



Julissa Prado, the Million-Dollar Curl Whisperer

She had us at hello. Then we got to know her and walked away inspired. Founder Julissa Prado mixed her grandma's herbal medicine legacy, a lot of sweat from relatives, \$50K in life savings, and her uncompromising drive to grow Rizos Curls, a hair care line that reached \$1 million in sales *before* it debuted at Target. But wait for it: before all that she earned an MBA, managed major brands for Nestlé, and became a licensed commercial truck driver.

Alicia Menendez:

Rizos Curls founder Julissa Prado is really close to her family. So close, her cousin designed her logo, her tio gave up his garage so she could have a headquarters, her little cousins packed boxes, and tio drove them back and forth to the post office to ship them, and her brother was her wingman the whole time. Less than two years in, Rizos Curls hit \$1 million in sales.

Julissa, so good to see you in person!

Julissa Prado: Thank you. I'm honored to be here.

Menendez: Big week for you. Just announced that Rizos Curls is now available at Target. Is that real to you?

Prado: It still feels really surreal, especially because it was always a big goal for me, especially that specific retailer, to have my products there. So, to see it actually happen, it's just a testament that with hard work, you can really make anything possible.

Menendez: Julissa, did you always embrace your curls?

Prado: No, so like many Latinas, and women who have curly hair, I went through a phase where I hated my curly hair. I remember the very first time I got it straightened, and the amount of compliments I got, and I just became obsessed with these compliments. I was like eight years old, and I was like, "You would never give me a compliment in my whole life about my hair. I get it straight one time, you guys all want to tell me how pretty it looks? All right, I'm gonna keep doing this."

Menendez: Of course. Well, what's the message there to an eight-year-old?

Prado: Yeah, so I was like obsessed with straight hair, and I would damage it so much, like people didn't even know I had curly hair for a long time, and it wasn't until around high school that I started wanting to embrace my natural hair, mainly because I was really lucky to go to a high school that had really advanced curriculum, where it taught us about racial inequalities. They taught us about gender inequality, class inequalities, and I feel like it kind of like opened my eyes to the fact that I had been trying to adhere to a lot of European beauty standards, or just in general things that I had internalized that... about stereotypes within my own culture, et cetera. So, it made me kind of want to just be

naturally me, and for me it was really hard to do that, because I think especially within the Latino community, not only do we have the barrier of like, you know, most people wear their hair straight, but on top of that we have this language barrier a lot of the time, where a lot of this information and knowledge doesn't really enter our communities.

So, I kind of went on this quest to find things that worked for my hair, and I felt like everything was either too heavy, and it moisturized too much, or it was just a lot of hold, but there was nothing in the middle and nothing that would help me extra define, extra enhance my hair, because it had been straightened for so long, and it needed help. Because it was not curling all the way.

Menendez: What led you to the right formula?

Prado: Yeah, so I grew up with my grandmother, who was... In Mexico, she was kind of like the town's doctor, per se, but she wasn't a doctor, she just like... You know, they didn't have access to doctors or towns. The nearest one was probably like a few hours, and she literally grew up in a mountain, and everything that she ate, everything that they did was like they literally grew themselves. She would make herbs, and remedies, and whatever people needed help with, but she always because of that, ever since I was a little girl I was always taught that the Earth gives you everything you need, that it's more than just plants, more than just food, it's medicine. So, I was always very comfortable growing up, if my hands were dry, I would go and get some sugar, and I would get lemon, and I would mix it together and make my own scrub.

When my scalp started getting flaky, I would go and cut an aloe vera plant, take off that little juice, I would put it on my scalp. When my stomach hurt, I would go to the herb area, my mom would tell me which one to pick, I would smell them, and then I would go and make some tea. That was very normal to me, so me using those lessons and coming up with my own concoctions and testing out different things for my hair was something very natural, so that's what I did. I just started mixing things up, and kind of like creating my own formulas for my hair, and then I finally found some different stuff that worked, and I would carry it around in Ziploc bags, and you know, literally in high school, I would carry around sometimes even like lemons, because lemon really helps with... It makes it hard. It's kind of like a hairspray, like if you use it directly on your hair, you can tell. It will leave it hard and it won't leave it flaky.

