



How Fashion Entrepreneur Camila Coelho Went from Working Retail to Building a Beauty Brand

The blogger and founder of Elaluz and the Camila Coelho Collection shares how a promise to her mother pushed her to work hard in a very competitive industry. And she gets real about using her massive platform to fight the stigma of people living with epilepsy—like her.

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Alicia Menendez:

The almost nine million people who follow Camila Coelho on Instagram know all about her impeccable style and flawless makeup. What they might not know is how much of her ethos is tied to her story of immigrating from Brazil to Pennsylvania and choosing to stand out rather than fit in. When we talked, I also learned just how much of Camila's hustle comes from a promise she made to her mother years ago.

Thank you for doing this, Camila.

Camila Coelho: Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Growing up, there was always that kid who everyone emulated her style. Were you that kid?

Coelho: I don't think so. I don't think I was. I was always like an extrovert. I loved communicating with people, making new friends, and I loved dancing, and my passion for beauty started at a very young age, but my friends knew me for liking to dance, and when I started high school, I was already living in the U.S., and it was a time that I was very afraid to show my style, because I felt so different coming into a very white high school in Scranton, Pennsylvania. I felt very different and I felt like, "Oh my gosh, should I be wearing the same thing as everyone is wearing? Or should I just be myself?"

Menendez: So, what was everyone wearing and what did you want to wear?

Coelho: I would see the girls more preppy, like pleated skirts with Ugg boots, and I remember telling my mom, "I think I need to get an Ugg boot, because everyone in school has them and wears them." And I remember my mom telling me, "Camila, being different is what's gonna make you stand out." And that stuck to me, and that was the moment I was like, "You know, maybe I should just be myself." All I wanted to wear to school was like colorful clothes. This Latina style, like clothes, and ruffles, and little by little I started feeling more comfortable. But in the beginning, especially also being a bit insecure with my epilepsy

and all of that, it made me more insecure, like I wanted to fit in, and I just wanted to maybe wear the same thing as everyone was wearing to be kind of like them, you know?

But I went through that phase and after that, after accepting myself and going through it all, I realized my light was only going to shine if I was truly myself and if I accepted myself as I was. And being different is a good thing.

Menendez: You've said you were raised fearless. What did that look like?

Coelho: I was raised in a very small town in Brazil, a town of like 15,000 people in a countryside. I had very limited access to the world in general. But the good thing about growing up in such a small town was that I was so free. I could just get out of the house, play with my friends. Yeah, I was just such a free child. Today, like I am so grateful looking back that I grew up in such a small town, and that I didn't have any fears. My mom would just let us go out and do our thing, and come back home later on, and she wasn't worried. I wasn't worried of something happening to me, because you know, that's like growing up in a small town looks like in Brazil. And being so connected with nature and all of it, that's what made me so happy, free, and fearless.

So, yeah.

Menendez: And then you moved to Scranton, Pennsylvania, which is quite the twist in the story.

Coelho: Oh my gosh. I know.

Menendez: What do you most remember about that move?

Coelho: First, before we moved we went to visit, and I loved it. I didn't go to just Pennsylvania, of course. I went to New York where my dad was. My parents were divorced at the time. And I remember just exploring this country and I was so in love with it. I wanted to learn the language. I wanted to go to school in the United States. I wanted it. And I remember when we finally moved, I was very excited. I was excited, but I was also scared, especially like my first days in high school. I felt very different from everyone again, like I was scared that I wasn't gonna have friends, but I was excited, but I was also scared. And I remember my first friends were Latinos, and later on of course I made more friends with my American friends, who were so amazing as well, but you know, I always had a stronger connection with my Latino friends. It's just in our culture, like we're more warm.

So, that move was scary, but also exciting at the same time.

Ad: *You all know I did not grow up speaking Spanish. My husband did. And it's really important to us that our girls have exposure to the language. When I interviewed Susie Jaramillo, the creator of Canticos, she gifted me a book for my girls. And they love it. Like, we read it all the time. And now the older one is using their bilingual learning app. They use the same nursery rhymes from our childhood. Think, "Burrito Sabanero," "Elefantitos," and "Arroz con Leche" to teach kids concepts like phonics, letters, math, and emotional intelligence through song and play. The games and the songs alternate between English and Spanish, so it's super easy to learn the languages. Plus, the characters are adorable: pollitos, elefantitos... we can't get enough of wanting to squeeze their little cheeks. They've also got beautiful books, games, and toys that just bring the lessons and fun from the app full circle. If you want to learn more about bringing language and culture to life for*

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Menendez: You are a self-described nerd. It was pretty surprising to people when you chose not to go to college. What went into that decision?

