



## How Cece Meadows Built a Cosmetics Line as an Homage to Indigenous Beauty

The CEO and founder of Prados Beauty leveraged her skills as a make-up artist and her experience as a cancer survivor to launch a beauty brand out of her daughter's nursery. Cece shares how her company's strategic partnership with Thirteen Lune and JCPenny brought Prados Beauty to profitability, and how her experiences of domestic abuse and homelessness have shaped her commitment to giving back.

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Alicia Menendez: Cece Meadows has survived a lot. Ovarian cancer, domestic abuse, a period where she and her kids were homeless. Today, she runs a makeup line, Prados Beauty. And as you're going to hear in the telling of her story, all of that hardship and all of that struggle only doubled Cece's commitment to giving back. Cece shares how her Indigenous roots informed her vision of beauty, the financial mechanics of fulfilling huge product orders, and how her retail partnership with e-Commerce site Thirteen Lune and JCPenney catapulted Prados Beauty into profitability.

Cece, thank you so much for being here.

Cece Meadows: Thank you for having me.

Menendez: So Cece, you grow up outside of Yuma, Arizona, the eldest of four children. And you describe it as a pretty rough upbringing. Can you give me a sense of what that looked like and the lessons that you were growing up with?

Meadows: My parents were fairly young. I think my mom was 17 when she had me. My dad was a cowboy on a cattle ranch. He started working there when he was like 14. Didn't really have a lot. I remember my parents telling us that we were rich in love because we had each other. And I think that that's a normal thing that you say to kids because you literally have nothing. My grandparents were a big, big part of my childhood growing up. I actually didn't even speak English when I went to kindergarten because I was raised pretty much in my grandparents' home and they only spoke Spanish and the traditional Yoeme language. But I loved school because we had breakfast and lunch, and then eat dinner at my grandparents' house. And it was always frijolitos and rice and squash. I hated squash for the longest time because I ate it so much as a kid, but we didn't really have a lot. It was really rough.

Menendez: The way you tell it, I mean, it feels to me like your life took off like a rocket ship in the sense that a lot of kids who are living in homes that are under-resourced, school for you becomes a refuge. And you do really well in school and school's a place where you thrive. You even become the first person in your family to graduate from college. You get big jobs out of school. You're making six figures working in finance. You get married, you have a baby girl, and then things are going up, up, up, up, up, and then you get sick. Tell me how you go from being a self-described successful person to being absolutely broke.

Meadows: Yeah. So I had just separated from my first husband. I got married super young. I was 21 years old when I got married. Divorced, or separated at 25. Between 25 and 27, I

continued working in finance and being successful and learning how to shuffle a co-parenting schedule with him. And he was great, he's always been great. But I started dating somebody after my marriage ended, and it was great when it was great and it was awful when it wasn't. And so I'm a survivor of domestic abuse. And I feel like being in that relationship was just the kickoff of this domino effect of just unfortunate circumstances that started happening in my life.

I'm diagnosed with ovarian cancer at 27. I've always had women issues, menstruation issues. I would get ultrasounds pretty often and they were just following ... you get polyps and you get cysts and things like that. They were following just one that just kept growing and they were just like, "You know what? We're going to have to go in and biopsy this. It looks like it's growing." And so they caught it very early. I'm super lucky. But I did one round of chemo. I didn't have the long-term disability option to just stay home, and so I went back to work. I was wearing my scarves, and I just was too sick to work and I had to stay home, eventually. And I just didn't have the resources to be able to live.

And so I did end up going through remission. And then I had my son the following year. He was just a little bit over two months, and I moved in with my ex and he was an alcoholic. And I found myself holding a newborn baby, being kicked out of the house, and the only thing I could grab was a box of diapers that were by the door. And I didn't have anywhere to go. Ultimately, that led me to being homeless and sleeping in Walmart parking lots, just because I literally had nowhere to go.

Menendez: How do you begin to pull yourself out?

