



## How Bomba Curls' Lulu Cordero Unfurled Her Natural Hair and Ambition

The entrepreneur, whose hair care line has already made it to Nordstrom shelves, traces her enterprising spirit to a childhood backpack candy business. And gets real about the cultural challenges and triumphs of loving your natural hair.

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**Alicia Menendez:**

Lulu Cordero did what so many of us have been asked to do, put our own hopes and dreams on pause to be of service to those we love. She spent years helping her dad build his business and now it's her turn. She's the founder of the hair care company Bomba Curls. The company has only been around for a year, but Lulu's products are already on shelves in Nordstrom. We talk about the politics of hair, bringing a vision for a product to life, and what it takes to really know your customer.

Lulu, I feel like I know you based on one key detail about you, which is that you were that kid in school who was selling snacks out of your backpack at a markup.

**Lulu Cordero:** You already know the hustle is real.

**Menendez:** Every school had that kid. Where did that entrepreneurial spirit come from?

**Cordero:** I am in immigrant, soy inmigrante, and growing up my parents did not have the money to buy the flyest new pair of Nikes, or get you those Jordans, or any of those nice things, so I learned very early on that if you want something, well, this is the country that you can go out there and make it happen and do it for yourself. So, I remember my dad gave me my seed money, quote unquote, to start my candy hustle at school. So, I had like 10 bucks and I figured, "Okay, let me buy that big pack of the snack size chips, and Skittles, and Starburst. I'll keep them in my backpack." And whenever anybody needed something, wanted a snack, needed a little sugar, they knew who to turn to in class and who to get it from.

**Menendez:** I got you an Airhead for \$2.00.

**Cordero:** I've learned that sometimes you just gotta hustle and make something out of nothing.

**Menendez:** You immigrated to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic. You were seven years old. And you've said about being Dominican, "From the time you're born, you start to learn about hair." For you, what were those lessons?

Cordero: Oh, man. Good and bad. Being Dominican, yeah, we love hair. But yeah, you learn all about hair care, what natural ingredients are available that you can use to make a mascarilla, a little mask. If your hair's extra dry and it needs a little TLC. You kind of learn from early, early on haircare. But you don't necessarily learn early, early on how to love your hair, your natural hair, your natural texture. In Dominican culture, what's beautiful is silky straight hair. What's acceptable, what's professional, what the ideal is is silky, straight hair. And if you look around, most Dominicans, the bulk of the population does not have that type of hair naturally.

Menendez: When did you realize how racialized that was?

Cordero: Early, early, early on in life. I was a little, little, little girl. And my mom, God bless her, she, ahead of her time in that from the time that I was a tiny little thing she wanted to prepare me for some of the things that I would grow up hearing with respect to my Blackness, with respect to my Black features, my hair, my lips, my color. She really, really, really did try her best to instill in me that Black is beautiful. Because she knew that I would grow up hearing that Black is ugly, or have a shame be associated with your African blood, your African heritage. This might be a controversial statement, but Dominican culture is notorious for having certain anti-Black parts to it and for having Blackness be stigmatized.

Menendez: You got your first relaxer when you were nine. What do you remember about that experience?

Cordero: The lady that did it was our neighbor. She had her cosmetology license back home though, back home, and she was running her little salon operation out of her apartment.

Menendez: So good.

Cordero: When we came to America, unfortunately my mom, who was the person that was in charge of taking care of our hair, and knew how to handle our hair texture, she stayed behind in the DR. The Dominican Republic. When we got here, I was with my father's side of the family, and they had no clue what to do with my hair. So, it would always be frustration, and combs breaking, and a mess. So, eventually they were like, "You know what? We're gonna have to take you in to the building's cosmetologist and have her fix it."

I remember it took all day, because she... It would have to go section by section and really stretch out the hair, make sure that that relaxer coats every little bit of hair, and when all was said and done, they dunked my hair into the bathroom sink, put vinegar on it to neutralize the relaxer, and I had straight hair. And I remember looking up at the mirror and being like, "Is that me? What happened? Where did I go?" But everyone else was like, "Oh, look at you. You look like a proper young lady. This was the best thing in the whole wide world."

For many years after that, that became the routine. If you wanted to be treated like a proper young lady and have people respect you and say, "Look how good and put together you look." Then that was just a part of the process.

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, Burrito Sabanero, Elefantitos, and Arroz*

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Menendez: Then, 2004, you make a decision to “live like a queen.” I need to know what happened in 2004.

Cordero: Yes. That was the year that I decided to write my story and color the world as I wanted to see the world and experience the world, and just do my own thing.

Menendez: Wait, but time out, because you're what, 17 in 2004?

Cordero: Yeah. I was 17.

Menendez: Okay, so this was before college.

Cordero: Yep. Right before college. I was 50 pounds heavier. I didn't know how to take care of me. I said, “You know what? I'm in control of this.” And I changed my life. I decided to go green, live a healthy, wellness-focused lifestyle, I became super conscious of not only what I was putting into my body, but using on my body. That then led me to look at relaxers and naturally that meant stopping the relaxers, because relaxers are full of a lot of harsh chemicals, toxins. There's a lot of research that shows that a lot of products like relaxers and products that are marketed to Black women and communities of color are full of yucky, not so good for your body things.