Coelho: It's funny that you say the word nerd, because my teachers, especially my math teacher in high school, he would call me a nerd. I was in love with math and I actually was an honor roll student in high school throughout the four years, and my mom was so sure that I was gonna go to college and be like the best student out of all my three siblings. I think she saw me as the highest chance of being the greatest student. But when it came time for me to apply for college, I remember thinking about it so much. I did not know exactly what I wanted to do and because I also knew that my mom would probably help me go to college, as well, gave me even more pressure. I did not want to choose the wrong thing. I did not want to pay for college, study for something, and not love what I was doing at the end.

I did not know what I wanted, and I was sure that I didn't know, but I didn't want to make the decision. I was just so scared, and I remember I just pulled my mom aside and I was like, "Mom..." I knew she was gonna be so mad and devastated, but I said, "Mom, I don't know what I want to do, and I just need some time. I need at least six months to figure things out. I want to move out of here, out of Scranton. I don't know what I want to do, and I need to figure it out." And she was like, "Camila, no. You need to go to college right away. Your grades are amazing. You have to go to college."

And I feel like it was also a fear of hers, like she didn't want me to end up like her, depending on someone. My mom did not go to college. She was a housewife. I understood her fear, but in my heart, I knew I needed to wait. I know for an 18-year-old girl it was a huge decision, but I followed my heart and I remember telling my mom, "I promise you that I will make you proud." And I looked her in the eye and said that, and I still get chills saying this to you, because that stayed with me for so long. There was a need and desire to make my mom proud after I left home.

So, it was when I left home that I got a job. I moved to Boston. I had an aunt in Boston, so I lived with her for a couple months, and I wanted to get my own apartment, so I just got a job somewhere. My aunt helped me out and she... and the job was at a department store, working at a makeup counter, selling makeup. The counter was Christian Dior. And I remember I hated the retail hours. It was terrible. Working on weekends and all of that. But one thing I loved about that job was the fact that first, I was working with beauty, and I've always loved beauty since I was a little kid, but second, that I was in a way transforming or affecting people's self-esteem.

People from different backgrounds, with different needs, and different moods, would arrive at the counter every single day, and after me selling them a product or putting something on them, like 95% of these women would leave with a smile on their faces. And that would make my day. That was what, at the end, made me realize how transformative empowering beauty is, and that experience was what made me want to become a makeup artist.

Ad: *We asked our producer, Paulina, to try out the new Summit Intarsia Sweater from Faherty. She is the youngest and hippest among us. Her response, "It is the most delicious, softest*

sweater.” She says wearing it feels like she’s, “Hugging a redwood tree by the Pacific Ocean while the wind whips my long hair.” I can see why. The whole Faherty collection gives me watching the sunset on the beach vibes. Wearing Faherty pieces feels like the coziest you have ever been outdoors, telling stories around the bonfire, taking a long walk hand in hand on a moonlit night, or looking up at the stars on the porch, and that’s by design. The family-owned brand is timeless, sun soaked, and sustainably minded. They partner with Lakota designers for their beautiful blankets and Faherty products are made to last a lifetime.

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Coelho: So, after that job, I became a makeup artist, and I told my mom, “I’m a makeup artist.” She was happy about it, but I knew she was probably like, “Oh, maybe you could have done something better if you went to college.”

But then, you know, I found social media. I found YouTube. And I did my first video as a hobby, and this was 10 years ago, when YouTube was just-

Menendez: I was about to say. Yeah, the timing of it is important. Because now it doesn’t seem that novel, but 10 years ago people were not approaching it as a business.

Coelho: No. 10 years ago YouTube was just used as a platform for you to watch music videos on, and I remember one night I actually went on YouTube this day to watch a music video, and I found this video of Kandee Johnson, which she still does her videos today. She’s from California. This girl had a full-on tutorial on YouTube, and I was like, “Oh my gosh, this is incredible.” And in my mind, at that moment, all I could think about was doing a video to help out my friends and family, like my sister who always asks me for a 101 and teach them how to do their makeup.

So, it took me a few weeks and I finally uploaded my first video. The lighting was so yellow. I had no idea what I was doing, but I uploaded my video, and surprisingly I started getting great feedback from my friends in Brazil. I just shared this in my personal Facebook at the time, Twitter, and it was just my personal friends in there, but people liked it and I started getting engagement, and surprisingly, slowly it became something. It became my career. You know, I never expected in my life that putting videos on YouTube back then, 10 years ago, was going to end up bringing me to where I am today.

