

Modern Life – Episode 7 – Jannese Torres-Rodriguez

Title: Gig economy & financial freedom | Jannese Torres-Rodriguez | Fidelity Modern Life

Transcript:

Jannese Torres-Rodriguez: Entrepreneurship is an exercise in confronting fear in all different forms or fashions. And it really just is a matter of pushing the boundaries within yourself of what you are capable of.

Jamila Souffrant: Jannese Torres-Rodriguez, thank you so much for joining us on Modern Life to talk about the gig economy.

Jannese: Thank you for having me. I'm so excited.

Jamila: I'm so excited to talk to you. We have talked a couple of times about our transitions from working full time and having side hustles and making it now our full-time thing. So I want to learn from you...how did you decide what your first side gig was?

Jannese: I never imagined being an entrepreneur. That wasn't something that I had planned for my life. I grew up in a very traditional Latino household. The plan was to go to college, get a degree, hopefully get a pension, retire at 65. Do all of things that are "the American Dream." But I found myself around the age of 27, just really feeling like, "Is this all there is to life?" Cause I did all the things and I really felt unsatisfied. So the creative part of me always thought I wanted to do something around the culinary arts. Then I discovered the world of blogging and that for me was a light bulb moment in being able to take my passion for cooking, but also maintaining the flexibility around that type of industry by being online.

Jamila: So the food blog was your first side hustle while you were working.

Jannese: Yes. It was.

Jamila: How did you get that blog going? Because before you can monetize it, you had to build an audience. So what was that like?

Jannese: Yeah. I had no idea what I was doing. And so it was very much subscribing to YouTube channels and going on Google and searching how to start a blog.

For me, it was just a process of trial and error. I didn't really know I was creating a business when I first started it. It was just really a passion project and something that I

looked forward to after work. Just a way to have a creative outlet and then it blossomed into what it is today.

Jamila: Right and it earns like, six figures?

Jannese: Yeah. It's kind of insane.

Jamila: That is insane. And I think what the important thing right there that you said was you didn't intend for it to be something that you'd monetize.

Jannese: Yeah.

Jamila: You were just doing something creative, and it led to that.

Jannese: Yeah.

Jamila: So how did you first monetize it?

Jannese: So I took an intro to food blogging course at the Institute of Culinary Arts in New York City. I learned about things like affiliate marketing and sponsored content, "being an influencer," right, that was just like becoming a thing and also digital ads or display ads.

So I started to really focus in on honing in my content in a way that was going to make me stand out, whereas before I was kind of just doing whatever. I didn't have a real niche in my blog, but then when I started focusing on Puerto Rican food, I realized that there's not a lot of Puerto Rican food bloggers and my traffic went crazy.

So that was the first indication that I had locked in on a specific niche that I could grow. And once it started to grow, those opportunities started to show up for me. So I was able to monetize through ads and through sponsored content and affiliate marketing.

Jamila: And also you had to take your own pictures, right? So it forced you to learn new skills.

Jannese: Yes. I had to become a food stylist on the go. I was reading a lot of like Better Homes and Gardens magazines, seeing how the professionals do it. And really just trying to mimic that with my own amateur set of skills.

Jamila: You're doing this blog on the side. It's starting to make money. When did you really think, "Wait a second, this may be something I can switch and do full-time?"

Jannese: The first year that I thought it would be a possibility to turn this into a full-time business was in 2017 when I made \$10,000 that year. So at that point, I was kind of hooked. I was like, "I got to figure out how to turn this into way more." And it took some time, but I mean it's kind of unreal how this has happened.

Jamila: It was the same for me. You know, you're just taught to go to school, get that education and get a stable job, wait for that pension, and you'll be ok. And then, tell me if this is your experience: and then you realize there's blogs, there's podcasts, there are all these things people do on the side that they turn into full-time gigs. And you're like, "Why didn't I know about this before? Because I would have tried this earlier."