The only thing that I didn't expect, though, is that while I felt like I was doing something that was so good for me, it was all good up until I decided to stop relaxing my hair. Then that became a problem of me choosing to embrace me, and love me, and honor me. I wasn't quite prepared for all the negativity that came with letting go of relaxers.

Menendez: What was the negativity? Who was it coming from?

Cordero: Family, of course. Being Dominican, as I mentioned, what's acceptable, prim, and proper, for a young lady is to have straight, straight hair, and relax your hair, and I realized a few years later, once I became an adult, that a lot of the negativity that I was experiencing, and just words of, “Oh, you need to fix your hair. You need to do something about that.” Like, “Why are you... Nobody's gonna take you seriously.” I realized that it came from a place of concern inside of my family. They were more so worried, like, “Well, who is going to hire you? How will you have opportunities?” Because they knew, especially coming from where they come from, that you had to fit within a certain mold. You had to look a certain way or else you wouldn't get a job, because back home, for example, you are required to have your picture on your resume, and you're judged based off of that.

And to this day, back home, if your picture on your resume shows natural hair it's, "Thank you, next. We're not giving you this opportunity." So, I realized that it came from that place, but yeah, they were just like, "This is an abomination. This is blasphemy." You know, "Why would anybody want to wear their natural hair?" And that was just mind blowing to me, because I mean number one, here I was doing something good for me, for my health. I believed, "Okay, no more toxins for me. No more toxins seeping into my scalp, getting into my system, and what you're worried about is my hair?"

Menendez: What then was it like to show up at University of Chicago freshman year?

Cordero: I think going to Chicago was one of the best things possible for me, because it was a completely different world, and Chicago was this whole new world with people from everywhere and different... Different cultures in a different kind of way. And being in Hyde Park, Hyde Park has a great Black community. There was diversity, like you see people from everywhere, and I felt like kind of a sense of freedom in so many ways, but then again lots of kids experience that sense of freedom when you're able to kind of like stretch your wings and experience all the world has to offer, and you're off in culture, and you're learning new things, and reading new books, and learning to take the world in in a completely different way.

It was nice because I got to see more people that in certain ways kind of thought the same way that I did, because I come from a mom who's super pro-Black, like from the time I was a kid, like I told you, just making sure to teach me we're Black and we are proud. Don't let anybody ever try to make you feel like you're less than for being Black. Never. And then being in Hyde Park and coming across all these amazing people, educated Black people, and people that felt like, "Yes, Black is beautiful," and I felt in so many ways like I was home if that makes sense.

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Menendez: 2009, you graduate from University of Chicago. You worked in banking for a bit. Then you go home to help your dad build his private security business. What went into that decision to go home?

Cordero: Well, culture. Latin culture is very much all about family, and putting family first, and being there for family. It's just all about family. So, my dad worked so hard his whole life for us, for his family, to do for us, and I felt like it was my time to do for him. That's why I just decided I'll put myself aside and help him build his dream. Here I am, I speak English, I have American education, I'm in a perfect position to help my family now who's helped me so much along the way. So, I went back home, put my dreams aside.

Menendez: Well, what was the dream? What was the dream at that moment?

Cordero: For part of the time when I started school, and I did start off as a bio major, early on in college it was, "Well, maybe I can be a physician." But nah. But don't get it twisted. Chemistry is my... backwards and forwards. I discovered that. But yeah, I wanted to be in banking and be in that world, and in some ways because I did ultimately get a degree in

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economics, I always wanted to help the world and use that to help improve the socioeconomic circumstances of people within my community. That's what it was always about.

But I ended up helping the world and to create opportunities for people in a different way, and that was through helping my dad build his business, and now in hindsight, I see that that was just life's way of preparing me for what was to come and preparing me for the journey.

Menendez: But are you at the time totally resolved about the fact that this is what you have to do? Or is there lingering existential angst about the fact that you've gone, gotten this fancy degree, started to build your own career in finance, and then stepped away from it?

Cordero: Initially. Initially, yeah, for sure. You always have this voice in the back of your head. It's just like, "Is this really what you want?" And it was always there, but I kind of shut myself off to it because I just wanted to focus on what was in front of me, so I kind of put the blinders on and just focused on that. And just gave that all that I could give it. I didn't want to disappoint my father. I didn't want to disappoint my family. You know, you push yourself, but eventually that little voice kept coming back, and kept getting louder, and louder, and louder, and louder, until eventually... I mean, I couldn't ignore it anymore. And in 2019, I backed away and said, "I've done what I can do and now I think I've earned time to do what I want to do."

In 2018, it was summer of 2018. I'd been dedicating myself to a side little thing, something that I really loved to do, like making my little curly concoctions, and people were always asking me about it and I'm like, "Okay." In the back of my head, I'm always like, "Okay, I think could be something here." But you're scared. You're afraid. You're like, "What if this is all wrong? What if this is all in my head? Maybe my stuff is not that great." But in summer of 2018, I actually was ill, and going through that it helps you realize that life is short. I always had that voice saying, "Well, do it. You can do it. You can do it. You've got what it takes. You got what it takes."

