



## Transcript: Episode 4

### Crafting Success: Building a Design Empire, Being a Latino Entrepreneur, and Breaking Barriers

*A Conversation with Paul Gonzalez*

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**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Welcome to Rising Together, a podcast on the art and design of inclusion. I'm Dr. Elcin Haskollar.

**Curtis Anderson:** And I'm Curtis Anderson.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Each month, we'll have a special guest, and we'll learn from their personal stories and experiences about how to create change. From thought provoking discussions to real life strategies, we'll explore the transformative power of inclusion and discuss how to create a world where every single voice matters.

**Curtis Anderson:** We hope you can join us as we dive into the art of creating inclusive communities. Let's embark on this journey of transformation one story at a time. Stay connected, stay engaged, and more importantly, keep rising with this.

**Paul Gonzalez:** I just say, just keep working hard. Be nice to people. Be humble. There's a lot of, and be kind, like, that that's a really big thing, overall. And just treat people how you wanna be treated. It matters so much.

**Curtis Anderson:** You can catch the latest episodes of Rising Together on the first of every month on Spotify, YouTube, or your preferred streaming platform.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Welcome to another episode of Rising Together. And today, we have Paul Gonzalez here in the studio. Paul graduated from Ringling College with a degree in graphic design and has gone on to make waves as a creative director and an entrepreneur. He's the mastermind behind Studio Black, a designer firm based in New York City. Welcome to Rising Together, Paul.

**Paul Gonzalez:** Thank you. Thank you for having me.

**Curtis Anderson:** a while.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Back to Sarasota, and welcome back to Ringling College.

**Paul Gonzalez:** Yeah. I I'm here very often crazy enough because I have a home here. So like, but I I've seen Ringling grow over the last 12 years. I haven't been here. It's been quite a journey.

**Curtis Anderson:** We go way back. Right? We're just talking about how how long it's been since we've graduated. But for our friends and family who are watching and listening, can you,

like you started to go a little bit just now, but, like, can you roll back a little bit and tell us a little bit about who you are?

**Paul Gonzalez:** So I grew up here in Sarasota. I'm Puerto Rican and Ecuadorian. My dad's from Puerto Rico. My mom's from Ecuador. It was very interesting growing up in Sarasota.

I was, like, very few one of the very few Latinos I know. I grew up, like, in a a nice, very like a beautiful, like, suburb. So, like, that heavily influenced like, I was around, like, a lot of great friends, and so that heavily influenced, like, who I was and, like, having great family, great having great food. Yeah. As I grew up.

And so Yeah. So that's, like, pretty much a little bit about me and, like like, my background. And, yeah, as as you're saying, what I do now is, like, I I'm an entrepreneur. It's kinda weird to say that, but, during the day, I I, own a design agency. And so and then at night, I'm a part owner and I'm a professional salsa dancer, which is also wild to say because if you were to tell me in college, you'd be a professional salsa and owning a dance school in New York, I'm like, shut up.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** That's amazing. Because I know that your mom, like my mom, was a fashion designer and a tailor. And then so when you were, like, a little kid, you were helping your mom make pillows and dresses and all, you know, all kinds of things. And I remember, like, my mom making all sorts of, like, very fancy outfits for us. You know? So I wanna know if those years really, like, influenced, you know, your interest in art and designs. Tell us a little bit about that.

**Paul Gonzalez:** Yeah. I would say that definitely probably came into about so as a child, I used to just play with friends, like, outside and like, but my mom is a tailor and fashion designer, so I used to help her make stuff. And I didn't know it at the time, but, yeah, like, she always customized things. And so, like, making things and customizing things were, like, a building block, I think, to design, like, from a young age, like, from, like, fabric to, like, I can do whatever I want. One of the coolest things I think that my mom ever did ever was, like, when I was doing my first communion, and or confirmation.

I don't know what it's called. But, and so she gave me a catalog, and she's like, pick whatever suit you want. And I got to go and, like, just flip through it and be like, I like this. I like this. I like this. So I got to design it with her, and she like we went to the store and picked out the buttons and, like, the fabric. It was amazing. I I I loved it. And, I didn't know I would ever do design. I didn't know what design was until high school, really, until late in high school.

I always knew I liked making things, but that the idea of design never came until later in, like, high school. I didn't know it was a profession. I knew I knew very crazy though, I had an eye for design from a very early age, and I knew it. I just didn't know it was design. I just like, ah, that looks good, or like, that looks awesome, or like, that that looks unique.

