



Why Nicole Chavez Wants to Help You Cultivate Style Confidence

She built an impressive career in television costuming before a friendship with a budding actress led her to celebrity styling. She had no idea what she was doing, but she figured it out. Nicole shares the vision and planning that goes into those red carpet looks, and how we can each simplify our style while still having fun!

-
- Alicia Menendez: Nicole Chavez has styled some of the biggest names in Hollywood from her first client, Rachel Bilson, to stars like Kristen Bell and Scarlett Johansson. Now Nicole is drawing back the curtain on how she made the leap from costuming to celebrity styling, the role of intuition in her work and why she is on a mission to help everyone cultivate style confidence. Nicole, thank you so much for doing this.
- Nicole Chavez: Thank you for having me. This is exciting.
- Menendez: I love the way you describe your upbringing, which is working class, hippie parents in California. Can you give me a sense of what that childhood was like?
- Chavez: It was pretty perfect, I have to say. I don't have a lot of complaints. My family moved to an area called La Canada and I lived there my whole life. I was born there. And it was just a beautiful, cute little neighborhood to grow up in. This is so dating myself. But we just rode bikes, roller-skated, hung out with friends, came in when it was dark. Life was really simple then. And it was great.
- Menendez: Yeah, especially now that we're raising kids of our own, it's like that's the dream. Just throw them out in the street and have them come home in time for dinner. And it's hard to find now.
- Chavez: Yes.
- Menendez: The way you describe your mom reminds me of my own mom and myself to some degree, which is a not particularly ornate person, someone not super into style or to fashion. It's really your grandmother that's your big inspiration. Can you tell me about her?
- Chavez: Let me talk about my mom for a second, because it wasn't that she wasn't into fashion, but it just wasn't like a priority for her. So for her, it was just more about taking care of us and making sure that we were happy and my dad was happy, all of that. So fashion stuff was second rate. But my mom was an amazing caretaker and still is. And so when my grandmother got sick pretty early on in my life, she came to live with us and I'd always been very close to her, but that time in particular, we just had such a deep connection. I was like 5, 6, 7 years old and I would just lay with her all day and ask her questions and she would tell me about fashion and beauty and jewelry and she was pretty amazing, and still is.
- Menendez: Your own love of fashion, this is a thing you find young. It is clear that you love it. Can you tell me about the outfits you are putting together, the things that were drawing attention to you as a young person?

Chavez: Where I grew up was a predominantly White community. At that time, there wasn't a lot of diversity there. So I was definitely the most that I was aware of Hispanic person that was going to my school. I had dark, curly hair. Everyone had blonde hair, blue eyes. So it was definitely keeping up with their fashion. But at the same time, there was something very deep inside of me, that craved that just loud, tons of ruffles, color, pattern, print. If my mom and dad and grandmother used to take me down to Oliver Street and I would say, "I want all the dresses. I want all of them, all of them." I was obsessed with those really over the top little dresses for little girls. And I didn't know where... Because I didn't have a lot of Latina roots growing up. My dad, Hispanic. My grandmother was. But there was something about growing up in LA when my grandmother was raising my dad that it was almost like not ashamed of your roots, but you wanted to assimilate and be part of the community and not sort of stand out. So I never learned to speak Spanish and I didn't have a lot of Spanish roots to draw from. There's a lot of food and things like that in my house. So it's interesting that I naturally gravitated towards that type of fashion, and I still do. I love color. I love pattern. It's definitely so innate in who I am and how I style. It's interesting. It is part of who I am.

Menendez: You go to school. You study photography, but you keep sort of coming back to this idea of working with models and styling and it's like, it's easy to see in retrospect how it's right there in front of you. But it's not the most obvious path. And you have this conversation I think is really important in terms of understanding the trajectory of your career with a Disney executive who asks you, "What do you want to do?" So many young people have this moment where someone asks them what they want to do, and there can be this tendency, especially in our community, to demure and to not assert what it is you want. But you're crystal clear in that conversation and it sets you on the trajectory for the rest of your life.

Chavez: Completely. I stumbled into art through my high school. I had an amazing art teacher. I never thought that art was a career that I could pursue. She believed in me. It led me to my major in photography. I didn't know much about it in the sense of what I was going to do afterwards and how fashion was going to fold into that. And so when I graduated, I still was unclear what my next step was in terms of what type of job I wanted. I knew that I loved photography. I didn't love the math in photography, but I really loved the styling aspect, the behind the scenes, curating, casting models, just a lot of the creative side of it. So I took a little time off. Once I graduated college, I took a year and I worked for an interior designer, just still feeding that creative brain.