So, I decided after that, "You know what? Life is short. And I don't want to wonder what if. I have to have faith and trust in God's plan. Trust in God's vision for me. If I have been given this vision for what I want to do and how I can help people and do so in a way that also helps the community heal," because that's another thing that's super important within the Black-Latino community, and within the Black community. There just needs to be healing when it comes to all that comes with being in the skin that we're in. I made that decision to finally let go, let go of the fear, just have faith, and jump, and give it all that I can give it.

I did not have fancy funding or fancy connections. I had a dollar and a dream, and of course my formulas, and I basically mightily morphed back into that little kid I was back in elementary school, hustling my candy bars and chips to make it happen. And here we are just a little bit over a year later and Bomba Curls is now available in Nordstrom. We're available of course direct to consumer and people are loving the product. Our customers are really, really just connecting with our message and happy to see themselves represented, and happy to have their stories be told.

Menendez: So, take me through from sort of the decision to leap to this moment. What were the actionable items? What were the first things you started to do to build this business?

Cordero: I had my formulas, but it was a matter of figuring out how do I go from my little kitchen hustle to scaling it and producing it? I always say that I am a proud alumni of Google University. Thank you, Google. Thank you, YouTube. Teaching myself all that I needed to know, just placing random phone calls to different places of, “Hey, how can I do this?” Or, “Hey, how can I do that?” Or, “Do you do this? Do you offer... You don’t? Well, who does? What is my brand?” You know, “What does it look like?” I know how I felt but how can I translate that feeling into something tangible? And then the business portion of the show I had experience with. Granted, it was in private security, but on the business front of things I had some experience to go on.

Menendez: You had initially imagined yourself doing this with a partner, and you very quickly realized that that was not a fit, and I wonder if you can talk us... Because I like partnerships. I like going into any project venture I do with a partner, because I like being iterative. I like having someone who holds me accountable. At the same time, I have had times where I’ve started projects with someone and realized midway through this is never gonna work. So, I would love to hear how you realized it and then how you also disentangled yourself from it.

Cordero: I had someone that kind of worked with me before and she was familiar with my work ethic, so she was like, “Okay. I’ll work with you because I know you don’t stop.” The only thing is that the energy, the vision, things have to align. And so, if you’re not on the same wavelength and there isn’t that alignment there, it’s not going to work. And I realized that we didn’t share the same vision and I wanted to make sure that I could honor the vision that I had for Bomba Curls in the best way possible. And then too it’s important that whoever it is that you work with live it, breathe it, and believe it as much as you do, and if they don’t-

Menendez: It’s critical. No, it doesn’t work otherwise.

Cordero: It doesn’t work. It doesn’t work. And I realized, “Okay, this person does not live it, doesn’t breathe it, doesn’t sleep.”

Menendez: You dedicate yourself to this business. You both figure out sort of what that first key product is going to be, you figure out how to package it, you launch it. How do you actually find your consumer?

Cordero: I am the consumer.

Menendez: And how do you make sure that that consumer is finding you?

Cordero: I am the consumer. I’m the Bomba Curls consumer. I’m the Chica Bomb. So, I think that gave me a leg up. I know the struggle. I know what it’s like to try to find what works for your hair, what doesn’t work for your hair, so I just spoke in a manner that other people were able to say, “Okay, see, she speaks my language. She gets it.”

Menendez: Where were you actually finding them?

Cordero: Heavy on Instagram. Going on our social media and connecting with customers, like our first week people were sending messages and I would just be having honest conversations with them about hair, and culture, and, “Yo, well, tell me about when you went natural and what was that like? Does your tía still say like ¡Ay muchacha! When you

are gonna fix your hair?” It was just a very honest connection and I think that that’s one of the reasons why Bomba has been able to develop the loyal community that we have.

Menendez: So, what do you do next?

Cordero: Hopefully, we’ll be able to grow Bomba, offer more products. I really, really love just making it easy for our community to embrace all that they are and look in the mirror and like what they see. Love what they see. And I love decolonizing the minds of a community that needs it. And I know that that’s the work that I’m doing, that’s the essence of the work that I’m doing, and it’s just continuing to do that, and continuing to break barriers, and continuing to show that beauty can look like more than just one thing. So, it’s just doing that and continuing to be honest on that journey.

Menendez: I’m so excited to watch you grow this.

Cordero: Thank you, thank you, thank you so much.

Menendez: Thank you, Lulu.

Cordero: This is so... This is a nice, honest conversation.

Menendez: Thank you for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you when you email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com), when you slide into our DMs on Instagram, when you tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe, follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you’re listening, and please, I know I ask this all the time, but do leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow.

**CITATION:**

Menendez, Alicia, host. “How Bomba Curls' Lulu Cordero Unfurled Her Natural Hair and Ambition” *Latina to Latina*, Lantigua Williams & Co., January 25, 2021. LatinaToLatina.com

Produced by:

