



Why Beauty Entrepreneur Aisha Ceballos-Crump Stepped Out on Faith

The Founder and CEO of Honey Baby Naturals and Botanika Beauty paired engineering and marketing to pave her own path into beauty. Aisha gets candid about the reality TV experience that clarified her vision, and the financial risks she took to realize her dreams.

Alicia Menendez:

Aisha Ceballos-Crump spent nearly 15 years working in the skincare and hair industry before launching two lines of her own, Honey Baby Naturals and Botanika Beauty. You have seen Aisha's products on the shelves at Walmart, at Target. This is the story behind them. It's also an incredibly candid conversation that went in directions I was not expecting, including a reality TV show appearance and dramatic financial decisions. You will notice me gasp a few times in response to Aisha's many leaps of faith.

I want to start with you being born and raised in Gary, Indiana. How did the Puerto Ricans end up in the Midwest?

Aisha Ceballos-Crump:

The Midwest, Gary, Indiana in particular, was a booming steel industry. At that time we had inland steel, US steel, and there were jobs and everyone on the island talked about going to the mainland to create a better life for their family. My father's side of family, they came over first and then my mom's side of family at that time, usually the father's could only come. So he left my grandmother on the island with the kids, but he came here and all of them got jobs in the steel industry, and it was like new money. It was a new world, a new life. So there was a huge Puerto Rican population growing up in Gary, Indiana when I was a child.

But when the steel industry collapsed, basically it busted, a lot of people lost their jobs. People were laid off. A lot of people left Gary. And Gary at that point started to go downhill. And that's when the crime increased, that's when... Just everything started to change. It felt like... My dad was always out of a job. He tried to work in the steel industry, he was always getting laid off. My mom ran a domestic women's shelter. So when I say we grew up exposed to so many different things and it just built tough skin, it was the Gary that I knew, but it was the Gary that I loved.

Menendez: How did that instability affect the way that you saw your own career and your own ambitions for yourself?

Ceballos-Crump: I wanted to change. My parents actually were born and raised in Gary, Indiana and they met in high school. They were 18 and 20 when they got married. They got GEDs, they didn't go to college. I just always wanted to just do better than them. I wanted to elevate each generation education, just really thinking about community and I wanted to make them proud.

Menendez: My sister-in-law is from Indiana, and she has taught me about the concept of Midwest Nice, so I need to know how Midwest Nice squares with being Latina.

Ceballos-Crump: I'm not Nice, I'm friendly. I went to Purdue, which is in West Lafayette, Indiana. That is a night and day difference than Gary, Indiana. Gary, Indiana is predominantly Black. It is poverty. I think when I was in high school, we were murder capital of the world. So you have to be tough and you have to have tough skin. And I spent my childhood always defending myself, always trying to be tough, a little five foot, three, Puerto Rican girl that was so tough. Yes. I'm very friendly, but the same, like I always... I have this facade about me that it's just a tough skin because I've dealt with so many adversities in my life.

Menendez: Yeah. When you spend your life being tough, it's hard then to be soft.

Ceballos-Crump: I'm always soft with my kids.

Menendez: That's good. They deserve that. Talk to me then, how did you make your way into engineering? Were you always good at math and science?

Ceballos-Crump: So I love math and science. I did well academically. I was valedictorian in middle school, valedictorian in high school, and I was... grew up in a poor family. So I pretty much could have chose any college I wanted to go to. And I wanted to go to NYU to become an actress. I wanted to be in telenovelas. And I... Even though my Spanish is not perfect, I wanted to be in Broadway, even though I can't sing.

And it was my senior year and all the recruiters were coming to my high school and they looked at my transcripts and they looked at my SAT scores, and they were like, "Holy cow, you should go Ivy League. You should go to one of these schools." It was actually a recruiter that came in from Purdue, which is only an hour and a half from my home. I sure as heck didn't want to stay that close. And she was like, "You should come to Purdue because you're so good in math and science, and you could become an engineer." I really didn't know what an engineer did. And all she said was it's the highest paid undergraduate degree. And I said, "What?" She was like, "Yes, chemical engineers come out and you make more money than anyone else in four years." I said, "Sign me up."