And that designer was working with a client who became a family friend. And it was one of those things where they needed a nanny. They needed a [inaudible 00:06:21]. So they were traveling. I started filling in for them. And yeah, Peter was really assertive with me and said, "I know you graduated. What's your next step? What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to work in movies. I want to do costumes and film and television." And I had no experience or any understanding really of what that meant, but I just said that's what I want to do. And so he said, "Okay, let me see if I know anybody that is looking for a production assistant." Turns out I got a meeting at Disney with a producer. So I go in, all giddy to go. And they're like, "Okay, if you can fly yourself out there and put yourself up, you have a job as a production assistant on this huge movie.

And I said, "I'm there. Done." Not even hesitation. I think I made, I don't know, a hundred dollars a day if that. And once taxes were taken out, I had very little to live on. And that job

led me back to Los Angeles and got me in the Costume Design Union. And really from there, it was just, you just start meeting people. You start networking. You get in with certain teams and the rest is history. I tell this to people all the time. If somebody cracks the door open a little bit, barge through and just go for it, it's such a great opportunity and not everybody gets that opportunity. So when you do, don't waste it. Make the best of it.

Menendez: Those opportunities lead you to a show that listeners who are my age will know and love, The OC. And what I think is important there is, shows come and go. And then there are shows that are phenoms, right? That all of a sudden, it is in the zeitgeist. Everyone's talking about it. Everyone knows the actors who are on the show. And The OC was that. The fashion on The OC was that. And for you, it represents this major moment because it's where you meet Rachel Bilson. You work together. Tell me about the conversations you were having that led you from, I'm styling you on the show in the form of a character to, there's an opportunity to style you, the person. And how then you differentiated between who she was on the show and who she was in the world.

Chavez: When I got the OC, they'd already shot the pilot. And how it works when you are in the costuming arena, there's different levels. There's shoppers, there's costumes, there's costume supervisors. There's costume designers. At the time, I was a costumer. So I was allowed to shop and be on set. That's what my union allowed me to do at that point in my career. So I had a lot of friends and we would just jump from show to show.

Menendez: So when you were a shopper, is it like you're given direction? Were they like, "This is what this character is"? Or did they tell you, "Go find a yellow cardigan"?

Chavez: Both. Sometimes it'll be really specific. And also as a shopper, you're shopping fabrics. You're going downtown, you're pulling leathers. You're coming back with all different leathers. I've worked on films where we make all the costumes from scratch, every single one. Then there's shows like the OC, where you're shopping or you're pulling from showroom. So they're all very different and your job is different every time, and your team is different. So my job was to be on set every day with the actors. I was in charge of making sure when we were on the day shooting that they were in the correct outfit. I would take continuity photos and I would just maintain their looks on set. And they were long hours. We're talking like five in the morning till 10 o'clock at night, Monday through Friday. And that is how I met Rachel. We would just be sitting around for hours and hours all day looking at magazines, talking about fashion.

And so as the show grew in popularity, there was more and more red carpet appearances that they needed to go to. So she asked me, like, hey, do you think that you could find a dress for me to wear to X, Y, and Z? And so it started very casually like that. And I would just cold call people. So I had no idea what I was doing. I would just ding, lingling like, "Hello Chanel. I'm just wondering if we can borrow this look for this event." And they said yes.

It took about a year for it to sort of sink in that that's what I was doing, because I was writing both. I was still working on the show for the first season, and I was helping Rachel out after hours. And I was really loving it. It was amazing because it was just me making my own... We were making creative decisions together, but it wasn't like a team. So it was fun in that sense. And she introduced me to Kristen Bell, who at the time was on Veronica Mars. And they were going to a lot of the same events. And she was like, "You need to meet my friend Nicole if you ever need help with styling." And that's what led to my second client. And that's when it hit me that, oh, this could be my job.

Menendez: I've worked with stylists a few times. I remember the first time that I did it, working in TV news. This woman, she was excellent. She came in, she looked in my closet. And she's like, "You own no pants?" And she was like, "Why do you not own any pants?" And I was like, "Oh, I don't know. I just don't like pants." And she looked at me and she very matter-of-factly with the love of a sister. She was like, "You're smaller on top than you are on the bottom. And you compensate for that by wearing a lot of skirts and dresses. Would you please trust me to put you in a pair of pants?"

And all of a sudden, I'm like crying in my closet because this thing that I have thought in my own mind for the past 30 years, I've never really talked about with anyone else. And bring up that story because there is a part of your work that is art and alchemy and business. And then there's a part of it also that I imagine is personal therapy. You've been with some of these girls from pre-baby, post-baby, single to married, 20s to 30s to 40s, and your relationship to your body changes. And then your relationship to clothes changes with it. And so I imagine that there's also a really emotional piece to the work that you do.

