Lessons learned from always being the new girl

Two weeks after her birth in Chicago, Raquel Cadena was on a plane to Bogota, Colombia—the first stop in what would be a lifetime journey to discover who she was and where she fit in. Both her parents came from humble beginnings; her father, Miles, in Colombia, and her mother, Eni, in Peru. They met at Northwestern University, just north of Chicago, becoming entrepreneurs before the word became clichéd.

Early in their marriage, they bought a building in Chicago that they planned to refurbish and sell; but before they could, the place collapsed. Without the funds to rebuild, Raquel’s parents decided to repurpose the property by opening an oil-change business called Quick Oil.

It was so successful that they took the idea to Colombia, where nothing like it existed. That began years of weekly or bi-weekly travel for Miles and Eni as they took turns staying home with Raquel and her sister while managing their business in two countries. It also meant occasionally relocating their family for logistical reasons.

“I went to preschool in Colombia and kindergarten in the US,” Raquel says. “But then I returned to Colombia for first through third grade at an all-girls Catholic school.” She landed back in Chicago the next year, where she remained through her freshman year in high school. “I was always the new girl,” Raquel says. “It was hard finding people to relate to me. In Colombia, they would say I was not Colombian enough. And when I was in the US, I was not American enough. So, I never had that best friend who was with me every stage of life. Someone to vent to and talk to about the things I was going through.”

Her family settled in Chicago’s northern suburbs, a place Raquel says her parents couldn’t really afford, “but they wanted us to be exposed to families that were achieving much more. ... Each morning before dropping me off at school, my father would spend 20 minutes driving around all these houses I never could have imagined existed; they were so big and beautiful. It made me wonder what type of jobs the people had, and what they did in their lives to earn this. Dreaming like that became a thing for me.” The comfort of her dreams helped get Raquel through her final three high school years in Colombia.
“It was very tough,” she says. “There were a lot of stressors. I had become so accustomed to being in this bubble in the US that when I went back, I had to learn to adapt and be flexible—to embrace chaos again.” Most importantly, Raquel learned the value of vulnerability. “I grew up in a home where you just showed strength. The whole concept of vulnerability was foreign to me. Then, in high school, I noticed that if I said I was having trouble with my homework, people would help. And next time I’d ask, they’d say yes again. It was mind-boggling.

I realized that I had become far too independent. It allowed me to slowly start peeling off my layers and open up and be vulnerable. And the more I did that, the happier I was.” Raquel eventually moved to Seattle, where she joined Microsoft’s Data Science team. “I’m learning how to live by myself for the first time,” she says. “I admit I was scared to do this—to leave family and friends in Chicago. But I believe if the regret of not doing something is bigger than your fear, then what are you fearing? You’re just fearing the growth and experience you’re depriving yourself of.” There’s much more to Raquel’s story, including what she learned about borrowing sugar from neighbors in Colombia. You can check it out on the Powered by the People podcast.