Alicia I had no idea what I was getting myself into, but I was like, "Good. I love math and science." Unfortunately, kids in the inner city are going to be at a disadvantage going into college. I didn't know that at the time. I had algebra, I was... I had a 4.0, I did everything that I possibly could, but there's only so much they give you. We didn't have AP classes.

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We had calculus. We didn't have a lab, we didn't have anything that these other kids have. So here I am, "Sign me up for chemical engineering." I got in, I got a scholarship. I'm going to go in there and take 18 credit hours my first semester, because I'm brilliant, because I'm a valedictorian from Gary, Indiana.

My God, that was the biggest culture shock of my entire life. Going from a predominantly Black community, being around Latina culture with strong Puerto Rican culture, to going to predominantly white institution. And I've never in my life been in that environment and majoring in chemical engineering. And when you look in the room and there's 250 people, there might be one other person that looks like you. There's not many women and not many women of color. I think there were four Black women that were in the class with me and two other Latinas. And that was it. And we stuck together and we really helped each other because it is a big cultural shift. It's a big change that we don't talk about. We don't talk about growing up in the south side of Chicago. Now I live in Chicago now, growing up in Gary, Indiana, growing up in Miami, growing up in LA and these communities where all you're exposed to is one thing. And then they poof. They throw you into this completely intense environment and you have to survive.

Menendez: How did that change you?

Ceballos-Crump: My first semester I took 18 credit hours, calculus, chemistry, computer programming. I thought I could handle anything in the world, and I got a 2.64. And I remember this because I never made anything less than "A" in my life. I found a circle of friends that had some of the same struggles. And I said, "I am not going to fail. I am the first person in my family to go to college. I'm going to put on my big girl panties and I'm going to do everything that it takes." I just made a major shift, my friends that I was hanging with, I started hanging with engineering students. I was working in the minority engineering office, I got a tutor. I was participating in everything possible. And by the time I graduated with honors in four years in engineering from Purdue University. It was not easy, but I learned so much about myself and how thick my skin is.

Menendez: The way I read your LinkedIn is you end up doing more marketing and sales for engineering companies than you do the actual engineering, is that right?

Ceballos-Crump: That's true. And it's funny because I hated engineering. I was there four years... I did. Alicia, I wanted to be on stage. I took a theater class at Purdue. I was taking volleyball, bowling, anything to make me have fun outside of this comfort. I hated engineering in the sense that I'm not an introvert, I'm an extrovert. I love people, and I couldn't really see myself in a lab, even though I did well. And I graduated, and then I started interviewing, I went to interview with Lilly because I was like, "I'm an engineer. That's what we do. We go work in a lab," and thank God, the recruiter tells me, "You are not an engineer. You should not be in a lab. Get into sales." And yes, I started off my career in sales, marketing. I learned so much... so many things that were valuable to my career now. And I think the... at that point I realized that I was bored out of my mind, felt I had this high paying job that I

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really didn't bring enough value. I was meant to be this entrepreneur. I was a hustler my whole life.

Menendez: No, no, no, no. You can't just gloss over that. Where is that calling coming from? Because the way you tell your story is that 2015 you step out on faith to begin your own thing, but it's never just one moment that-

Ceballos-Crump: It's our life. It's growing up how I did, the pressures of having to take care of my parents. My parents don't have savings accounts. They don't have 401(k)s. Everything was just pressure. I think my first year out of college, I was making 70 some thousand. I was 21 years old in 2000 and my parents thought I was rich, but it wasn't enough to do more and I just felt bored. I had my first son at 25. I love my baby to death. I love being a mom. I love working, but I just felt so incomplete. And at that time I was thinking about taking theater classes to have fun, but I was like, "That's not going to change anything. I want to be an entrepreneur. I don't know how to get there."