I would carry these little things in Ziploc bags and just kind of like had fabulous curly hair.

Menendez: Is that how you became the curl whisperer?

Prado: Yeah, so I would have this fabulous hair that smelled like citrus and amazing. That's why with my scent now, with my product, I was like, "It has to be citrus." I always wanted it to have a citrus scent, because I was known to be the lemon girl throughout high school and college. I would walk around with my hair, and then my little Ziploc bags, and I would always encounter undercover curlies, so in the bathroom, in the dorm rooms, in the hallway, in the elevator, and they would always whisper to me, "Psst, you know, my hair's actually curly, but it could never look like yours. What do you do?"

So, then I would invite them over, we would meet in the bathroom, or in a dorm room, and I would do their hair natural for the first time, and I feel like I got addicted to that moment, like that moment of them seeing their hair natural and liking it for the very first time, after straightening it almost their whole life. It was such a powerful moment, and I feel like it was

really empowering for them to be able to really love themselves, like love the way that they looked at that moment without having to kind of have this disguise.

Over the years, there was hundreds of them, like throughout high school, throughout college, so when I first launched my product, I had forgotten how many people I had done that with until I launched, and I received so many orders and messages from like all these women over the years that I forgot that I had helped. So, yeah, they became my first customers.

Menendez: Even though not all curls are the same.

Prado: They're not, and so I would teach them depending on their curl, because it's... With products, it's not just... You don't just need good products. You also have to know how to use them. Because how much you use, how you put it on, all of that plays a factor.

Menendez: What's the one product in your line no curly-haired person should leave home without?

Prado: That's hard. So, like the curl cream, it was probably the hardest one to make, because that's the product that there's absolutely nothing in the market like it, where it takes whatever your natural texture is and defines it and enhances it. So, if you have like wavy hair, it'll make it curlier. And then the more you use it, the more your hair will get curlier.

Menendez: When you talk about these formulas, I mean how do you go from mixing lemons and aloe to like doing legit chemistry?

Prado: Yeah, so I worked with a chemist. It was a four-year process. I worked with two different labs, and at first, I was not getting the results that I wanted. I felt like unless it's something that is truly extraordinary, and it's something that I'm really gonna use myself and love, I'd rather not even do it. So, the chemist that I ended up falling in love with, and she was great, she's Jamaican, and then the lab was Nigerian-owned, and I felt like we both kind of came together, like I brought my teachings and my things from my grandmother, and I kind of like brought that insight, and then they brought in insight. Like for example, they were like, "Oh, moringa oil, my family's been using this. Let's try that."

So, it was kind of like a collaboration between these three cultures, and then we would go back and test it on our respective families and community.

Menendez: 2017, you had a full-time corporate job.

Prado: I sure did.

Menendez: What happened that made you realize you had to go for this?

Prado: Yeah, so I feel like my experience with corporate was very different, in that I was working for Nestle, and they were so... like I don't have a bad experience. You know, although I am working for somebody else, I feel like so much, so many of the tools and insights-

Menendez: What were you doing for them?

Prado: So, I did a variety of jobs, like I did... My very last job I was an account manager, which means I was kind of like the liaison between the retail store, the retail buyer, and the brand. I was doing a lot of what I'm doing now.

Menendez: Right.

Prado: With Target. But I did it for DiGiorno Pizza, CPK, Dreyer's Ice Cream, Haagen-Dazs, Nesquik, Coffee-Mate.

Menendez: Yes. Yes.

Prado: Yeah, all these big, billion dollar, like most of the brands that I managed were billion-dollar brands. And then one of my first positions with Nestle was I actually led a team of around 13 sales reps that drove 16-foot to 24-foot trucks and delivered and distributed all these products, these frozen products, to all of the retailers. So, I actually have a commercial driver's license, like I had to parallel park a 24-foot truck.

