



Ep. 14: Alejandro Garcia-Amaya (Questrom'07), Mulu Labs CEO & "Getting Here" Podcast Host

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

For tech start-up CEO, Alejandro Garcia-Amaya (Questrom'07), entrepreneurship runs in the family. Alejandro learned the ropes alongside his mother and brother as they built the experiential brand marketing company, InterMinds. Today, Alejandro is charting his own course as CEO of the investor-backed team, Mulu Labs in Silicon Valley and he is the host of the Getting Here podcast. On this episode of Proud to BU, Alejandro explores the lessons he's learned from the worlds of private equity and venture capital; and what it means to be named one of the ['Top 20 Latino Tech Leaders'](#).

Podcast Transcript:

- Jeff Murphy: I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations, and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU podcast. My guest today is fellow podcaster and the CEO of Mulu Labs, Alejandro Garcia-Amaya. Alejandro graduated from the Questrom School of Business in the class of 2007, and since then has been following his passion for entrepreneurship. He was co-founder and CEO of InterMinds, where he worked at the intersection of interactive art, branding, and technology. Today at Mulu Labs, he leads an investor-backed team in Silicon Valley and also hosts the Getting Here podcast, centered on conversations with leaders who are pursuing and achieving their dreams. Alejandro joined me on the podcast to share a few of the lessons he's learned following his path and also to talk about the important role that networking has played in his career. Alejandro Garcia-Amaya, thank you so much for joining us on the Proud to BU podcast.
- Alejandro Garcia-Amaya: Thank you for having me here, Jeff.
- Jeff: And let's get started by stating something. You and I found each other because you have a podcast that's nearly identical to this one. Will you get us started by talking a little bit about your podcast?
- Alejandro: Yes. The podcast is called Getting Here and it's based on leaders who pursue and achieve their dreams and how they got to where they are. And we cover upbringing, success, fears and lessons learned. And it's a whole diverse range of leaders from different communities and heritages, backgrounds, industries. So we have a lot of fun.
- Jeff: And I listened to an episode that you did with another BU alum, Dan Liburd, and I'll tell anybody who's listening, if you like Proud to BU, you're going to like Alejandro's Getting Here podcast as well. So where can people find that?
- Alejandro: They can go to gettinghere.us, and in there you have all the available links for Apple podcasts, Google podcasts, Spotify, Soundcloud, just all the different mediums. Yes.

Jeff: Perfect. Well, let's rewind the clock a little bit. I certainly want to talk about your career path and how you got to where you are. But tell me, we had chatted a few weeks ago, but tell me so our listeners know where, where did you grow up? And I'm curious to know how you found yourself at BU for your undergrad experience?

Alejandro: Yes. So I was born in New York, raised in Colombia until I was about eight years old. Came to the states because my father worked at the United Nations, so that's where I ended up growing up in Westchester County in a city called Scarsdale. And I ended up at BU because I have two other brothers and each of which went to their respective university, one in New York, NYU, the other Villanova, which was in Pennsylvania. And I wanted to be close to home and I figured since those states were already covered, why not go to Boston? And I visited Boston University during the spring time and fell in love with it, not realizing that also the springtime is only like a week that you get to spend as a student to the university [laughing]. The rest of the time it's a lot of cold. Um, but it was, it was a lot of fun.

Jeff: But you also get those picturesque winter postcard shots of snow up and down Comm Ave. You wouldn't want to miss out on that.

Alejandro: Who would want to miss out on that? You're absolutely right.

Jeff: So you came to BU and you started at, at the time was the School of Management, now the Questrom School of Business. And from what I remember, you sort of majored in Entrepreneurship. Had you known your whole, sort of in high school or even growing up as a kid, that you thought about being an entrepreneur someday?

Alejandro: Yeah. You know, I was surrounded, my parents and my father is an academic-turned-diplomat and my mother's an entrepreneur her whole life. And so I have always been surrounded and I've always seen so many different ventures that she created growing up. And so I think that free spirit and that curiosity was always provided to me by my mother, by my grandfather. So the father from my mother, he was also very entrepreneurial. Uh, so I don't think, while along the journey you have different things that come up, I think I'd always, once you get a taste of building something and building a venture and building a team and trying to solve a problem, it's pretty addictive.

Jeff: So you got to Comm Ave. I'd love to talk a little bit, I sometimes think of this as the BU lightning round. Before we sort of talk about your academic experience, I'd love to know kind of about your life at BU. Where did you live when you were on campus? Were you in the residence halls?