Jannese: Absolutely. I attribute a lot of that to just the lack of representation in our communities for what entrepreneurship looks like. When I think about who owned businesses when I was growing up, it was like the neighborhood bodega or the nail salon or the hair salon. Those were never careers that I considered for myself and we don't have representation in our communities about like, who are the Elon Musks or the Jeff Bezos of the black and brown communities? And I have to remember that a generation ago, the internet didn't exist. So these jobs didn't exist. We're seeing new industries pop up because of technology. So I can't fault my parents or my grandparents for not understanding what I do, because this wasn't a thing. And so it's okay if people don't get what you're doing. It's not really about them at the end of the day. It's for you to understand what you're doing. And then eventually they will, they'll believe it when they see your success. It's very much about granting the next generation permission to dream bigger. My father has always talked about starting a food truck and he's never done it because of that fear of just rocking the boat and sacrificing all of the stability that they worked so hard to get.

So I feel like it's almost a duty at this point to do the things that my dad couldn't do. Because then it gives my niece and you know, who knows, future grandchildren, permission to dream bigger.

Jamila: You said the first year you made \$10,000 and then you made your six figures from your food blog. How long did it take for you to do that?

Jannese: 2020 was the first year that my food blog was making enough money for me to quit my job. That was the first inkling that I had into, "Oh my gosh. I've actually done what I set out to do all of those years ago." So 2021 was the year that I pulled the plug and I'm now making more money with my food blog than I was in my corporate job, which is just insane.

Jamila: Wow. So how did you prepare? Because you're leaving behind a "safe paycheck,"—So how did you prepare for that?

Jannese: Well, the first discussions were with my husband because I'm married and I'm also the primary breadwinner of my household. So it wasn't just this thing where I

could just quit my job and we'll figure it out on the way down. Right? Like jump out of the plane and figure it out. I had a lot of discussions with him about what my plan was, around how much money I was going to save in emergency fund, what my plan was going to be for retirement, what we're going to do for health insurance, all of those things, and more. I even started a family emergency fund outside of my own personal emergency fund because I do provide financial support to my family. And I didn't want to be in a position where I'm putting that at risk by taking the leap.

Jamila: And that's a great point you bring up because as women of color, I know for the Latina community, taking care of family is a big part of our culture. And sometimes it's expected, you know, our parents sacrificed so much to put us in positions to succeed, and often at the detriment of their own security. So can you talk about those ramifications and how that does prevent or keep us sometimes locked into jobs and careers we're not happy with?

Jannese: I think so many of us crave the comfort and stability that we didn't see growing up. And so that makes us very risk averse. And as an entrepreneur, I mean, you have to get really comfortable just taking risks, instead of just thinking about what could go wrong. It's also been a lot of openness with my family and just having them understand, like why I'm doing this. Because when I told my parents like, "Hey guys, I'm going to quit my corporate job with a pension." They're just like, "What are you talking about? You went to school. You got two degrees. Like this was the plan. So why rock the boat?" And once they understood that I had a clear plan and I was willing to take calculated risks and not just, you know, doing things for the sake of it, they began to understand the potential of what I was creating and now they've become my biggest supporters.

Jamila: You also moved, right, to help with the cost of living. And I think that's a big deal because you are originally from the New York, New Jersey area and it's expensive here.

Jannese: Yes.

Jamila: And so can you talk about that?

Jannese: I think it goes back to this idea where we just have to get comfortable being uncomfortable. So the first major thing that I did was moving from New Jersey to Florida and my cost of living was slashed by at least 25%. So part of that move was also knowing that as a full-time business owner, I was going to go to a place that has much friendlier business tax environment and was going to save me money as an entrepreneur.

Not everybody's going to have the luxury to make those decisions but it's at least worth entertaining, whether that's...even moving to a different town, right? You don't necessarily have to move to a different state. It's just a matter of making sure that your environment is aligned with your goals as well.

Jamila: And the other thing that you did during the pandemic is start your podcast, which has also ushered in more income streams. How did you discover that podcasting would be your next side gig to your side gig?

Jannese: Yeah. So as a fan of podcasts, I eventually came to a place where I wanted to hear conversations about money from Latinas, and I couldn't find the podcast to do that. Something about my personality just said, "Maybe I can be the one to start these discussions." And it really just started with me downloading an app on my phone, recording some episodes in my coat closet. And here we are, like 18 months later, over 200,000 downloads.

It's been a wild ride, but what it's given me is the same sort of insight that I had when I figured out my niche as a food blogger: there's a huge niche for these conversations in the Latinx community. And they're just not being had, but the hunger is there. So I think that's why it's grown so much in such a short amount of time.