Meadows: Oh, man. A lot of hope and a lot of prayer. I had a 2006 Super Sport Monte Carlo and it had a moon roof on it. And we were sleeping in a Walmart parking lot, and it had just stopped raining and the clouds opened up and you could see the stars. And I'm holding my baby and I'm looking out this moon roof, and you could see the stars so clearly. And this is in the Salinas, California area, and so it's always foggy and you don't really get a clear view of the stars. But I remember my little girl looking up and she was like, "Oh, look, it's the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper." She was only five. And I always would talk to her about how we come from the stars.

And I remember her placing her little hand on my son, placed it on top of his head. I was holding him kind of like this. And she looked at me and she said, "Mommy, we're not really camping, are we?" And I think for me, as a mother, there was no other feeling to feel like a failure in that moment. And I thought to myself, she's watching me. She's watching what I'm doing, and she's watching what I put up with and she's watching where I brought her. And kids are so resilient and you can try to hide things from them, but there was no hiding that from her.

And it was in that very moment that I decided that I needed to pull everything that I possibly could, out of myself. What I had left, what little I felt inside of self-worth and self-love. And I needed to really focus on that because what I was doing was I was allowing a lifetime of ... at 28 years old. I was letting 28 years of things just fester and not getting the therapy that I needed for myself so that I could learn what had happened to me and why. And how I needed to stop it with myself so that my children didn't have to suffer the way that I was at that moment.

And so I ended up calling a friend of mine who was also having a hard time. And I asked her, "Hey, where did you go to get help?" I was ready to go stay in a homeless shelter. And she was like, "You can actually go stay with me at my brother's house if you need

somewhere to go." And I remember all I had was my two kids and a laundry basket that I kept in the back of my car. A couple of days just turned into us staying in an empty room that they had for a little bit over a year. And I started going to cosmetology school. I ended up dropping out 500 hours away from graduating because one of my former associates that I worked with in finance, he said, "Hey, Farmer's Insurance is looking for trainers." And I ended up opening my own Farmer's Insurance agency. I studied to get my Series Six and do investments and things like that. It took off from there.

Menendez: That's an unbelievable story. It is.

Meadows: I'm crying about it because it's been a long time that I actually think about ... in detail about what happened.

Menendez: Cece, 2019, you launched Prados Beauty with brushes and with lashes. Why the decision to start there?

Meadows: After I went into remission, I actually immersed myself in the beauty world because I had friends who worked at the MAC counter and they came over and they really saved me. They gave me a makeover at the height of me going through chemo, and I had half an eyebrow hanging on and three or four lashes. And I remember them using their tools, and the brushes, even though they were gentle makeup artists, it still hurt my skin. And I thought to myself, how cool would it be one day if I could design some makeup brushes that are so soft that it literally felt like clouds on someone's face? And I started just doodling and putting things down in a notebook. I started doing makeup for kids at the Ronald McDonald House and just volunteering my time. And a lot of the kids, they don't have eyelashes. And I thought, how cool would it be if I designed a pair of lashes that had a thick enough band that you could put on some eyeliner and it wouldn't look like it was a fake lash? I started with makeup brushes and eyelashes because I was serving an underserved community. But then once I got into the beauty community, I realized that that just wasn't just going to be something that was going to serve one community. It was going to be a bunch of communities that were marginalized in that area.

Menendez: Part of that is your own identity as an Indigenous woman. Can you tell me how you identify?

Meadows: Yeah. So I identify as Chicana and Indigenous.

Menendez: And in what ways did you see a gap in the market for that community?

Meadows: Well, I mean, you would go to Target or big department stores and buy clothes. And you would see traditional tribal clothing designs, and they're owned by white conglomerates and designers. They're not even made by Indigenous or Native American people. And they're making millions of millions of dollars off of traditional tribal designs. And you're thinking, well, where the hell is that money going? Because it's not going to natives or Indigenous people.

And it was the same thing at New York Fashion Week. I went to New York Fashion Week one year and I wore a shirt that said Strong, Resilient, Indigenous. And I had more than a few models ask me, "What's an... what's indi-guh-nus?" And I thought to myself, you know what? I can either get mad about this or I can make this a teaching moment about what it means to be an Indigenous person. Because at the end of the day, Alicia, these people just really didn't know.