And that is one of the most special things about it, too, like my expectations were so little and so... because I started not knowing that it could be my job, or it could be something. I was a makeup artist, happy as a makeup artist, and I was doing that as a hobby, but it turned out to be my career, my job. So, yes, my mom is very proud of me today. We have this conversation all the time and she tells me like, “I’m so happy that I let you do you, like follow your own heart. Because if I had stopped you, your story could have been completely different.” When we talk about this, it brings me so much peace, as well, in my heart, to know that I did what I wanted, I followed my heart, although my mom was kind of against it, but it ended up being something good.

Menendez: What's also apparent about you, though, is that you have a lot of hustle and are very savvy, because once you started seeing those... the viewership on YouTube, you quickly expanded to blogging, and there you saw sort of immediate growth, as well. Which also broadened it out from beauty to style, which is a much larger space to fill than just doing makeup tutorials.

Coelho: I give those credits to my husband, as well, because I remember when I did my first videos, he was like, "Oh, this is cool. Internet, Camila, you know internet is the future." And I remember him telling me this.

Menendez: Just so you know, the Gen Z'ers are listening to the two of us, dying.

Coelho: Exactly. But like when he told me that, I was like, "Come on. Future? Internet?" You know, and he was the one that said, "Keep doing it. It's going to be great. It's a hobby, I know, but it could be something great." And I remember the things he used to tell me, I would never believe him, and it would all happen. I remember when I opened up my blog, people started asking me for more content. And when you're doing video, it gets limited, right? And if I wrote a blog, I could share content every single day, every type of content, including fashion, which I've always loved. In the first 12 days of my blog, I got more than 150,000 unique visitors, and that was a crazy number. And so, and Ícaro, my husband, was like, "See? This is gonna be great. Keep doing it."

Menendez: What was it that you were doing that was resonating with them? Because those are wild numbers.

Coelho: It was mostly the how-to videos. How to do an eyeliner. Today, find all of these... I mean, if I do a how-to eyeliner today, it's not even gonna get a view, because there's so much content out there. But back then, you have to think like there was nothing. Imagine the amount of girls who did not know how to do their makeup, and then they could go to YouTube and find how to do your eyebrows, how to do your cat eye, how to do a smokey eye, how to do a red lip perfectly, how to do contour, highlight, so all of these things were the ones that really got the most engagement. When I was sharing about fashion, as well, it was like my look of the day. It was very personal, the fashion style side of it in the beginning.

But the most attention was brought from the beauty tutorials, like the how-tos. At the end, like I built such a strong relationship with this following that they had me as a friend, who were there every week to teach them something, and I've always been close with my following, and I've always taken some time to listen to them, like what did they want me to bring? What did they want me to show them? So, that was very important on my growth, as well. To listen to them. And I still do, until this day. Such an important part of it.

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Menendez: The most immediate way in which you monetize these followings is to do work with brands, and you of course had brands reaching out sort of immediately. How were you assessing, how do you assess who to work with and who not to work with?

Coelho: Oh. You know, in the beginning it was really hard. I remember when one of the first brands sent me a box of product and I was so excited. I was like, “Oh my gosh. I am doing this as a hobby, I love it, and I’m getting free product.” Little did I know, I was actually going to get paid to do certain things. But since the beginning, it was very important for me to keep my following’s trust. I remember when brands started reaching out and I told myself, “I will not advertise any product if I don’t love it.”

So, that was always a rule for me. Before saying yes to a brand, or to a product, or to advertising something, I need to try it first. And if I already tried that product and I don’t love it, I’m going to say no. So, since the beginning, when I was still very small, I said noes. And those noes were very important as a long-term for my career, because you know, you need to stay true to yourself, and your followers will know. If you advertise something that you don’t believe in, it’s automatically going to come out not so organic. I still say a lot of noes. I’m okay with those noes, because if I say yes to everything, and if I don’t stay true to me, it’s gonna get to a time that it’s all gonna end, and I’m gonna lose my followers’ trust, which is the most important thing that I have.

So, yeah, noes are very important. And it has always been.

Menendez: You’re also operating next level now. I mean, you have partnerships with beauty brands, a fashion line that bears your name, and now your beauty and cosmetics line, your new launch, Elaluz. What is your vision for the brand?

Coelho: My vision for the brand, I mean, my fashion label came first, which was such a big dream coming true. I just really... I wanted a brand that kind of translated my style. Why we chose REVOLVE, right? It was like my main goal was to have this available online all over the world. So, we chose REVOLVE as a partner because I’ve had a relationship with them for so many years. I know the people behind the brand, and I knew it was going to be accessible for everyone all around the world. My goal with Camila Coelho collection, for example, at first was to see everyone from every background, everywhere in the world, wearing my brand. Wearing these clothes and representing CCC.

And with Elaluz, it’s the same, like my goal is to see this brand grow and evolve, like we aim to be perfect and to deliver amazing quality. So, my biggest decision with my beauty brand, Elaluz, was for it to be clean. Could I do that? And I doubted myself. I was like, “Can I make a brand that has quality, but has clean ingredients and meets the high standards for clean?” I know a lot of brands use the word clean today, but like you know, being clean for me... It’s from everything, like ingredients, to packaging, and being sustainable, and I gave myself that challenge, like Elaluz was supposed to be launched much sooner, but when you’re clean, you have so many limits, there’s so many limits to everything. To ingredients, to formulas, to packaging, and I gave myself that challenge. I wanted to prove to my own self that I could create a clean brand, because also I think it is the future.

We need more products out there that are good for you, good for your skin. My goal with Elaluz is to represent women all around the world. The messaging with this brand is it’s all about light. It’s about the name, Elaluz, was inspired by the warmth and the confidence that comes from everyone’s individual inner light. It has to do also with my light story. You know, I want people to grab the product and think about how special their inner light is. But my goal is for us to grow, and to evolve, and to learn through the years, and I see a beautiful future for both of these brands, because I’m 100% involved in every single detail of both brands.

And you know, I always say when there is love, and there is passion, when there is hard work, things come out great. So, I hope the future of these brands is a beautiful future.

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Menendez: You were diagnosed with epilepsy when you were nine and your mom suggested that you not share the diagnosis. Why?

Coelho: Yeah. There's still a huge stigma out there about epilepsy. And this is something I've been working on to... You know, using my platform to try to end this stigma, and to educate people in society on what epilepsy really is. One out of 26 people get diagnosed with epilepsy in the world. So, it's a lot of us, and you don't hear anyone talking about it. 20-something years ago, this was what, when I was nine? The stigma was even worse. My mom telling me not to share with anyone was a way to protect me from being bullied, or from being looked at differently. Because she knew my type of epilepsy was controlled and that I was going to get to live a normal life, she felt like I didn't need to share.

You know, a lot of people with epilepsy, one out of those 26 people, they get to live a normal life. But a lot of them don't. But those who do get to live a normal life, like me, today my mom thinks differently. She thinks, "You know, I maybe could have, if I had more experience myself, I should have told you to actually talk about it." Because she also didn't realize that keeping it in was probably going to affect me. Which it did. When I was 17, I had a really dark time accepting myself, and even though only my family knew, I had limits, right? I couldn't drink alcohol. I had to sleep well, eight hours a night, because all of those things triggers the seizures.

So, today my mom thinks differently, but back then it was a way to protect me. The one advice I always give to people, to moms out there, say the word epilepsy. Talk to your children about it in a normal way, like encourage them to talk about it. Talk about their condition. Because it's only going to make them stronger. Today, I can fully talk about my whole epilepsy story in every detail and not get emotional, because I became stronger after speaking about it. Speaking about it, not just epilepsy, but any problems you have, anything you're dealing with will only make you stronger.

Menendez: After sharing so much good news, so much glamour, what's been the lesson of sharing a challenge like this?

Coelho: The lesson is there's no such thing as a perfect life. There's no such thing as perfection. You know, today with social media, we see everyone's filtered lives, right? Out there on Instagram, on Facebook, we're only sharing most of the great moments about our lives, and it's a big issue, because especially with the new generation, there's so many teenage kids who are going through depression because they feel like they're less fortunate than others, and everyone's lives are perfect, and theirs is not. And so, those with a voice, with a big platform, it is important for us to talk about our vulnerabilities, about our challenges, and about our struggles. So, for me, that is the biggest lesson, like I've accomplished so much through the years. I've accomplished much more than I ever dreamed of.

Coming from such a small town, I never thought in my life that I could be half the way where I am today. I feel like I've accomplished everything. I mean, now I have a very personal accomplishment, goal, which is to be a mom. But you know, I'm sure, I have faith that it will happen in the right time.

My biggest lesson is there's no such thing as perfection. We all, everyone in this life, will have a different challenge, will have a different struggle, and you are not alone. Whatever you're going through, there's somebody going through the same, or worse, or less worse, but we're all going through something. And going through challenges is what makes us grow, it's what makes us learn, and it's what makes us better.

Menendez: Camila, thank you so much for your time. I appreciate you.

Coelho: Oh, thank you. It was great talking to you.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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