Jamila: When you did have your full-time job and you were doing the blog and then at some point the podcast on the side, what was a day like? Because what happens for people is, they're like, "I'm already tired and like, my day's already booked or full," But they want extra money, and they don't really see how they can fit it in. So can you give us and walk us through a day, like a real day, what that looked like when you were doing everything?

Jannese: It's a lot of hard work. It's a lot of sacrifice. It's a matter of really committing to what you want and the vision that you have.

On those days when I was just exhausted from work and I knew I had to get things done for my business, that's what drove me. It's just this, I know what life can look like if I keep going, so that's what fuels you when there really is nothing left. And you also can give yourself permission to take a break. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. It's important to remember that and you don't need to be working every single day.

Jamila: And it's so encouraging because there's someone listening or watching right now, and they're like, "I have an idea." Or maybe they don't know yet what they should do. So how would you help people decide what they should start exploring on the side to make money?

Jannese: I think there's three different aspects that you need to look at. First, it's the skills that you have at work. There's a lot of skills that we use at work, whether those are technical skills or even soft skills that you can use to start a business. A lot of people don't realize that that's the first place to look, right?

For me, I've been very much the other aspect of it. So I'm looking at all the personal skills that I have, like the things I do for fun. How can I turn those into a business? I'd never imagined like creating an engineering consulting firm cause I'm like, "I don't

want to do this forever," but I love to cook. I love to talk to people. How can I turn that into a career? So whether you do things for work, you do things for fun, those are two great places to look.

It's also good to explore what your curiosities are. Maybe you don't have the skillset that you need right now to start the business that you want. But there's so much free education now. You can go on Google. You can watch YouTube. You can go on Instagram. You can go on Tik Tok.

I will say you just have to start at some point. You got to get out of your head at some point and just really start experimenting. That's what entrepreneurship is. It really is just experimenting through different versions of what you want to create. I tried to be a travel blogger. It didn't work. I tried a drop shipping store. It didn't work. But I didn't let that stop my journey as an entrepreneur. I just had to figure out what it was that I could stick with, that I could commit to. And what I was really passionate about.

Jamila: Now you talked about your family; how did they react to you leaving your job?

Jannese: So the first thing I did was I started showing my income statements to my husband and to my family. I'm like, "Look, guys: I'm actually making more money with this business than I am in my job." My father was like, "Well, why don't you just do both?"

I'm like, "Dad, I'm working like 20 hours a day. Like this is not sustainable. And the whole reason why I'm pursuing this is to have more time. I don't want to have less time. I want to have more flexibility so I can spend more time with you guys."

So once they understood my why, and then also understood the financial success was already kind of built into the plan, they were both very supportive. And my husband was just like, "Let me know when you need me to put you on my insurance. I'm ready when you are." It's so important to have that circle of people around you. That makes or breaks a lot of entrepreneurs if they don't have that level of support.

Jamila: Yeah. And like you said, things like insurance, healthcare, all these things are very important. So what, what would you say someone should be really considering in those fields?

Jannese: I contacted a CFP and actually work with them on a transition plan to make that leap. So thinking about things like signing up for long-term disability insurance, now that I'm taking the leap into entrepreneurship, I want to make sure I'm protecting myself if I end up not being able to work because of disability at some point. Also upping my life insurance policy. Making sure I have an estate plan. All of those things I did before taking the leap, because I really wanted to have like everything ironed out.

So there's no right or wrong way to prepare, but you can definitely inform yourself as much as possible and have a plan.

It's never too early to work with an accountant. I for a while was just trying to DIY my taxes, DIY the accounting of my business. And it was a disaster every time I filed my taxes. I owed a huge tax bill. It was so hard to reconcile everything because I didn't have separate bank accounts. I didn't have a separate savings account for dealing with taxes.

Unless you're an accountant yourself, you don't want to start trying to figure out how to deal with the IRS. There's so many different tax loopholes that you might be missing out on. There's just a lot of things to consider, a lot of moving parts when it comes to your money and your business.

So having those separate accounts to deal with your taxes, to pay yourself so that you're not investing all of your money into your business. Having those systems in place are so critical.

Jamila: And it's so key to understand like how money works as an entrepreneur or someone bringing in a dollar because sometimes, you'll hear people say, "Oh, I earned six figures." The business earned six figures. I didn't earn six figures because I have overhead, I have expenses, I have taxes.

Jannese: Right.

Jamila: And I think when you don't know that it kind of just seems more glamorous than it really is.

Jannese: Yeah. That's why I'm so big on transparency with my own numbers in my business. So if you go on my Instagram, I share my income statements. You know how much money I'm making, where it's coming from.

And I also want to normalize this idea around women of color, especially, being able to build multiple six figure businesses. Less than 10% of women-owned businesses earn over a hundred thousand dollars a year in revenue. So just normalizing this possibility for us is so important to me. And I think transparency helps not only people who are thinking about this, but maybe it also gives people some perspective of like, "Do I want this level of responsibility in my life?"

You know, you might need a gut check too, so it's just important to put it all out there and let folks make the decision that works for them.

Jamila: Right, so what would you tell someone listening right now? Maybe, you know, they're a person of color or a woman and they haven't seen representation. They

have family that just don't understand or get it. How would you encourage them to follow their dreams?

Jannese: There are so many people that you can meet on the internet that will be willing to root for you and support you in ways that maybe your family just can't right now. And if that's the route that you need to take to get the support that you need, do it. There are women like you, there are women like me who are ready to be your biggest cheerleaders.

And I think when I question whether or not I'm worthy of doing this, I think about all the opportunities that the women in my family didn't have. My grandmothers. My mother. You know, a generation ago, women couldn't even have their own credit lines, couldn't have their own bank accounts. So it's almost like I'm acting on their behalf to see what is possible and to make up for all of that lost time.

That's the biggest honor and the biggest duty that I have to myself. So if you feel like this is something you want to do, remember all of the women who came before you who couldn't do it, and do it for them.

Jamila: So when someone is, let's just say they have this side hustle, it's earning some money. What is your advice for someone who's like, "All right, this looks like it could be a thing, but I don't know."?

Jannese: First it's getting very comfortable being uncomfortable. Entrepreneurship is an exercise in confronting fear in all different forms or fashions. And it really just is a matter of pushing the boundaries within yourself of what you are capable of. The first time I got hired for a speaking engagement, I was like melting inside, but you get past it. And that confidence muscle is the thing you have to build when it comes to entrepreneurship, because you will have failures. For me, I'm very risk averse, so I needed to have a fully funded emergency fund. And as an entrepreneur, that's a one-year emergency fund. I also needed to be able to have replicated my success for six months, at least. If I could consistently make at least X amount of money, six months, that to me told me that I figured out my business model. I figured out how to make this a consistent thing.

Jamila: So outside of the emergency fund, what other financial considerations should one consider if they're going to make this leap?

Jannese: For me, it was really important to get debt-free, at least consumer debt-free. So I went kind of a little overboard. I sold my house. I paid off all my credit cards. I'm like, "I don't want any debt if I'm going to go into entrepreneurship." You don't have to be that extreme, but you should definitely have a plan as far as how you're going to tackle that debt and manage it now that you might have more unstable income.

I opened a solo 401(k) while I was still side hustling. I didn't wait until I transitioned to full-time entrepreneurship because all you need to have is an Employee ID number to open these types of accounts. So just knowing your options is like half of the battle.

Jamila: For some people like they, they're fine with the side gig just staying the side gig. Right? They're fine actually with the full-time job and the side gig. So how does one decide if one thing should stay a side hustle or something they just do versus "I'm going all in. It's going to be my full-time entrepreneurship goal."

Jannese: Yeah. I think that happens organically. I find that when you're creating your side hustle from this place of passion, it's really hard to keep that as a side hustle, especially when you start seeing that level of success.

So when you wake up in the morning and you're more excited to work on your side hustle than you are to like check in for work, that's an indication that you might be ready to take that full leap. If you don't have that feeling, then maybe you're okay just doing the stuff on the side and it might just be something you're doing to pay off debt or save money and you're ready to just go back into, you know, normal life at some point and that's okay too. There's no right or wrong way to do this.

Jamila: I love this. Okay. Jannese, thank you so much for coming on and sharing more about just side hustle, side gigs, and entrepreneurship.

Jannese: Thank you so much for having me.

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