I had the eye from a young age, but I didn't know how to describe it. And I I think Ringling taught I think that's one one thing that Ringling taught taught you is here is that, like, I learned how to talk about design expressively through words and all that, across the board. So

**Curtis Anderson:** There is just something so it's like a pleasing to the creative senses where you just take something flat fabric and then you can mold and warp it and it becomes this 3 d like this garment that you can wear. And then once that technical aspect kinda gets, like, established, then you can start to infuse some creativity storytelling, and this is where I would wanna how I'd wanna customize it, and this is what I wanna say. So, I mean, I think that's really cool that you kinda just felt that that in initial, like, creative push before you even decided the design was where you wanted to go.

**Paul Gonzalez:** I still like, I came I I come back for my mom altering things all the time. Like, I came back with, like, one of my, dance outfits. I'm like, I need this tailored.

**Curtis Anderson:** So yeah. So I think that's, you said something about being an entrepreneur that I'll come back to. But you like, hearing how you like, your upbringing and your mom and your your dad, like, it's like, like, tell me about these cultural experiences and how they've shaped who you are. Like and how that's almost changed since you've got your, you know, hit the boots running with design to where you are now as an entrepreneur, business owner, design studio owner?

**Paul Gonzalez:** Yeah. I mean, I think as a Puerto Rican in this country, you're really, like, very Puerto Rican. Like it's it's it's a very big thing to being Puerto Rican and a part of being Puerto Rican culture and also Ecuadorian as well. It's less like I think Puerto Rican like growing up in a Puerto Rican in Ecuadorian household, like I'm a lot of the values are taught through community and like family and like growing up with a lot of family around. And so that itself has, a lot of the values have gotten larger even through my businesses, and like, just overall, like and I think, like, that's a very like a it's an awesome question just because, like, I think, like, in my overall theme of life in both businesses is like, I've learned that they're not really cool.

I'm like, awesome, like, having these businesses, but I feel like for me and who I've become and, like, as, like, a a Latino, Latinx person is that, like, I'm trying more and more nowadays to, like, change the perceptive perceptive, like, perception of, how, you know, Americans see Latinos in it's a very big thing for me. It's huge. And it's very like, and it's in Cucala, which is my dance company, and also Alt Alt Black, also we renamed. It's not Studio Black, it's Alt Black.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Okay.

**Paul Gonzalez:** Yeah. And it's such a big thing for me, like, and I think that's why I have such amazing employees that stay with me for years, is that, like, I treat them like family. Like, I I I take like, I I don't pay myself out as much as because I want to invest in them and, like, help them and, like, it's it's such a big thing. Like, I have yearly retreats where I pay for everything. So, like, they just have to come and, like, you know, like we just spend time with each other.

It's very, like, it goes back to family. Same thing with, like, my dance company. We have, like, monthly, like, you know, like get togethers. We go out, we eat together before performances, like, even our yearly anniversary, which is happening in 2 weeks, is we're gonna have a huge band, like 10 performances. Like it's all gonna be free.

It's very community driven. It goes back to like how I grew up, having barbecues, getting together, having fun, dancing, about an hour.

**Curtis Anderson:** And it's important to note, like, as you're saying, you left here as a, you know, junior designer and you and you advanced. That wasn't, like, a full-time job. Like, this was you banking on yourself. We can talk about, you know, you as an entrepreneur Yeah. You know, but, like, freelancing through and through until you decided to start your own business.

So that that's even more so, you know, a lot of people could probably lose like, maybe I can yield or I can, you know, conform to something to like, you like, your cultural roots kinda just led you, you know, family first, community oriented. Mhmm. Even as a freelancer, you gotta really double down on that. Like, this is who you are, and that's part of, like, the Paul Gonzalez brand.

**Paul Gonzalez:** Yeah.

**Curtis Anderson:** Right? Okay.

**Paul Gonzalez:** One of the last things is, like, as I've learned through both these businesses, like, I think my overall goals change the perception of how, oh, yeah, Americans look at Latinos. Normally here in the States and so working high like getting like higher positions like at Amazon or like, all these like places where I like I worked, like RGA and stuff like that, I I learned I I saw the leadership and I was like, no one's black, no one's Latino. And so I knew from an like I didn't know it yet. But I always knew coming out of college, I always knew I wanted my own company, my own firm. And I saw it and I was like, oh, I kind of want to make an agency that's like Latinos or minorities focused.

And so that's like my overall goal, which I've learned is that I'm trying to change that perception for Americans that, like, Latinos can also perform at a high level, and change that perception because, like, the majority of, like, the jobs that Latinos have are waiters, you know, cooks, you know, we're very we're, like, you know, mechanics mowing goons. Like, we're very, like, work driven across the and so, like, that's, like, one of my biggest goals is, like, changing that perception with using the values of Latino, which is, like, community and love and, like, food and, of course, food That's

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** awesome.