And that's when reality TV was really big. And Richard Branson, who is one of my favorite entrepreneurs, philanthropists, he was having a casting call in Chicago for the Rebel Billionaire. I don't know if you remember the show. Am I crazy, full of dreams mind, I heard this on the radio, and I said, "He's talking to me. I need to go out to that Virgin Megastore and try out for this show." I had never tried out for TV, never done anymore acting.

I had no idea where I was going, I heard it on the radio and the next day I woke up at 3:00 in the morning, I put on a suit. My husband says, "Where the heck are you going?" And I said, "I need to change something in my life. And something's telling me just to do this." And so I walk out of Michigan Avenue, grab my coffee and out of 250,000 applicants, Aisha Ceballos-Crump from Gary, Indiana gets selected to be on a reality TV show. Come on, man. I have no idea what I'm getting myself into. I had this great paying job. I had my son, my husband and I were investing in real estate. And I just go try out for a reality TV show. I was just bored. It was just something greater in me.

And I was so hype Alicia. I felt, "My God, this is my time to shine. I'm going to have an opportunity to tell my story, to put my community on the map in a positive light. I am going to show this Puerto Rican girl and her tough skin." And we fly to London, we have no premise of what the show is going to be. We just know Richard Branson, adventures, entrepreneurs, and the first person I meet at Richard's castle in Windsor is Sarah Blakely. She's a contestant on the show with me, Alicia, Sarah Blakely.

Menendez: Okay. So for anyone who doesn't know, that is the founder of Spanx. So as you pull up your faja right now, Sarah.

Ceballos-Crump: Yes, the youngest self-made American female billionaire. She's the first person I talk to and she's, "Hi, I'm Sarah with Spanx." I said, "I'm Aisha, just an entrepreneur wannabe." It's crazy experience. It's like this outer body experience. I'm sitting in a castle in Windsor with Richard Branson. Come on now. How does this happen? And unfortunately I got kicked off

the show, the very first episode. And it's interesting. You could Google my name. I never talked about this until last year. And they call me a Puerto Rican firecracker. And there's all these stereotypical things that are mentioned about she's beautiful, but she has this attitude and she's a diva and they compare me to J.Lo. And so that was the turning point of my life, when I realized that no matter how hard you want to get out in front and tell your real story and give your real truth and show your real skin and what people like you experience and how successful you are, people always want to put you back in your place. And after I got kicked off the show, I came home, Alicia, and I felt like I let my whole city down. I let my family down, let my kids down. I let my community down, but I really didn't. But in my mind I felt like that. And I said, "I can't go back to this job." I was like, "I cannot go back to work because I was supposed to change something and do something." I didn't want to be famous, but I wanted to use the show as a platform, just like Sarah did, put yourself out there or your business. Didn't really have the business.

So that's the point in my life. I was 28 years old where I went to the lab and I said, "Aisha, you have too much talent. You work too hard. You've come too far. What do you want to do?" And I created a cosmetic line called Culture Shock, and all the products were infused with my culture and... But I didn't know anything about the business. I knew a little bit about ingredients and so forth. Started selling the products to salons, door-to-door, got in the paper. And that was my awakening. That was my "aha" moment, where I realized that I am great. I have always been great and I will be greater than I am right now. I didn't know anything about the business, so at that point I started doing everything I can to learn about the beauty business, to the point where I left my six figure job to go take a job at the make-up counter at NARS in Nordstrom to learn everything there is about beauty, cosmetics.

I started flying to companies to research the industry. I figured I wasn't ready yet to really launch a brand. So I sold off that cosmetic line. And I typed in a computer, beauty, because I was always interested in beauty and fashion, engineering and sales. And I landed a job selling specialty ingredients to all the beauty suppliers.

So that was it. I got in the door, I started calling on these companies. I was teaching them how to make products. I was giving them the claim substantiation, the ideas to the point where I would walk in a store and I said, "Holy crap, everything I gave this customer's sitting on the shelf." And that's that time when you realize that you could spend the rest of your life, making someone else rich or you... or yes, you can jump in and do this for yourself and your family and your community. I really never let down my community. I was just starting to uplift my community and that was it. I went to work for a contract manufacturer, a family-run business. I learned everything about compounding, product development, manufacturing, sales. I worked for another company doing marketing, distribution. I spent over 10 years perfecting my craft. And then I was ready.

Menendez: You basically turned it into you getting paid to go to grad school.

Ceballos-Crump: Yeah. I know it's so funny, because I kept trying to go to grad school and I was, "I don't have time. I'm learning day-to-day, every aspect of the business." I'm telling you. And I took

pay cuts. And I worked from home when I was in sales. I worked three hours a day. I went on field trips with my kids. When I went to work in the factory I was working 10, 12 hours a day, plus then some in an office. I sacrificed, I took a pay cut. I lost vacation days. I lost my 401(k). I lost travel, but I felt I had to take a step back. Sometimes we have to take a step back to take a step forward. And in 2015 I was ready. I didn't really have the money, but I realized that we always keep saying, we're not ready. And if we keep saying that, then how are we ever going to flip the switch? And so I pulled out all my 401(k), all my savings. I know, that's scary, right? I am a risk taker.

Menendez: My hands are sweating for you Aisha.

Ceballos-Crump: My husband still had a job. My husband was an engineer as well. And my parents said, Ay, que loca Aisha, you're ruining your career. You have this great job. We would go on vacations. I had a nice house. I already had the family. My parents thought I was nuts. My husband's mom though, she's probably my biggest supporter. She was the first Black police commander in the city of Chicago. She's a boss. She's like, "Go for it girl." Her and my dad, they were supportive and started filing trademarks. I created a website. I knew the first brand had to be about my family, this beautiful family of multiracial Latina and Black and culture. And it was Honey Baby. And I always say Honey Baby was my fourth baby. It's a term of endearment. It was really about doing your hair in the kitchen with the ingredients and the warmth. And I went all in. I produced 5,000 units of each. It cost me about \$60,000.

Menendez: So slow down because for most of us 5,000 is a lot, I guess.

Ceballos-Crump: It's a lot. It-

Menendez: Most of us have no... I have no sense of how much is a lot.

Ceballos-Crump: So when people first start businesses, they come to me and say, "We want to make a thousand total products to sell online." I was ambitious because I worked in manufacturing. I said, I want to do full batch runs. I want to run a 5,000 of each. I want seven products. That's 35,000 units, at least three to \$4 a unit. I was crazy. I was just ready. I was, I believe in myself. I didn't have a distribution plan. I didn't have a sales strategy. I didn't have a team. It was just me, my best friend ran my social. I was operating at my house. I learned how to do everything from design, trademark. I had someone do our logo, our work, and I launched this business, E-commerce, in 2016 and Alicia, our first year of business I got into Target. Look, I really didn't have the context. I tell people the first year of my business I went from making \$160,000 a year to nothing. I did not pay myself for two years. I maxed out my credit cards. I was so scared. There was no turning back. I put myself in debt. I remember one time there was a trade show in South Carolina, the only way I got my word out was trade shows. I had a Buick Enclave, I loaded it up with product. The kids were on

summer break. My husband had to work. Me and my three kids who did not drive, we drove all the way from Chicago to South Carolina, sweating hot. We stayed in a hotel. I did last minute HotelTonight type thing. And I didn't even know how we were going to pay to eat and to get back. And I know that sounds risky. People were like, "Why would you put your kids like that?" But it was part of the lesson that my children learned.

They didn't grow up struggling because we put them in a different situation, but this environment and me starting this business taught my kids how to build a business from the ground up from nothing to something. They were handing out samples with me. They were hustling in the show and the rest just happened. We expanded to Walmart. Now we're in 1200 Sally Beauty stores, Rite Aid, CVS, whatever.

And the challenges and where I'm stuck today is I'm trying to do this self-funded. And for everyone listening, especially Latina entrepreneurs aspiring, it is hard for women to get funding. It is 10 times harder for a Black or Latina woman to get funding from a bank, to get funding from outside investors from capital. So when you're thinking about scaling your business, this was self-funded. Everything that came in, went back into the business. So we were growing organically based off of customers and followings. So I hit a wall. It was just, "My God. Something has to give."

At this point, I had relationships with all the buyers. I keep saying, "Hey, why don't you do a segment for Latina women? I'm Puerto Rican." They're like, "But your name is Aisha, but your kids are Black." And so it's just we're in such a segmented society that I can't be both. I can't be a Latina and have a Black family. And so my products were placed in the ethnic section, and traditionally ethnic is African American. So anyway, I kept knocking down doors. Let's create a Latina section. Let's create a Latina section. They say, "Well, give me a Latina product and we'll create a Latina section." I don't think that Honey Baby says it's one race or another, but let's give them what they want.

And in 2018, a friend of mine who lived in the building... Again, put yourself in surroundings with people that are financially in a different situation. They saw my brand and they just saw my hustle. They saw me grow and they wanted to invest. And I said, "Okay, invest in this new brand. It's going to be amazing. We're going to tap into the Latina consumer. We're going to tap into this market. And we're going to put this on our backs, use the pathway that I created and just go straight to retail." So it was a very different experience. They helped me invest into the brand. So in 2019, launched Botanika Beauty and it was incredible. We now had an opportunity to have a section in Target. And then one year later they created a Latina section in Walmart. And in one and a half years, we have 1200 Walmart stores and 300 Target stores with a dedication to the Latinx consumer.

Yes, I did that. And I'm going to be proud. I'm... And I felt I always had these challenges, but even with Honey Baby, you're not Latina enough. And I want to talk about that too, because I feel a lot of people listening might have gone through the same predicament as me. I'm boricua, I love the culture. I love the food. I love the music. I might speak Spanglish. So I speak it, I understand it, though my hair is not curly. This is me, but I'm still 100% boricua and I'm very proud. And I feel in our society, we're so judgemental about who's Latina enough. They look at skin tone, they're looking at hair texture. And so Botanika Beauty was an opportunity for me because the category is so new, because the platform is

just getting started. I think I need a good five years to really develop into the brand that I want to be to understand my next move.

The challenge, where so many brands in our category have sold and they sold as Fortune 500 companies. And when the Fortune 500 companies own every brand that's in the retail shelves, we lose power as small minority owned companies. And so that's a challenge, is trying to stay relevant, trying to compete with these brands that can pay whatever for any marketing campaign. They can knock you off anytime they want. They have the lawyers, they have the money, they have everything, and we have to stay united. So part of my fight is I'm a member of the Global Beauty Alliance, which is a lot of small minority owned brands in talking to supplier diversity, making sure there's inclusion, making sure that we stay relevant. And when I do make the decision to expand and grow, it has to be strategic where I'm still giving back to my community and I'm still uplifting other entrepreneurs.

And I won't be finished because we have a beauty brand incubator. So when my husband and I bought the warehouse. We created incubators called Beauty Loft, and that's my family's company. And it's really about empowering other entrepreneurs that need the blueprint, that need help with distribution, logistics, manufacturing, and we're going to help working on other brands.

Menendez: Aisha, I'm so excited to watch this all unfold. Thank you so much for your time today.

Ceballos-Crump: Thank you so much Alicia. Thank you for the work that you're doing, it's incredible for uplifting our voices.

Menendez: Hey, thank you so much for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantugua and me, Alicia Menendez. Sarah McClure is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Stephen Colón mixed this episode. Jimmy Gutierrez is our managing editor. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you email us at hola at Latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at Latina to Latina. Remember to subscribe or follow us on radio public, Apple podcast, Google podcast, good pods, wherever you're listening right now. And remember, every time you share the podcast or you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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