Alejandro: I was in, yes, I was in West campus in Rich Hall. That was my freshman year. Then I went to 1019 sophomore year, and then as a junior I got to go to the, back then they were pretty brand new, but those towers, residential towers in West campus, I'm drawing a blank here for the name. But they're connected. Yes. Student Village. Yes. That was a big deal. Student Village was a big deal. You know, you sold yourself to the devil to try and get in there. I got one of my, I was lucky that my roommate, one of his friends got in, got the ticket. I already forgot how that worked, but somehow he got accepted to be a part there and then he was choosing what roommates he wanted to be with. Yes. So we got lucky. We got pulled in as juniors.

Jeff: Nice. So, um, how quickly or how long did it take you to feel like you were at home at BU? Was it right away your first year, or was it later once you really got connected to some other friends?



Alejandro: Um, yeah, I would say right away. I guess it depends on your personality, but I've always been more comfortable being placed somewhere that I don't know anyone and just make friends. So that was a very helpful skill set to have. And I literally think from day one, playing sports helps out a lot, you know, so playing basketball, playing pickup soccer games, you just quickly start picking up a number of friends and people you have a lot of things in common and immediately that just improves the experience right away.

Jeff: Along those lines, were there student organizations that you became a part of as somebody who was interested in entrepreneurship and business? Or were you sort of already kind of laying the groundwork to be an entrepreneur outside of the classwork that you were doing?

Alejandro: You know, when I came in as a freshman, I already had, my brother and I, my brother started a company called E-Tectonics. It was IT consulting for businesses, so law firms and schools, we even had churches. And we'd been doing that for a couple of years and it had grown quite a bit. So when I joined, I was already heading business development for the company. I got into BU, and any time that I had off I would be spending it trying to get new business for E-Tectonics in the Boston area. But you know what, I really wish, looking back now, I wish I would have actually done more research and looked at all the different type of student groups that are out there because they're amazing. And you get to tap into another world, learn a lot of things and build friendships and relationships while you're doing it. So I think that's super valuable.

Jeff: So at 18, 19 years old, you're already an entrepreneur working in a business with your brother. How was that experience of balancing academics and doing your coursework along with running an emerging business?

Alejandro: It's a learning curve. It's definitely a learning curve and you have to figure out what works for you and what doesn't. And I was lucky enough that, you know, I was doing this out of my own drive, it was not that my brother... at this stage, by the way for E-Tectonics, it was my brother and my mother so it was a company that we had both those family members in there and they obviously just cared more about me getting my education. So it was more me trying to challenge myself and do something different there. And so, yeah, so that was, you know, half-half. I'm sure if I look back at my grades, there were some semesters I'm not proud of, but it worked out.

Jeff: So speaking of those semesters, are there classes that you remember taking that really stand out in your mind as helping shape your entrepreneurial path? Were there professors that you really look back on now as being mentors to you?

Alejandro: Yeah, I really, I had an incredible time with Professor Molander. Erik Molander. He led the entrepreneurship, that was what I majored in in the Questrom School of Business. And he was just incredible. It was just fascinating. I remember one day he actually brought in the founder of Subway and he actually just came in and shared with us his experience and all the challenges that he came across and all the creative ways in which he tackled them. And Erik was always there, Professor Molander, after class was so available and always made it really easy for you to go in, share a ton of ideas that probably were horrible, and be really polite and nice and walk you through why your idea sucks. Which is very helpful. It is very helpful. But I really loved that class. We got to tackle so many different cases, so many different businesses that, you know, what went right, what went wrong, and got to speak with a lot of guests that he would bring in. I believe Erik had sold his company some time ago and then he set up a shop, like a consultancy, and maybe even also like a VC firm. And so it was just great. It was incredible to have that as your professor.



Jeff: So it's interesting to hear that you talked a little bit about getting ideas shot down a few minutes ago. You were also talking about this drive that you've had, to be, to challenge yourself and to be successful. Was that something that you always knew was going to be part of being an entrepreneur? Was it something that you learned at BU or has it been more so after the businesses you've started since your BU experience?