**Paul Gonzalez:** And dancing. Yeah.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** I know. I love the food. Yeah. We're gonna come to that come to dance in a little bit. But I wanna learn a little bit about, you know, those years when you were interning. So you I guess you had an internship in New York City. Right? And then you came back and graduated from Ringling College and then packed up everything, went to New York City to do some freelancing. Right? So tell us a little bit about those years when you did some freelancing and some of the things that you learned before you were able to, to, you know, create your own startup?

**Paul Gonzalez:** It is I mean, that's a wild story. So, like, once again, I I feel like I just got lucky in my internship. I I had a class here, and I was, just designing next to this amazing designer, Tommy. And he's he was I I just remember being, like, this guy's so cool. Like, you know, and so.

**Curtis Anderson:** yeah. Tom P?

**Paul Gonzalez:** Yeah. Yeah. Tom P.

**Curtis Anderson:** Yeah. He's cool.

**Paul Gonzalez:** Yeah. He's awesome, dude. And, he he graduated and I was looking and he was already working this for an amazing design agency called Hi Rez. And I just hit he, like, posted something about internship and I was like, yo, man. So he recommended me. I got it. And I just went to this internship in New York. My grandma lived there. I like, you know, I stayed with her in Yonkers for like a month or 2, like 3 months. And I made this crazy commute from Yonkers to, like, Tribeca.

And it was such a culture shock for everything. One of my my first website ever in that, like, helping Tommy and that crew, which is in that that crew was incredible. Yeah. Like, I have never worked with such like, it it kind of sucks when you're working with the high level people and then it kind of goes down as, like, that's how I felt, like, through, like, my career is that, like, I never got to work with such cool people again. Like, oh, like here and there, yes, you work with individuals that are just as as great and cool, but, like, everybody in that studio was just, like, amazing, and very, like, experimental and, like and so I had a lot of culture shock even with, like, the like, I got to work on Helmet Langhside.

That was, like, one of my first project. And, you know, very innocent Paul, like, working on this and, like, I'm just like, hey, guys. I'm working on, like, a product page. I'm like, hey, guys. When are we gonna change these prices?

There are a lot. And they look at me and they're like, those are the prices. And I'm like, oh my god. I just didn't know anything about fashion. Like, even though my mom's like that was, like, high end fashion. So, like, I didn't I didn't know that Helmut Lang was a name. Like, I just, yeah. So,

**Paul Gonzalez:** I so coming out of that internship, I come back to Ringling, and, you know, we start interviewing for, like, roles and stuff. And I actually got a couple of roles in Silicon Valley. I had, like, 3 job offers. I was like, I'm not doing that. I wanna go to New York because, like, I was just so influenced by New York because I had that Tribeca thing. And I was like, I'm in New York and, like and so I I, you know, I was really burned out at Ringling. Like, I really like, my senior year, I freaking, like, I I I really tried really hard. Like, that like, I to the point I burnt myself out and then I took, like, 3 or 4 months off, did nothing. And and then when the school year started coming to start here, I like I'm like, I can't be here.

So I'm like, alright. I wanna move to New York. And, yeah, I just moved up to New York with no job even though I had opportunities in California. And I was like, I'm just gonna go freelance. And so hit the ground running. Like, I just I just I like I said, I just got lucky. I started working for Einerbrands, RGA, these large companies that, like, were like, yeah, come on. Like, I had I had, like, the work from Hi Rez and, like, I had a great book from here because, like, we prioritize portfolios here and so, like, it I I just got very lucky and, like Yeah.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** So you went to Ringling College. Right? You studied graphic design. So I was wondering if you can tell us a little bit about those, like, you know, years at Ringling College, what you learned, and then how, you know, it made you become a successful graphic designer, creative director, and an entrepreneur, maybe even a salsa dancer.

**Paul Gonzalez:** I I loved coming to Ringling. As I said, like, I worked incredibly hard. I was a good grinder. I always worked so much. I met my incredible friends that I'm still friends with in New York.

You know, I'm still very, like, friendly with, like, everybody I went to school with. And, yeah, I I think some of the things I learned at Ringling is, like, learning how to learn, how to adapt. Even during my time here, like, the teachers would change the whole curriculum because they saw the industry was changing, so they're, like, you don't need that school anymore that you learned last year. We're learning something new and because it's where the industry is going. And so I learned how to change and adapt very fast overall.

