

## Shayla Rivera

Former NASA Rocket Scientist, Professor, and Comedian

Shayla Rivera is an aerospace engineer and former NASA rocket scientist turned salesperson, corporate trainer, and now international keynote speaker, TEDx speaker, radio host, emcee/host, comedian, actor, writer, producer, seminar facilitator, panel moderator and, as of 2017, director of the ENGR[x] program and Professor of Practice with the College of Engineering at Texas A&M University. However, none of these labels tells you much about her. She best describes herself as a spiritually irreverent mystic and awareness expert. What many would call a Renaissance Woman.

Always using the power of humor and her life story, Rivera has been speaking and performing in both English and Spanish for more than 25 years on a wide range of subjects that span inspiration, motivation, leadership, diversity & inclusion, STEM education, stress management, communication, and self-growth. Her clients around the world include Fortune 500 companies, national and regional organizations, as well as students, parents, and faculty from elementary schools to colleges. She performs live stand-up comedy worldwide, explaining, "My number one goal is to inspire, through laughter." Rivera has seen, first-hand, the impact the Latino population and culture has had in all levels of American corporations, organizations, and education, and is focused on helping make this merging occur as smoothly as possible. She jokes, "We are all the same, only different...once we understand this, we will be able to seize the opportunities that lie in our seeming differences."

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Rivera grew up with an avid interest in human behavior, science, machinery, and fixing things. She attended Texas A&M University, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Aerospace Engineering with a great number of additional credits in her other passion, Psychology. After graduation she joined McDonnell Douglas Space Systems at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, where she worked on the Space Shuttle and Space Station programs for five years. Rivera left NASA to pursue her abiding interest in psychology, trying to figure out what makes people tick, eventually becoming a corporate trainer. Rivera began facilitating life-changing seminars on stress management for executives at companies around the country – where she discovered her comedic skills. Encouraged by many of her clients, she signed up for a weekend seminar on stand-up comedy, at the end of which she performed a five-minute routine. It was a personal turning point. "I knew I'd found what I was looking for," Rivera recalled.

Almost immediately, Rivera became a regular at comedy clubs nationwide. She used her experiences to create the hit one woman show *Rocket Science and Salsa*, directed by Debbie Allen for which Rivera earned a "Best Lead Actress" nomination by the NAACP Theater Awards, as well as a nomination for "Best Choreography" for Allen. Rivera has hosted Lifetime Real Women Network's 13-episode TV series *You're Not The Man I Married* and appeared on television shows such as *Comics Unleashed*, *Xtreme Fakeovers*, *National Lampoon's Funny Money*, *Funny is Funny*, and many others. She has been a guest on *The Dennis Miller Show*, *The Roseanne Show*, *The Martin Short Show*, featured in the *Paul Rodriguez Latin All Stars*, and was part of the Comedy Central special, *Comedy Rehab*. She has performed and headlined on entertainment programs for Univision, Galavision, HBO Latino, and on Telemundo's *The Latino Comedy Jam*. She also was named "Funniest Latina Comedian" by the Latin 2015 organization. In 2020, Rivera's 30-minute stand-up comedy special titled *Shayla Rivera: It's Not Rocket Science*, premiered on HBO Max & HBO Latino.

Among many recognitions, in 2004, Rivera received the Mario Moreno Cantinflas Award in recognition of entertainers who "represent the Latino Community with the same humor as the great Comedian Cantinflas did" and for her involvement in the community. She has also received the President's Volunteer Service Award from the President's Council on Service Participation, the Award for Excellence in Public Speaking by the Latino Speakers Bureau, and after only 3 years of teaching, the John J. Koldus Faculty and Staff Achievement Award by the Division of Student Affairs at Texas A&M University.

Rivera is now bringing her expertise in self-development and awareness to the engineering students at her alma mater, Texas A&M, as a Professor of Practice and as Director of ENGR[x] – a new program with the objective of providing undergraduate engineering students with professional skills and experiences beyond their engineering degree requirements, making them more attractive to employers. Helping students become better prepared for life, not just as engineers but as individuals, is her greatest purpose.

Shayla Rivera is not easily placed in just one category or class – she defines her own. On a personal note, Rivera shares, "I have been present through everything in my life, learning from my reactions and always moving towards the awareness of the self. Through awareness I have been able to take risks, endure and grow. I have survived the same struggles in life that many people have, breast cancer, limiting beliefs, injustices, and the

ultimate loss of a child. My desire is to share a story of growth, persistence and can-do because, if I am still here, and I am still growing then we all can do the same."

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