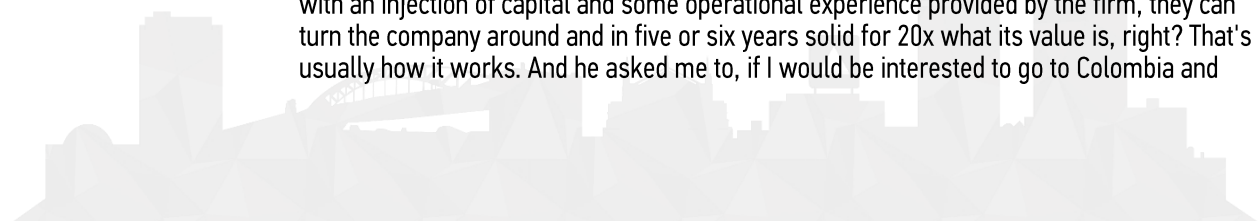
Alejandro: I think a bit of everything. The characteristics that I feel really important to have are, that I've noticed, right, as an entrepreneur, is that most entrepreneurs you meet are very optimistic. I think that's real, and I think that trade is necessary because you better be optimistic because it's hard, right? The minute something bad happens you can't, you gotta always look at the, at the brighter side and figure out, okay, now how do we solve for this? So optimistic, opportunists, opportunistic, right? So like an opportunist looks at what's out there and know that there is always some form of solution that could actually be, when something goes wrong, maybe it's the solution to that new problem that ends up being the product or the service that creates your company. Right?

Jeff: Yeah. So I'm interested again with the optimism and the drive. I'm curious to know how you tap into that, how you create that drive and optimism on those days that maybe you get out of bed and it's just not your day. How do you, how do you continue to tap into those things? Do you have strategies for doing that or is it just work?

New Speaker: That's a great question. First and foremost, I would say that the people that are around you, just surround yourself with optimistic people and you'd be surprised how that passes on to you. So on my end, even just family, my mother, my brothers, they're entrepreneurs as well. My father. So I think the times when you're down and you get to just call them and talk about it a lot of times too all these things that happen with entrepreneurs, if they don't have, a medium, an audience that they feel safe with, that they can share a lot of the challenges that they're going through, that can be a recipe for a disaster. You know, you end up building all this frustration and there's nowhere else to let it go. It can just, it might end up going straight to your team, or just fog any ideas that otherwise would have come out to solve a certain problem. So surround yourself with people that are optimists and that definitely helps out a ton.

Jeff: So tell me about the experience you had as a graduating senior, figuring out and making some decisions about what you were going to do after you finished your degree. Was the plan to sort of continue building E-Tectonics with your brother or did you already have sort of thoughts about starting your own business? What was that decision process like for you?

Alejandro: You know, it's funny cause you have like this plan set, right, and you say okay, so the plan was I'm going to go with E-Tectonics and we're going to do this or we're going to do that". And I think the minute I got out an opportunity arose where I had, my best friend's father, he owned a private equity fund, which even graduating from Questrom school, I did not know much about private equity, but he owned this private equity fund. And he had read an article in Business Week that spoke really well about Colombia and its economy. And obviously he's known me and my family for quite some time. And he approached me and told me, he asked me, "Do you know what I do?" and I said, I have no clue. And he explained to me what private equity is, and bottom line, it's just a group of investors that they invest in privately-owned companies that are, each one has their own vision of where their investment scope. And then in his particular fund, they invest in privately-owned, family-owned businesses that have been around for 10 or so years. That the idea is they have a great foundation but with an injection of capital and some operational experience provided by the firm, they can turn the company around and in five or six years solid for 20x what its value is, right? That's usually how it works. And he asked me to, if I would be interested to go to Colombia and



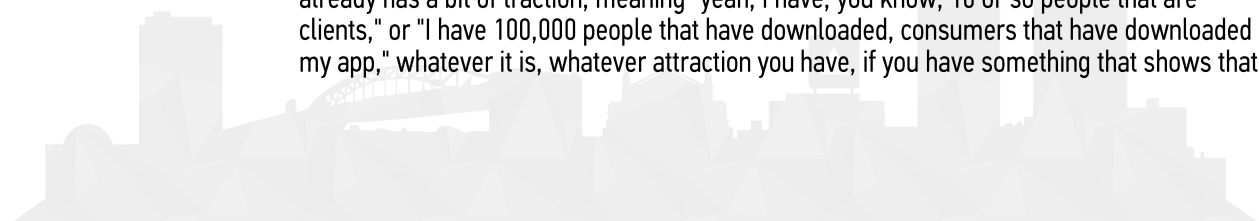
check out a couple of, see if I can find some potential deals for them. And of course I'm 21, and that seemed like an incredible opportunity. I discussed it with my brother, with my parents, and you know, my brother was the first one to say, you would be crazy not to take this. You've got to go and give it a shot. And so I did. And by the way, keep in time, keep in mind too, that when we graduated, it was the spring of 2007, we were all pumped. And it's like, yay, go out there and change the world. And then a couple of months later, people that have had a career for 20 or 30 years don't have a job because the global financial meltdown, right? So one of the things that I think is really powerful to have always is that many people set up a plan, which is amazing. But you gotta be flexible. You gotta be able to adapt. And even now when I look for people, when I look for incredible talent, especially in the startup world, you're looking for people that can adapt. You're looking for people, yes, that they have certain experience in something, but at the same time that they go with the punches because things change very quickly, and all of a sudden your plane goes to hell. And then you say, now what? So that was one of my experiences.

