



Why Healthy Hood Chicago's Tanya Lozano Believes Wellness Requires Community

She grew up in a family of activists and led her first walk out as a high school student. Then she worked in city government and saw up close the need for community-based solutions. Now, motivated by Chicago's 20 year life expectancy gap, the non-profit founder and CEO is working to ensure that her community has what it needs to thrive.

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- Alicia Menendez: When Tanya Lozano learned that Chicago, her hometown, had the highest life expectancy gap in the country, she sprung into action. She combined her passion for sports, dance, and activism into a community organization that offers fitness and community health programming, Healthy Hood Chicago. Tanya and I talk about growing up in a family of outside agitators, her work inside city government, and why she believes community is critical wellbeing. Tanya, I'm so happy to see you. Thank you for doing this.
- Tanya Lozano: Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm so excited for this.
- Menendez: Tanya, you come from a family of activists. Can you tell me about them?
- Lozano: Yeah. So, my mother is Emma Lozano. She's also the sister of Rudy Lozano, who would be my uncle, are both internationally recognized immigration activists. I grew up in that kind of world, and my father, Reverend Slim Coleman, He was a member of the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther party, with chairman Fred Hampton. He was also a key person in the election of our first African American mayor here in Chicago, Harold Washington, and since then has done just incredible work all over the map in terms of social justice.
- Lozano: So those are my parents, and then, like I said, my uncle, Rudy Lozano was a key figure in bringing about the Black and Brown coalition that got mayor Harold Washington elected. He was somebody who was really fighting for unifying the Black and Brown communities for the sake of liberation, for the sake of social justice. I kind of have a legacy of family who has been in the movement for social justice.
- Menendez: What's the first act of community organizing that you do?
- Lozano: Because I grew up in it, it was just all around me all the time and I had to participate in it regardless. But I would say my first act of community organizing that I've ever done myself, in terms of being a leader, would be my freshman year of high school. That was at Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, which Jesuit is a Catholic school. So it was like a big deal, because nobody ever did anything like that there. I organized a walkout of my school to support the immigration marches at that time.
- Menendez: What did you learn from that experience?
- Lozano: Well, number one, that authorities are most likely not going to support you and they may even try to stop you from doing something different. But the most important thing that I

learned was that you got to do it anyway, because that's how we agitate cycles of thought, cycles of abuse, cycles of inequality, is that we have to become agitators.

Menendez: Because you pay a real consequence for organizing that walkout.

Lozano: Oh yeah, absolutely. I did not get accepted back into school the next year. And at that time, that was a big deal for me, because I was a basketball player and I was a freshman in a starting point guard position. I was in a Catholic school that had resources to help me get recruited and scouted so that I can continue on playing basketball. At that time, that was my goal in life, because I was a young person and I was an athlete. It was really tough.

Lozano: I went to an alternative school that did not have a basketball team, and so then I left and went to a public school to play basketball, because that again, that was my everything. And then, shifted again, back to the alternative school to learn of my own history, the history of the Puerto Rican diaspora and the Black history in America. I had only ever gone to schools in underserved communities, Black and Brown communities.

Lozano: Then going to college was a culture shock. I went to Naperville, Illinois, which is a suburb of Chicago, and it's the school itself, North Central College, at that time, I don't know what it is now, but at that time it was 92% white. There's Confederate flags hanging out of some of these giant homes while I'm walking around going from class to class, and just being amongst a student body that was just so different. It just, it took me out of my element. Then it also just put me in a state of depression.

Lozano: But I remember just going to classes and being the outspoken person of color in these classes. I was learning of a lot of things I had never been taught before and I was appreciative of that, but to hear people's opinions and to hear people's narratives on all of this stuff was mind blowing to me. I remember one of the conversations in my political education class was, we were talking about the bombs at Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The professor was asking us, "Do you think that this was justified to a degree because we became the most powerful country in the world after this?" Then I just watched as hands went up and spoke about how it was the overall good for our country, and not considering that people, and for their children for generations to come, were going to be affected by this nuclear weapon.