And yeah. And once again, like, you know, I leaned towards more the international people when I was here. Mhmm. Like, you know, my crew was very international from, like, Bosnia, Maldives, like, Pakistan, like, all these, you know, Vietnam. Like, this like, I growing up here in Sarasota, there wasn't that much diversity.

But, like, because Ringling had this, like, very diverse international crew, I just I don't know why, like, I just, like, gravitated towards them. And so, like, I hung out with them. And so I learned a lot about the world, like geography, like where is I didn't know what even, like, in Uzbekistan was, like, or, you know, all these countries. Like, oh, wow. And I learned about their culture.

They made food. I made food. Like, it was, like, this amazing experience. That's cool. And yeah.

Across the board, like, it was it was it was a lot of fun learning about the world even with the people I was around here. And yeah. I think and I and I was saying before too, the things I learned, like, a lot of the groundwork was, like, making clubs. Like, I made something out of nothing that,

**Curtis Anderson:** like, like Still around. Type club.

**Paul Gonzalez:** Around. Type club. I made a club that's still around today 12 years later. I'm, like, shocked. What club

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** is that?

**Curtis Anderson:** Type club.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Oh, wow.

**Paul Gonzalez:** Yeah. Amazing. Yeah. I made it with, like, it was, like, 3 others. It was Drew Rios and Fernando Realales.

Like, yeah. Like, yeah. And I'm still so shocked. Yeah. It's amazing, though.

I love seeing that, and it makes sense for the department. It's still around and, like, yeah. I I knew coming here, I was like, I have to do everything I could. Like, in in dancing, it's called, like, squeezing the juice. Mhmm.

Like, you wanna you know, like, like, you're trying to, like, you know, like, be making movements as much as you can so you can, you know, show the world. And so, like, for me, I I just worked super hard to, like, do as much as I could here so that, like, you put in what you get out, you know, or you get out what you put in overall. And so I did that here. And Yeah.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** I'm looking at you now.

**Paul Gonzalez:** I know. Because I always compared it to my parents, and I was like, I just felt so uncomfortable. They were so proud of me. My dad was so proud. He's like, yeah.

Like, my son's doing yeah. But, like, it I it's just incredible shame. It's very funny. Like, I I just like, but yeah. And it took me years to get over.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** I feel the same. Sorry.

**Curtis Anderson:** What was your metrics of success as it pertains to, like, being, like, a a a Latino? Like, your like, if your parents if, like, your you say you made, you know, so much more money than them. So then, like, once you were reaching that threshold, was it hard to see what success looked like in the realm that you were in as a, you know, a Latino? Or, like, because Success is a funny word, man.

**Paul Gonzalez:** Because, like, I don't think even now I'm successful. Like, I can objectively see, oh, Paul, you're doing so great. You have multiple companies. They're doing great. They're all profitable.

But, like, I don't know if I see the world like that. It's like, oh, it's like you're for sure. I get it. But I think success for me is, like, doing what I'm doing now. I guess I I like, is that I'm very lucky I get to spend the time I do with my family, I get to help others in the community, and I get to empower others through the businesses I run, especially minorities in Puerto like Puerto Ricans, ERCO Latinos, everybody, like and I think that is what success for me and I just wanna push that.

**Curtis Anderson:** You said something in your intro that I found so, like, really intriguing. Like, you said, like, yeah, I'm an entrepreneur, but it feels weird to even say that. Like, what did what does where does that stem from and, like, where did you start to see that shift where it was, like, super foreign to, like, I can start to, like, walk and talk like I'm an entrepreneur?

**Paul Gonzalez:** Schools don't prioritize businesses, like, in the sense of, like, learning how to be a business. I always wanted to make my own firm, but, like, it was never that. And even as a freelancer, you are your own business. You had to navigate these very hard conversations of, like, money. And New York is like, you like like, the hourly rate got really high really fast for me. It went from like, I'm making \$30 an hour to like, I'm making 90 to 100. And that was very hard for me to say. Like, super hard for me, like, hey.

I'm worth a 100 an hour, as a freelancer, a 125 an hour. And I was just I wasn't comfortable for years saying that. Like, I was about you or hard like, hard

**Curtis Anderson:** for me to say to yourself or hard for you to say to, like, an employer? It's both.

**Paul Gonzalez:** Yeah. Okay. And so, like and and so, like, that itself as like a like and and this all goes back to business and so, like, it's hard to say that because, like, for the entrepreneur, because of, like, things like that. It's not learned and taught. Like, it's it's it's and it's it's also you know, it's it it was a very big learning curve, overall. And literally, I had to practice saying, like, a 125 an hour. A 125. I literally had to, like, practice it probably, like, a 100 like a 100 times just to be, like, to make it sound so easy and so smooth that, like, you know, it's like a normal day, you know. And and I have to do that with my own business now too because the running contracts for my firm is like between, you know, 15,3010. And so, like, you know, like and but most of the time too, we get larger projects, like, in the 50 to a 100 range.