Menendez: Stop.

Prado: Yes. I was like, I don't know, like 23 at the time. I'm just managing this team of like 13 people, they're driving heavy machinery that could be dangerous if something goes wrong.

Menendez: But tell me about the moment where you say, "I gotta do this."

Prado: Oh, yes. Yes. I was hoping that I would be able to do both at the same time for a long time. I was like, "Oh, I can do this for a few years." Have my day job, and then when I get home, I'll do Rizos. But it got to the point that I was not sleeping, like Rizos consumed my life. I didn't expect it to do so good from the very first day. So, it got to the point where I had to make the decision because Rizos was like my baby. I felt like I had become a mother when I gave birth to this business, and this baby was requiring a lot of attention, and it was growing very, very fast, and if I neglected it for five minutes, something terrible could happen to it.

So, I feel like I had to choose. I had to choose my child.

Menendez: So, you spend \$50,000. Your life savings, you pour into this.

Prado: Yeah.

Menendez: What did you spend that \$50,000 on?

Prado: Oh my God. For this industry, \$50,000 is no money. So, I spent it all on just like buying product, buying the supplies, testing. So, the testing took four years, you know? And every sample, that's money. So, when I first launched, I had a zero-dollar marketing budget. I didn't have... I had spent all of my money just to have the product in my hand.

Menendez: This is a family product.

Prado: 100%. Yeah.

Menendez: Can you tell me about that?

Prado: I'm very, very close to my family. We all grew up in Mid-City. My parents moved to Pacoima when I was a little bit older, so I can go to high school out there, but everybody else legit lives on the same street. When I was little, we used to all live in the same apartment building on Fourth Ave in Mid-City, and every unit was a family member. So, we grew up very, very close, and we grew up like, "This is all you have." You know?

So, my dad, he crawled through a sewer to get to this country. He was like... His very first job was picking oranges in the fields in Florida. So, when you come from that, when you really come from like nothing, and when you start here it's like when you have family, that's

the only people that... You only have each other. You know, those are the people that you depend on. Those are the only people that you really can trust. My family, I'm so proud of them. The fact that my dad even has his own restaurant is... That was his dream, you know, like this little boy that crawled through a sewer with nothing in his pockets was able to achieve this. And I saw him able to achieve it with the help of all of our family, so it was like all... Any gain that we have, we see it as a win for all of us, because we know that when we win, we don't just win. We help each other, like we bring everybody with us, like, "Okay, I'm helping you open up this restaurant right now, but I'm gonna learn from you, you're gonna teach me, and then everybody else is gonna be there for me when I do it."

So, I think that's where my mentality too, of like Rizos Curls being the three Cs, curls, community, culture, comes from. Because like from day one, I always saw that when you have something good, you share it with everybody else. You share it with your family, you share it with your community. You don't just keep it to yourself.

Menendez: What did your parents say when you told them that it was gonna be carried in Target?

Prado: So, my mom, especially my mom, they don't understand the internet, right? They're like, "Why are you crying over the internet? Is someone bullying you? I saw on Primer Impacto that there's a lot of online bullies." She for a long time thought I was kind of like an Avon lady. She's like, "I see all this product coming in and coming out, are you... Is it in your trunk?" And then she would like come back, and when I would see orders going out, she's like, "Oh my God. Yes, of course there's orders, Julissa. You don't understand my efforts. At church, I'm making announcements." Like, "Cool, mom."

So, it's like I don't think they really understood what was happening, and I think Target was probably the first moment that they're like, "I think my daughter really built something. I think it might be legit."