Lozano: It just was really crazy. We talk about ignorance on both sides. In my community, people say that we're ignorant, but then when I go to this affluent white community, I'm like, man, you're ignorant in some of the worst ways, like in terms of having empathy and learning what understanding is, and learning that you affect people with your actions. It was a lot for me. I didn't last very long in college.

Menendez: After college, you have a number of jobs. It actually feels like you kind of are really clear pretty early about the space that you want to exist in and the type of change that you want to activate. I'm very curious for you, coming from a family of outside agitators, about the decision to spend a few years in city government. I wonder if you can walk me through a time that government got it right, that government was able to deliver for people when it came to this idea of community health and community access.

Lozano: It's interesting, because I feel like there are systems that need to change in order for real progress to happen. I would say, I know that there has been certain elected officials who go in there and they're true champions of the people's causes and issues, but for me, I don't think I've seen a time where government has gotten it right. So many of the decisions that get made in government have big pharma in mind, have profit in mind, and especially

when it comes to how they distribute resources to community organizations who think that they can get it right and are getting it right to a degree already.

Lozano: But it's really about us doing it for ourselves first, or at least starting to design it already before the government can get involved with their voice. We need to be given ours first. I just don't see that there are structures and systems in place in this government that exist like that.

Lozano: I try not to focus so much on city government or state, federal government, especially because I worked for city government and I know how that works. It's a very bureaucratic process and it lacks a ton of humanity. I think it's important for us, sometimes to stop focusing so hard on what they are and are not doing and really focus on what do we really want? What is our demands? What are the things that we need to work on so that we can create a space for them to play a role in it? Otherwise they design what we're doing, and then we're just playing a role in what their plan is.

Menendez: 2014 you found Healthy Hood Chicago. What was the gap, or the void in services that you had identified?

Lozano: The data comes out, right? Dr. David Ansel writes this book called The Death Gap that says in Chicago there is the largest life expectancy gap that exists between communities of color and affluent communities. We know that Chicago is not the poorest city or lacks the most resources. It's one of the biggest cities in the country, right? But it's because of how segregated we are, and that is a question of race. If people always say racism doesn't exist, but the healthcare system really exposes how racial inequality does exist within our systems and structures of this country. When that data came out, especially being that I'm from Chicago and I live in one of these communities that are affected by this life expectancy gap, it just, it felt like we needed to figure out something for ourselves.

Lozano: What was it that was causing this life expectancy gap? These five diseases are not death sentences. They are completely preventable, but because of the way the healthcare system is structured, it's structured to treat people after they get sick. So in order to make profit, people need to be sick. Then they really have no motive to help in preventing sickness. So we had to do that for ourselves. Going from, like I said, Black and Brown communities my whole life to an affluent white community and seeing the difference in how the communities prioritize their health, how they have the space and the access to do so, how their food is healthier and all of these different things, I just, for me, it was like, I could not unsee it. I could not unknow it. I had to bring it back to my community, like this is why they live longer.

Lozano: It's not that we can't do this for ourselves, but we just don't have a structure of communication and education process that we're teaching that to ourselves as a community. That's why Healthy Hood was born. We decided that we wanted to be an example and be a place that wasn't just a physical brick and mortar place for people to come and get it, but that would be a spark to, a fire of what is a movement that is going to shift the culture for our community and really get people to prioritize their health.

Menendez: There's an expression you use in your bio on LinkedIn that I want you to explain to me. You call yourself a community health culture jammer. What does that mean?

Lozano: That's changed, by the way. It's funny that it's on LinkedIn.

Menendez: Update your LinkedIn, Tanya.

Lozano: I need to, I actually prefer the term community architect, and that is because I feel like when I started Healthy Hood and I started my career in activism, at least publicly, it was very health and wellness heavy based. It still very much is, but it has become more of a comprehensive holistic approach to the inequality that exists in Black and Brown communities. I call myself a community architect, because I've been able to build communities, bring about coalitions so that those communities can communicate with each other so that we can build more people power to create the demand that we want equality. I've built several communities, right? When I say I'm an architect, it's not that I'm building buildings, but I'm building these communities.