And so, like, now like, I'm used to saying that now. So I'm like, it's like no issue, but, like, it did take time. And a lot of that comes from my upbringing where, like, you know, as a freelancer, I was making more in a month than my parents made in a half a year. And I felt so uncomfortable about that. And, like, it was like this very, like, wild I'm like, I never made so much like, it's just wild to me that I made so much money, and I also, like, didn't feel like I also didn't deserve it.

Like, I was like it was weird. It was like, I know I'm skilled and this and that, but, like, it was just a wild feeling. And I'm just like but I took it and I was like, all right. I'm gonna do all the goals I wanted to. I'll, you know, pay debt, pay my parents' house. Like, that I had all these goals. And, like, I was like, achieve these goals. And so

**Curtis Anderson:** Like a like a sense of, like, impostor syndrome that was being forced out of you. Like, you couldn't keep it around because you were doing these things. Exactly.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** We talked a lot about everything, impostor syndrome, challenges, being a Latino, the importance of community and people, and how you're infusing your cultural

background, right, into your work and the companies that you're creating. If you were to give one piece of advice to our students, what would you like to tell them?

**Paul Gonzalez:** Just fail and work hard. That's it. And just be a nice person. That's really it. Like, you're gonna get far with just probably one of those things.

Like if you add all those 3 that, like, you know, it I think you'll be successful overall. Like, I I know people who, like, are just great people and, like, they've gotten so far just because of that. They might not even be great designers or great, you know, workers, but, like, because of who they are, they're just incredible employees. They become great managers and, like, they become go high up, become VPs and, like, it's just, you know, it's I think in the world of art and design, like, it's not it's not like it's not it's it's not like a direct row. It's like a it's a zigzag, and you have to figure it out, and things change all the time, like, all the time, especially now with ChatGPT and, like, all this and that.

Like, it's just, and and just, like, AI, like, overall. Like, I gotta give a lot to Ringling overall of, like, learning how to learn here, the people I've met, and, like, it's just because it's still every day, I use all the skills. But yeah, I think for the students, work as hard as you can in and out of school. Fail as much as you can because that's what I did. And a lot of those learnings, even here, like, the groundworks was for what I'm doing now.

Like, even here, like, Curtis, as you know, like, I made clubs. So I was making, like, a little and and what I learned was, like, those are, like, little companies. And, like, you know, and so yeah. I was like and and so, like, I was already making the groundworks of making something on in the real world. And so, just, like, just fail. If you don't know what you wanna do, just keep failing. Know what you don't want. That's easier than not just being like, I don't know, maybe I wanna do this. We're like, just work hard, treat people great, don't burn bridges. Yeah.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** So any final thoughts?

**Paul Gonzalez:** I just say just keep working hard. Be nice to people. Be humble. There's a lot of and be kind, like that that's like a really big thing overall and just treat people how you wanna be treated. It matters so much, overall and that that it yeah.

It's not it's yes. We're we are very preoccupied of what we do in our for our living because that's our livelihood and we invest a lot into college and but it's only gonna be a in in 10 years from now, probably for all students, it's not just the only thing you do. It's one of the things Right. You do and you'll be a whole different person in 10 years. And so and later in 10 years, you can hit up somebody 2 weeks before an interview and be like, you wanna come on for an interview? I'm like, sure.

**Curtis Anderson:** Yeah. Shout out to Paul for being answering my text message.

**Paul Gonzalez:** At, like, 2 AM.

**Curtis Anderson:** Yeah. I appreciate that. I appreciate that.

**Dr. Elcin Haskollar:** Well, thank you so much for being a part of Rising Together podcast. We really appreciate you. Thank you.

**Paul Gonzalez:** Thank you so much. Appreciate your help.

**Curtis Anderson:** And that concludes today's conversation. Thank you for tuning in and joining us on this journey of design and inclusion. You can find all of our episodes, transcripts, and other wonderful resources on our website, [ringling.edu backslash rising together](http://ringling.edu/backslash/rising-together). Join us next time for more insightful conversations, and remember to stay connected, stay engaged, and keep rising together with us. Rising Together is produced at the sound stage in partnership with Studio Labs and Art Network at Ringling College of Art and Design.

The show is produced by Dr. Elcin Haskollar, Curtis Anderson, Nick Paldino, Troy Logan, and Marquee Doyle.