So to take that opportunity and create Prados in a way that becomes an informational and education place where you're going to learn about Indigenous peoples and Indigenous culture. We make products for everybody. It doesn't matter what your skin tone is, it

doesn't matter what your backstory is, who you are culturally or demographically. We make products for everybody. But while you're here, you're also going to learn about what's important to us and what needs to change.

Menendez: Cece, make sure I'm getting this right. It takes four years for Prados to become profitable. 2019, you make about \$17,000 in sales. By 2022, you're just over 1.5 million in sales. What happens in those years that the numbers are trending in that direction?

Meadows: So when we first launched in 2019, it was just the makeup brushes and the lashes, and I started with \$250. I had done a few makeup jobs. I took my \$250 and I went and applied for a business license. I secured my website on Wix. I ended up working New York Fashion Week, and I took that money and I put it into creating the logo. I started working with Indigenous designers. And then the following year, it was 2020, I think that year we made just a little bit over \$100,000 in sales.

I got the call about the JCPenney in Thirteen Lune partnership in 2021, and I literally fell on the floor and started crying. Not just out of joy, but scared because I was thinking to myself, I'm the first Chicana and identifying Indigenous woman that would be in retail locations. I was just like, how the heck am I going to go from my D2C and my wholesale accounts to casinos and gift shops and boutiques to 600-

Menendez: Well, let's talk about that, because it actually creates a pretty interesting dynamic in terms of what you have to do in order to fulfill product order. The gap between the money you spend and then recouping that money, walk me through that financial cycle.

Meadows: So my husband and I bought a couple of properties in 2017 and 2018. And we were thinking, how the heck are we going to make this happen? And it's funny, Alicia ... I talk about this a lot. But at that time I had went to 12 different banks and 12 different investment groups and things like that, and all of them told me no. And I would ask, "Why? This is a booming ... we are in this brand. We're going to be a global beauty brand. Here's our numbers, here's our projections. This is the response, these are the reviews." It was just astounding to me that they would tell me no.

But one of them was really honest with me. And I said, "Can you give me some feedback of why you're saying no to this?" And he literally just said to me, "I'm going to be honest. If you default on your loan and you've got two Native Americans on this eyeshadow palette, how am I going to sell this?" And I'm just like, "Are you kidding me? That's the reason that you're not going to back this." So when we found out about the JCPenney, Thirteen Lune deal, I already had it in my mind that we weren't going to get outside funding for this. And so we sold the property. We took that money and we just reinvested it into the business. And we maxed out every credit card. Shout out to American Express. They would call us on the phone like, "Hey, you just charged \$50,000 on your card. Is everything okay? Are you going to have the money to pay this back?" And I would tell them, "Look, I'm going to be honest. We're growing a business. But yes, you will get the minimum payments for the first six months, but I promise you, we're going to pay you back."

And so it was hard bootstrapping. It was hard getting all those nos. It was hard doing all of those things. It was a lot of stress. But I mean, the end result is closing 2022 with \$1.5 million in sales. And being profitable.

Menendez: I want to go back to you and your daughter at the Walmart parking lot looking up at the sky. And your daughter saying to you, "Mommy, we aren't camping, are we?" When she watches you now, when she watches what you have built ... not just the company you've

built, but the life you have built for yourself. Your commitment to giving back to your community. What do you hope it is that she sees, that she learns, that she takes away from this journey?

Meadows: I always tell my friends that Anisa is the journal of my success story. She's the literal pages of my success story. And it started with me wanting to be a better example to her. When she said that to me, it just reminded me that I also was a child at a time that was watching things. And I needed to end that cycle of watching things and normalizing things that were very traumatic.

I dedicated my life to healing, and I dedicated my life to teaching, and to do more for others than I do for myself. And so to teach my children to do more for others than they do for self in a service type of way, but also always putting themselves first in their healing and in their worth, is something that I feel is the greatest gift as a parent that you could give a child.

Menendez: Cece, such an incredible story. Thank you so much for taking the time to be with us.

Meadows: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina To Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer, Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode.

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