Ad: *Is there something that's getting in the way of your happiness, or that's preventing you from achieving your goals? I have found that talking with someone can make a big difference, but sometimes the logistics, like finding the right person or the time to connect, make things complicated. BetterHelp Online Counseling connects you with a professional counselor in a safe and private online environment. You can get help on your own time and at your own pace. You can schedule secure video or phone sessions, plus chat and text with your therapist. BetterHelp's licensed professional counselors specialize in everything from depression, to relationships, to complicated family dynamics, self esteem, grief, you get it. And if you're not happy with your counselor for any reason, you can request a new one at any time. They even have financial aid for those who qualify.*

Best of all, it's an affordable option. Latina to Latina listeners get 10% off your first month with the discount code LATINA. So, why not get started today? Go to betterhelp.com/latina, fill out a questionnaire to help them assess your needs and get matched with a counselor. That's betterhelp.com/Latina.

Menendez: Who was your ideal customer when you were developing the line?

Prado: The strategy that I learned from business school and with Nestle, whenever we would develop a new brand, or were in the brand-development process, before you even think of the product, you think of the consumer. So, you draw out... We had this exercise where you draw out your target customer, your demographic, that person, and you have to draw them out, you have to draw their hair, their clothes, write down what religion are they,

where did they grow up, what did they eat, what businesses do they support, what motivates them, like every aspect of them. You build this whole character profile.

And so, I had done that, so this girl was from New York, and she had always worn her hair straight, and she was like barely transitioning. She was really proud of her culture. She was unapologetic. She was really socially aware, socially conscious, she cared about not just what product she gets, but who's behind them. She knows the power of what it means when you make a transaction, because like what I tell people is when you give your money to a company, you're not just giving them money, you're giving them power. So, she's like aware of all of these things, but she still wears her culture on her sleeve.

So, that was kind of like the person that I had in mind, and it's interesting, because to this day, the majority of our customers are not women that had already been wearing their hair curly. It's women that they're wearing their hair curly for the first time with Rizos Curls.

Menendez: That's a big deal.

Prado: Yeah, it's all those undercover curls.

Menendez: Well, because we talk often about how hair is very personal, but hair is also deeply political.

Prado: 100%.

Menendez: How does that show up for you?

Prado: Oh my God, it's... So, I think part of the reason why Rizos Curls even did well was because we launched in 2017. That was like in the midst of politically, it was... The political climate at the time was very anti-Latino, very anti-immigrant, and it's like I feel like we were hearing all these things, negative stereotype perpetuated in the media, about our culture. We were kind of being put down, and we felt very... I feel like our community felt very attacked, and I think that because of that, it made us want to wear our culture on our sleeve and make sure that wherever we went, people knew, "I'm not like you. I'm proud of my culture, and if you say something racist, best believe I'm not gonna sit here and take it. I'm gonna say something. "

You know, screw assimilating, screw whatever, us being so nice in the past, not... If you're not gonna help our community, that's fine, we're gonna help ourselves. We don't need you. We don't need anybody other than ourselves, like our community is powerful. We are strong, we are intelligent, and we're gonna help each other out. And I think that with Rizos Curls, it was like so many of these women, that's why they were ready to wear their hair natural, because it was like they wanted to rid themselves of these things that they had internalized, that told them that their culture, their natural state was not good.

Menendez: So, you have this woman in mind. How did you then go out and find her?

Prado: She found me. She was always finding me. It's funny, because I feel like I just was myself, and I was just... I was her, you know?

Menendez: But how did she know about you? Through social media, through the tours?

Prado: Yeah, so whenever people ask me that question exactly, like what was your best marketing tactic, it wasn't really a tactic, but the best marketing tool that Latinas have is Chismosa culture. Chismosa culture, I've rebranded in the sense of calling it sharing is caring. You know? Sharing is caring, like we have this culture of like when you see

something good, you don't just keep it to yourself. You want to tell everybody. When you see something bad, you want to tell everybody. You know?

That really helped my business out, because we opened up the social media page. I just kind of like put it on there, and for example, what a lot of people don't realize about Puerto Rico when the hurricane hit was that it forced an entire island of women to go natural. Women that just like the Latinas here, not in the Caribbean, that had been straightening their hair, and were not comfortable with their hair natural, for so much of the island didn't have power for so long, so they had to wear their hair natural, and it was like... It's different when you're forced to be this way than when you choose it, so we were the only platform, or the only page online that was talking to people in Spanish, even opening voice notes, and doing all of these different... I felt like I was talking to my tias, you know? That's how they would communicate with me. They would send me like voice notes on Facebook Messenger, or like, you know, random things like that.

And it was like somebody found out about us, and then more, they told more people, they told more people, and we would wake up every day to hundreds and hundreds of messages, on Facebook especially, from Puerto Rican women who were... Just didn't know what to do with their hair, and they were like-

Menendez: Because they didn't have electricity, so they couldn't use blow dryers, so they couldn't have straightener-

Prado: They couldn't use straighteners, they couldn't... Most of them didn't have gas to like... You know what I mean? Like we're waking up to hundreds and hundreds of these messages from these women that were, just like didn't know what to do with their hair, and they were sending me these pictures, and their hair was so damaged, too, because they had been straightening it for so long, so I had to revert back to my learnings from when I was making my own products at home. Some of them were calling us. They were like contact us in so many different ways, and all of them, we were helping them through this process, and I think during that time we went from like... I don't know, 100 followers on Facebook, to 50,000. It was insane, just like that month, and as soon as shipping carriers started shipping to them again, we had thousands of pending orders for Puerto Rico.

Menendez: That's wild.

Prado: Yeah.

Menendez: You have a master's in business from Wake Forest. How much of what you've done in the last two years is informed by what you learned getting your MBA, and how much is instinct, and just like life lessons?

Prado: It's interesting, because I feel like everything that I've ever done in my life has prepared me for this moment. From driving a truck for my commercial's driver's license, to the lessons that I learned growing up in the hood, I definitely attribute my entrepreneurial spirit from growing up in Mid-City, in Pacoima, in these underprivileged areas that are black and brown communities. Because I feel like true creativity, true hustle, is when you don't have a lot to, and you have to create your opportunities. So, growing up in these areas I saw growth, and what I meant by growth was like I saw the pupusa lady next door that I talked about start off with like making one pupusa, to having like a whole cart, to having like a whole little shop, to doing this. That's hustle, and I would see her there rain or shine, no matter how long the lines were, giving great service and everyone would come. Everybody knew about her.

So, I feel like I saw these people creating opportunities that didn't exist for themselves, and getting creative, and just put so much heart into it, so I think that for me, growing up not having a lot taught me how to appreciate things, and how to get a lot of bang for my buck, you know? True creativity I feel like doesn't come from having thousands of dollars and not caring about costs, and not having a not profitable business. I think true creativity comes from having \$20 on the first day of school to look really fly, and figuring out, going to Dollar Tree, going to this, making my own shoelaces, tying them up differently, whatever, sewing some stuff up and showing up to school like trend setting, you know? And that was how I grew up. Yeah, I didn't have a lot of money, but best believe I looked fly. You know?

So, that's how I feel about my business now, too. The example is like our little Target photoshoot thing. You know, I'm going to create something really cute. I'm gonna have cute photos. They're gonna be adorable. They're gonna be funny. But they're sure not gonna cost me my profits. I'm not compromising profits for brand awareness.

Menendez: You posted a video on Instagram after you received the first photo of a customer seeing the product on shelves at Target, and there was something you kept saying in the video, which was, "I'm not supposed to be here."

Prado: Yeah. Oh yeah, so that makes me really emotional, because it's true. I feel like... I don't know if it's like imposter syndrome, or what it is, but I feel like it's different when you grow up in communities where that just never happens, you know? Like when you don't see, when you think of entrepreneurs, I feel like a lot of times that word never gets attributed to Latinos, never gets attributed to like somebody who comes from immigrant parents. It gets attributed to someone that looks like Trump, someone who comes from this lineage of having a lot of power, and access, and privilege, so I feel like for me, and my customer, and my family, being on that shelf, it isn't just like a product being on a shelf. It's a testament to all of my family and my community's hard work and determination. And for me, it's like I think about seeing that product on that shelf, I think about all the work that went into it, from my dad wanting to come to this country, going through a rat-infested sewer, to working so many jobs, to sacrificing so much so that I could have everything, so that I could have access to better schools, so that I could have education, so that I could be more than what he had.

Like my mom never went to school at all, like she barely learned how to read and write when she was like already an adult. So, I think for me, when I say that it just means people that grow up like that, you just like, "That could never be me." That's where it comes from.

Menendez: I think a part of why I am crying is that for those of us who've been given those opportunities, and who know that we stand on the shoulders of people who've sacrificed so much, part of the hope is not just to honor what has come before us, but to make sure that other people moving forward have those same opportunities that we have.

Prado: 100%.

Menendez: And I think we're living in a moment where that feels like a big question mark.

Prado: Yes.

Menendez: Where we wonder if it is possible for a kid to come from Mexico at 16, to build a life for himself in this country where one generation later his child goes to college, goes to

business school, has the capital to invest in a product line, has the family and support to take that product line and put it in one of the biggest retailers in the country.

Prado: Yeah.

Menendez: I mean, it's an extraordinary story. I also don't know that we're living in a moment where it feels possible for other people.

Prado: Yeah. I think a lot of the time when I do these things, when I'm sharing, when I'm doing events to promote entrepreneurship, it's not about me. When I do these interviews, it's not about me. It's much bigger than me. It's what I stand for. It's what I represent.

Menendez: I'm gonna ask you one last question. What is your advice for other Latinas who want to make products for other women?

Prado: Oh my God. So, my advice is, so I don't know if you guys have read the... I think it's a 2019 Nielsen report on Latinas. Latinas 2.0.

Menendez: Sorry, you just hard pivoted back to your MBA school demeanor.

Prado: Let me just tell these women.

Menendez: You're like, "Let me just wipe this tear off and talk to you about some statistics."

Prado: And take you all to school real quick. Let me just tell y'all. I don't know if you've read it. If you haven't, download it. Look up Latinas 2.0 Nielsen report. It's about a 55-page report analyzing Latinas in every single industry as consumers and showing how much power and how extraordinary they are, and how they are drivers. Economy drivers. They are trend drivers. They are drivers in every single industry, from music, to art, to culture, to food. Everything, right?

Take that report and know that that report told every single big company, that probably doesn't care about us, doesn't understand us, that has a workforce that doesn't look like us, and they're out here trying to now capture this market. But you guys have an advantage. If you Latinas, the first, you don't just create a product, you create a solution to a problem. Y'all already have an advantage in that you understand these problems, so therefore creating a solution is so much easier for you, because you come with this insight. What they have to pay so much money, and research, and hire, onboard all these people, and do all these things, you already know innately, because you are who you are, and you know how to speak to your consumer better than anybody with millions of dollars.

My mantra has always been, "What you lack in marketing dollars, you make up for it in creativity and hustle." And let me tell you, so many of these Latinas that I meet whenever I do these events, y'all are mothers, y'all have a side job, y'all make hats, y'all have like... You guys wear so many different hats and are just so talented. You guys sing, you dance, you plan events, and then you do this, and I don't understand how you guys find the time to do this, but let me just say y'all are true renaissance women, and there's something so unique about you. Not just as a consumer, as a creator. You're not just a consumer. Don't let that report make you feel like you're just a consumer. You're not a consumer. Just as much as like anybody else, you can create things. You're a producer. You are an innovator. Don't let these big numbers, don't let this competition that's out there scare you, because you have so much more power and insight than you know.

Menendez: Julissa, thank you so much.

Prado: Thank you.

Menendez: Thank you as always for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Cedric Wilson is our mixer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. We love hearing from you, we really do. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or wherever you're listening, and please leave a review. It is one of the quickest ways to help us grow as a community. Finally, be sure to follow us on Instagram and on Twitter. We're @LatinatoLatina.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Julissa Prado, the Million-Dollar Curl Whisperer." *Latina to Latina*, Lantigua Williams & Co., February 3, 2020. LatinatoLatina.com

Produced by:

