

2024 Hispanic Heritage Month Interview Series

Interviewee: Rafael Ortiz Jr., Ortiz Jr. Auto Repair

Donald Jones: Rafael, thank you so much for joining us for this conversation. As you know, we are honoring Hispanic Heritage Month, and what we wanted to do to honor this month was focus on Hispanic entrepreneurs and help to tell their story, about how they became an entrepreneur and what their goals are for the future.

The theme of the conversation is 'identity as an asset.' So often as people of color we talk about the various challenges and barriers we face, which are real, but there's also a flip side around how we use identity - our racial identity, but also other identities that we have, whether you're a parent or you previously were a worker, the different identities you have in your community, your family – to shape how you operate your business and set goals.

First, can you introduce yourself and a little bit about your business?

Rafael Ortiz Jr.: My name is Rafael Ortiz Jr. I work for the auto repair shop named Ortiz Jr. Auto Repair. It is family owned. My father started this business about 30 years ago. We focused mainly on just mechanical work - suspensions, general maintenance and preventive care. We've been in this community in the same location. I grew up here. Because of this business, I was able to work on it and grow it, but also I was able to attend my dream school, utilizing our shop as the company that I'm working for. It's opened up so many doors. It's taught me a lot about business, the infrastructure, creating company culture, and everything. I love coming to work.

You know, it has my name on it technically. So, it was like "no pressure" when my Dad launched it!

DJ: That's great. I would love to talk a little bit about that theme of identity. As you think about your racial identity, and other identities that you may have, how does that show up in your business in terms of how you operated it or maybe the goals that you have set for your business?

RO: It all started growing up in South L.A.. I come from a long line of entrepreneur family members. I grew up visiting my grandmother's produce shop, taco tasting at my uncle's Mexican restaurant. So through all those experiences, I learned key components of running a business.

For example, when I was six years old, my parents utilized our apartment garage as an auto repair shop, which was a that was a great way to launch a minimum viable product. Once they figured out it was going to work, then they started shopping around, looking for an actual location, which is the one we're at today. They taught me how to you need to sacrifice and work hard and be ethical, because growing up and seeing that, I realized that our business should not be just transactional, but it's about treating like our customers like family. So technically, we were inviting our customers into our home so we could fix their vehicles. That's a lesson I just never forgot it. I was 6 or 7 years old, but I remember customers waiting outside of our kitchen, waiting for their car to be done. It made a difference as I was growing and educating myself a little bit more about business and what type of atmosphere and experiences we want our customers to have.

So, when I took over the family business, I understood those key components from when we first started. And I'll replicate that now as we're about to open up our new expansion location. Because I not only want to just continue growing my parents' legacy, but I also want to create a space for like our community where they can we can have art shows, for example; where they can come and just talk with our community members when they need a repair. Of course we'll fix your car, but it's more about building that community.

DJ: That's great. You talked about the expansion location and using it as a community space. What are some other ways in which you are differentiating yourself and how does identity show up in those plans?

RO: Being a Latino mechanic in South L.A., I think that my identity plays a huge role, whether its in setting a goal or running the business because our community is about hard work, resilience, ethics, family and simply helping each other. I've always been an advocate of building strong, lasting relationships with not only my customers, but with our community.

I always set my goals based on providing those reliable, high quality services that people can trust. Realistically, inflation is going up, and repairs should not cost someone a day's work. And if they do, I want to make sure that they avoid having repetitive repairs by providing great quality for them. That's why it would be very challenging to automate our business model, because you just need that personal touch, that community touch. It's very difficult to replicate.

So in regards to how I differentiate myself, we offer customized package repairs. We provide whatever our customer can afford, but we always focus on the quality because at the end of the day, we want them to understand what's going in their vehicle, and we want to make sure that that vehicle lasts a long time, or at least they know the lifespan of their vehicle so they can kind of go to work, take care of their kids, and kind of just live a day-to-day life.

For us at the end of the day, it's not just about the metrics, it's just making sure that our community stays mobile and with a reliable and cost efficient automotive.

DJ: If you were giving advice to a new Hispanic or Latino entrepreneur, what are some of the tips that you would give for success?

I would say have fun, because at the end of the day, this is a very long journey. And if you're not enjoying yourself or passionate about it, I think it can be very difficult.

Another piece of advice would be to find something you're passionate about, because I think that's what drives people.

Be resilient and network. Get to know people in your space. Don't be shy, get out there. very I've been working for my father for about ten years and I've learned so much and had I just stayed hidden or shy, I don't think I would probably be sitting here.

Continue educating yourself and learning. Trends change, so you want to be on top of that.

And just be attentive to your business. Focus on the financials - check them weekly, monthly, because at the end of the day, that's what fuels your business. And then make sure you understand like your customer clientele and make sure you're there for them. Like I said earlier, it shouldn't be transactional. You want to create that bond.

DJ: You know, I love that. Thank you. My last question: is there anything that you didn't get to share that you wanted to share with us?

RO: I think the work your company is doing is amazing, because I myself have tried getting contracts, but it's just difficult. I'd go to a seminar and sit in a room with 40 people, but there's only so much they can do to provide certain information.

I also want to highlight that I am a second generation business owner. It's been a fun journey, and we're going to continue to grow and continue to make change and despite everything that we've been through, we're still positive. It's been a long time journey to get funding to be able to complete our project, but I'm personally just excited to begin the next chapter of Ortiz Jr. Auto Repair. I call it a 2.0 version because it's now more like my version of it. I'm just excited.

Lastly, I've always had a passion for the community. We try to help tackle literacy and different other issues that we see in our community; I'm a huge advocate of the arts, which is why I want to do an art show eventually, and just keep our community fun. It's our responsibility to make sure we keep our community as well as we can. And that's why for us, we're not just your typical auto repair shop, you know, we're more than that.

DJ: Yeah. I mean, I love the themes I'm hearing around being a community member, having that relationship to your customers. And also how you bring in the scrappiness, hunger, and resilience, as you said, to that journey.

So thank you so much for sharing your story and, for your time. I really appreciate it.