Chavez: I'm very, very blessed because the women that trust me to get them dressed and to select clothes for them, trust me. And so I would never want them to be in a situation that they ever felt uncomfortable. I can tell immediately, the body language, all of that is so obvious to me. And even if it looks amazing, maybe the best thing they've ever put on, if they're not feeling it, I can never sell it on the carpet. It will never translate. As an actor, you're putting yourself out there in a very vulnerable way. And when you have to do press, even though you're doing press for a TV show, film, whatever your project is, it's still you now, the person, out there promoting it. So yes, it's very layered. There's a lot of psychology that goes into it. I think because my intuition is so strong and that I really follow my gut and I feel things really strongly that I just stay in that head space and I don't overthink things and I just go with my internal gut.

Menendez: Teach me how to do that, Nicole, not just for fashion, like in life. It would be great to just stay in an intuitive space.

Chavez: As I've gotten older, I have to work at it more because there's more noise in my life now. The pandemic, as tough as that was, I really found ways to calm myself through meditation in the... If I get up early and I take care of myself first. It's like the analogy of putting your oxygen mask on first and then helping others. That's what I think of my meditation, and when I do it at 6:00 AM. Before it's quiet in my house, nobody's up. I get up. I do it. My mind is clear. I'm ready for the day. I'm not carrying anything from the night before. I come in anew. It's been a real game changer for me personally and professionally.

Menendez: So this period where you are traveling all over the world, you're going to fashion shows, you're getting all of these clients ready for red carpets, and then as you say, dot, dot, dot. Then I became a mom. What changed when you became a mom?

Chavez: Everything changed for me. One, I didn't know I could humanly love something or somebody so much, want to prioritize them in front of everything else you're doing. So that was hard because my work was my everything. I thought about it all the time. I dreamt about it. It was my whole entire world and universe. And so it was different to step back and become a mom and then nurture in a different way. Nurturing adults is different than nurturing children. It was a nice change. It was something that I needed. I had done a lot in my career at that point. And I was really kind of okay with slowing down a little bit.

Menendez: You are actively styling, but I also get the sense from your bio on your website that you are seeing this period as a bit of a transition into something bigger. Can you tell me about what has brought you to that moment and what it is you see for yourself moving forward?

Chavez: So again, during my early morning meditations, I also started doing a lot of manifesting and talking and writing about things that I still wanted to accomplish in my life. And I noticed that there was this theme that kept coming back, which was collaborations and working with other people and designers because as a stylist, it's just really me. I hire an assistant to come in and out, but it's kind of lonely, especially coming from television, a film, where you're part of a team all the time. So I was kind of yearning for that collab, which I've done along the years. But I wanted something a little bit more. And I also felt like the business was changing and the dynamics of styling were changing, the rates were changing. All these things were upside down during the pandemic and a little bit prior to the pandemic, things were shifting.

I wanted more control in my day, my day-to-day, not just being at the mercy of what my... Well, the pandemic showed me that lesson too. Okay, so there's no red carpets. Well, then I have no work. There's no commercials. Oh, I have no work. I got to figure out how am I still going to be creative? How do I get out there and still do what I love? And for me, it's been teaching. And I've found that I do it naturally all the time with my friends and my family. I love clothes. I love styling. I have a long history of doing it. So I have a lot of knowledge. I have a lot of information to share. I find I'm always sharing it. So why wouldn't I share it on a bigger scale? So that's where my website idea came from and shifting my Instagram a little bit to be less of a portfolio and more of what I'm creating or working on or what I'm interested in and wanted to share.

Menendez: Okay. Well, I want to selfishly ask you a question, which is, you say that your goal is to help everyone have an easy relationship to style. Where do we start? If there's someone who either wants to make a pivot, a tuneup, someone who's maybe never even really thought about this before, where do you start folks?

Chavez: I think the best thing to do is to figure out what your end goal is. So are you getting a new job and you want to have a new look. Or do you want to do a complete closet overhaul? Or your body has changed dramatically and you want to change with it? There's so many different things. I'm a visual person. And I think that looking at visual aids is very helpful. So I would suggest for someone to go on Pinterest or who, what, where. Go to somewhere, type in street style, whatever speaks to you. Do you like Paris street style? Do you like LA street style? Start gathering imagery that you are drawn to. And through that, make a little album in your phone and then look through it and start editing, what do you really love from that. And you'll start to see a thread. So you start deduce, "Oh, well, everything in here is a striped sweater. I must really love stripes."

Okay, maybe you're into French girl style. So maybe that's your vibe. So then you're like, okay, well, I'm going to study that a little bit more. What does that mean? What are the pieces that make a French girl chic? I can tell you, it's like a trench coat, a striped shirt, jeans, ballet flats. That kind of thing. So there's so many different ways you can go, but you have to figure out what it is that you are vibing. What's your story? What story do you want to tell?

Menendez: Nicole, thank you so much for doing this.

Chavez: Thank you. Thanks 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. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcast, Google podcast, Good Pods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why Nicole Chavez Wants to Help You Cultivate Style Confidence." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. March 13, 2023. LatinatoLatina.com.

Produced by:

