings. And I was like this little red clutch is the yellow, blue and red of the Venezuelan flag colors, and so many other Latin American nations, that I'm like, "This is going to be perfect."

I never thought a higher up would call me about something like, "What are you going to wear?" As a woman, I think it's realizing that that would never happen to a male. As a minority, it's realizing that we still have these things to deal with, and we have to face them head on and talk about them. The call came, and I was in the kitchen with my husband. When that person said that to me, with in their mind the very best intention of having me be presentable and amenable to everyone there, I didn't know what to say.

This person literally said, "Please don't look too Latina. Wear something that's a little more Ivanka Trump, maybe." In my mind, I was like, "Is this really happening?" It takes a moment to sort of process the information. I wish I could tell the reader and your listeners that I had a really witty, amazing response, but I stayed silent. I hung up the phone. I cried for a little bit. I shed three tears, and then I went to Saks Fifth Avenue and picked out this please-don't-look-too-Latina Ivanka-type gown that had been suggested.

Throughout the whole of that White House Correspondents' Dinner I was smiling for the cameras, but I felt miserable. I look back at those photos, and you can totally see that in the photos. The next year I said to myself, "That's not going to happen to me anymore. I am going to go looking very Latina, wearing a color that is vibrant like my personality, and the colors that I would usually wear. Wearing my big jewelry that I would usually wear, and I will not let anyone else tell me what I have to wear," especially because it was an event where I was going... It was not an on-air appearance. It was an event where I was going as myself.

I felt like in a book where I'm talking about the importance of being your authentic self, that anecdote needed to be included in there, because I think again, it's conversations that we need to have as Latinas and as women in the workplace.

Menendez: It doesn't end there, though, because the dress was one thing. Then you get the same person starts talking to you about your red lipstick on air.

Atencio: But when it happened the second time, I was ready to answer for myself.

Menendez: What did you say?

Atencio: I said to this person in front of other people in the newsroom, "If you have nothing to say about my editorial, I would appreciate it if you would refrain from making those comments about my appearance in the future." It was a very respectful conversation. That person nodded, and it never happened again. This is my advice to Latinas listening, and to other women listening, have that answer ready.

Realize that it can happen to you, and be prepared with what you're going to say when those things happen. With men, with women, with higher ups, it can happen to you.

So, the moment that I was prepared to "defend myself", it never happened again.

Menendez: You and I are also two opposites side of the same coin, where everyone is trying to dial you down and trying to dial me up because they have an idea of what it's supposed to be, right? So, it's like, "We need you a little less, and we need you a little more." I think sometimes when we don't know how to help women be better at the job we do, we tinker a lot on the margins, on the aesthetics.

Atencio: Especially on TV. Especially on social media. In media in general. That's one of the core messages of the book, is ultimately your true power lies in being perfectly you. What's the point of this whole journey that we just talked about? What's the point of coming over from South America, crossing over, if you are not going to add this value that you bring to the table so that it becomes about much more than this Mariana or Alicia. It's about other Marianas and other Alicias. They are going to be seeing you on screen being like, "She made it. I can be there too."

It's taken me 10 years of this career, migrating to the United States, going through all the personal tragedies that we talked about, to realize that these quirks or these things that might not be what you see every day on TV, these things that make me "different or special" are what are going to make me stand out, and be successful, and lead a more purposeful life. So, whether you want to make it in TV, or want to create a social media account that is of value and resonates, or whether you're a creative looking to expand your business, a new mom, it's finding those things that make you unique, not perfect, but perfectly you.

Menendez: Mariana, thank you so much.

Atencio: Gracias a todas. Thank you so much for this space.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us today. Latina to Latina was originally co-created with Bustle. Now the podcast is owned and executive produced by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me. Maria Murriel was the sound designer on this episode. We want to hear from you. Tell us who you want to hear from, and how you're making the show a part of your life. Email us at Hola@LatinaToLatina.com. Remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever you're listening.

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