Jeff: So you've told me all these stories about sort of following opportunities based on getting out there and meeting people. Do you think of all of that as networking because that seems to be a pretty easy label to put on that. But would you say that networking has been the key to your success?

Alejandro: Yes, networking is important, but I would add to that strategic networking, because many people assume that it's just like, oh well I'll just go here and I'll stand around and just get to talk to people. I'll go to a meet and greet or whatever. I think it needs, like everything else, you need a plan, right? Like what are you hoping to achieve from attending that particular conference or a trade show or whatever it is, and if it aligns and if it turns out that yes, the people that I am most likely going to get the chance to meet here are the ones that are going to help me build X and X and so-and-so, then do it. Then just the attending those shows and getting to meet people and talk with peoples, it's an art form of being extremely polite, of knowing how to properly step away from a conversation without having the other individual feel like you're just completely disregarding them. Right? So there are so many things to it that you don't realize you learn until you see someone else do it the wrong way and you say, oh, okay, so I guess there is some art form to this in engaging and connecting with people and doing it the right way.

Jeff: I spend a lot of time talking to people about networking, Alejandro, and that's all really good advice. So thank you for sharing that. I certainly don't want to gloss over anything, but how do you go from that 21 year old, managing these equity relationships in South America to becoming a tech entrepreneur in the Bay Area?

Alejandro: So about three, no, four years ago, my brother, I have two older brothers. It turns out that all of us had the entrepreneurship bug in us. And my eldest brother, he, four years ago decided to, he did his MBA at NYU. He had always loved and been a part of the technology world and he decided to go to San Francisco, go to Silicon Valley, hopefully get accepted by one of the most prestigious investor institutions and build a company and build a team. And he went there for about a year and a half on his own. It was hard. He actually had kids, Leslie, my sister-in-law, they were kind of going back and forth and he had to live in San Francisco for some time alone. It's not cheap trying to figure out how to live in San Francisco. It's super expensive, rent is super expensive. But at the end of the day, he ended up getting accepted to Y Combinator, which is a, an early stage seed fund. They also are recognized as accelerators and what they do, bottom line is, the way it works is if you have an idea that already has a bit of traction, meaning "yeah, I have, you know, 10 or so people that are clients," or "I have 100,000 people that have downloaded, consumers that have downloaded my app," whatever it is, whatever attraction you have, if you have something that shows that



you're actually doing something really, really intriguing, interesting and it's a big enough market, these early seed stage funds, if you get accepted, you apply, you get accepted, they give you, for Y Combinator, which is recognized as literally like the top and the hardest thing to get into, they give you a \$120,000 check. You go through a three month program with them where you're working from the offices that they provide. And at the end of your three months, you have a demo day. And the Demo Day is, it's literally how you see it in, how you would imagine it in the movies. If you're watching a movie where it's like a dark room, you go there, you present in front of the world's most distinguished investors, they have like a button that they press if they're interested in investing and in one night you could raise- So my brother ended up going through the program and at the end of it all he ended up raising close to \$3 million in literally like two nights. So it goes to show, he went through that whole experience. And obviously as a younger brother I got to see all of that and I got to learn a lot about like, I did not know what an accelerator was or early stage stage fund and the technology industry, and so I just got to see it through his eyes and got to experience it. I ended up actually traveling with him a couple of times, and on his end, I think he had been vouching. He knew he wanted to live in San Francisco and California and Silicon Valley. And with his wife Leslie and he played his cards right. And he brought me there and I fell in love with it and with California. And then I brought my girlfriend who's now my wife there. She fell in love with it. Once that led to the other, and ended up making a move, and ended up stepping aside from the company Interminds, that's the company that I had built with my mother for the past eight years. The one that we bootstrapped and ended up becoming the largest marketplace that connects an attraction center to interactive attractions. So like amusement parks, family attraction centers, aquariums, zoos, all these are considered attraction centers. Shopping centers are considered attraction centers and all of them are always looking for an attraction to bring to their space. They usually, they have a set budget, they usually have a time when they want to do this. And the way it used to work, and it still does, is the person in charge would literally talk to those that they knew around them, that were part of the creative industries and figure out what type of vendors could work for what they're looking for instead of going in our platform. And now what you can do is you go on our platform, you tell us what your budget is, how big the space is, when you're looking to host this particular event, and if there's a theme, and automatically we curate over 15,000 different types of attractions that fit exactly what you're looking for, and then connect you with those individuals. And sometimes we're a part of the event itself and we help lead it, and other times we just do the connection and grab a commission. So yeah, so that's what we ended up building. And about a year and a half ago, I stepped aside, already living in San Francisco, I stepped aside and said, "you know what, I wanna give this a shot. I'm here in Silicon Valley, we're already living here. This is the epicenter for the technology world". And it really is, it's crazy. You walk the streets and you're eating, I guess this is what happens when you're in New York and you see actors or if you're in the financial world and in New York and you see a really famous investor sitting right next to you. In Silicon Valley, you're eating a sandwich and you see like a former co-founder of Paypal, right? Or a former- And in LA you're right next to, you're sitting next to Tom Hanks, right? So like every, every city has its fame, just in different industries. But yeah. So that's how I found myself in San Francisco and giving it a shot for what I'm doing now.

Jeff: Well, and speaking about all these big time tech entrepreneurs, you were, not too long ago, named as a top 20 Latino Tech Leader. What does that mean to you? And did that help you feel like you've been successful in the endeavors that you've launched?

Alejandro: I have had the opportunity with my brother, even through E-Tectonics, to gain a couple of awards. We actually had the New York Times write a piece about us for business section. And that was really, I mean, I must've been 17 at that age. One of the things that you realize is that it comes and goes, you definitely shouldn't be focused on that. To me success, to be

really truthfully honest, and this might already sound like I've been in California for a long time but it's, I'm so happy to have the family that I have. I'm so happy to be as close as I am with my brothers or my sister-in-laws with my nephews, my nieces, my cousins, even though I have cousins in Columbia. A couple, I'd say about five years ago, I made up my mind that it's extremely important to me to be there for the people that I love and the people that are family and those that are close and that would always outweigh anything else that I'm doing. And now looking back and looking at the relationships, how close I am with so many of my cousins and reconnecting literally, you know, you reconnect with family members that all of a sudden you're like, "Oh wait, I have a cousin in where? How old are they? Like, we're a similar age? What are they doing?" So truthfully in life, it's so short, it goes by so fast. The journey of starting a business and building a team and together trying to solve pretty big obstacles, that's super fun. To me it's a great way to pass the time, but the really important things, the things that are success, quote unquote for me, just make sure that you have been there for somebody else. Um, and I think, by the way, that's why, I don't have kids and my wife and I are actually, we're at that stage where you go on Facebook and you see everybody with kids, just announcing that hey're going to have a baby and all that. And I totally get it. I get the fact that when you're a parent, it automatically, it's no more about me. It's about that other individual. And that's really rewarding. It's very freeing when all of a sudden you, for your entire life, it's been me, me, me, me, and then one day to the other, you don't care so much about me. You care about others. And you know, that other individual, whoever that might be. And the older I get, the more, and the more I reflect back, it's, it's that, that is the ultimate, right? It's feeling proud that you were there. It's feeling proud that you have helped others. And they know you've just like shared your love with others. Love is very powerful.

Jeff: Well, I'm glad that we've got this Silicon Valley Tech Entrepreneur, bringing it back to family and talking about love. Alejandro, thank you so much for taking time to chat with us. This was really awesome to chat with you and I appreciate your time.

Alejandro: Thank you so much. Thank you for the time and I'm happy to have connected.

Jeff: My thanks again to Alejandro for joining me on the podcast. It was great to chat with a fellow podcast host and I really appreciated his willingness to share the ins and outs of his life as a serial entrepreneur. If you'd like to connect with Alejandro directly, I encourage you to reach out to him on LinkedIn, and be sure to check out Alejandro's podcast Getting Here. Thanks again for listening to the Proud to BU podcast. If you like what we're doing, please be sure to subscribe, rate and review Proud to BU wherever you download your episodes. I'm Jeff Murphy, and no matter where your path takes you, be Proud to BU. The Proud to BU podcast is produced by Boston University Alumni Relations. Our theme is from Jump and APM music. To learn more about Proud to BU, visit bu.edu/alumni/podcast.