Lozano: One of them is the Get Your Mind Right community, which is a collective of mental health professionals or healers, self-proclaimed healers. They meet as a collective. They give free resources to the community. I've also built, obviously, the Healthy Hood Fitness and Wellness community that teaches dance and fitness classes. I've built a collective of artists that I go to that are a part of the movement and make sure that the art is representative of what's going on in the movements. So really just developing collectives and then bringing them together as a coalition so that there's some kind of communication. The best part about that is that I help get them built, but the structure itself holds itself together. So, it's not really based on me. It's based on a idea, on a message, which is social justice.

Menendez: I asked you to talk about your time in government and a time when you saw government get it right. Now, I want to ask you the same question about the work that you do. Can you tell me even about a single person you have worked with where you feel that your theory of change has impacted their lives in a real and meaningful way?

Lozano: I would say my partner, Seobia Rivers is a great example. Seobia just is this dynamite fitness instructor. She's probably one of the best in Chicago, and she's the co-founder of Healthy Hood Chicago. When I met Seobia, she was going to move up in the fitness industry and after we connected and had some real serious conversations about what it was like, because at the time I was a personal trainer as well, and what it was like to be a personal trainer or just in the realm of fitness as a woman of color, it was that the only way we were going to actually make a living off of our craft was if we were serving in affluent communities, gyms, high end fitness studios. If we were actually going to get paid our value and sometimes not even that, but that was where the profitable infrastructure was in place, right? In order to make a living, we had to go there.

Lozano: It was a frustrating experience for both of us as women of color, because we come from communities that are devastated and disproportionately affected by disease and illness, especially these preventable ones like diabetes and hypertension that ultimately will be prevented if they lived healthier lifestyles. And we knew how to guide people into those healthy lifestyles, but we couldn't serve our own community because we couldn't make any money doing it. It was frustrating. So we really came together and said, "We want to change this. I want to serve my own people, because I know they need me." We connected on that level, and I mean since then, both of us have expanded our consciousness in terms of what health and wellness looks like for Black and Brown communities together, and I've watched her become this extremely revolutionary woman who can speak so beautifully about the disparities that exist, but more importantly, about the things that we can do to change that. She's definitely changed a lot of how she lives her life and how she processes the things that she does.

Menendez: How about the people who've come through your doors? How about the people who've taken a fitness class or a dance class and have benefited from that work?

Lozano: I think the biggest thing for the community members that they get from us is political education. That really creates a level of, I'm a part of something bigger. My trauma and my experiences as a Black and Brown person are not specific to me, but it is a collective experience, and I can share with my community that we're going through this, but we're going through it together. If we start to build with each other, then we can change that for ourselves in the next generation.

Lozano: It's not so much just a fitness class. You know what I'm saying? It's really that it's a community space that accepts you for every part of who you are, no matter what that looks like, no matter what that feels like. And even sometimes those are bad. There's bad parts of our community, right? Sore spots that are reflection of systemic racism, but sore spots nonetheless that exist, like domestic violence, like gun violence, that they become exposed because we're in community and now we can address them. That's what our people get. That's a safe space where they feel like they actually are a part of it and they're not just going to receive goods and resources. They're not just going to get charity, but they're really becoming a part of a community that's going to address the overall issues of their community.

Menendez: When you started Healthy Hood Chicago, what kind of budget were you working with? How much money did you need to operate it for that first year?

Lozano: That very first year, we had no money. No money, but I had a space. I had access to a space. I probably spent about, I would say maybe \$4,000 that year of my own money to get a few little equipment based things for fitness classes and stuff like that. But the majority of how I started the organization was just by providing the skills that I had as a person, which was that I was a fitness instructor, I was a Zumba instructor, and I could teach that as long as I had a space that was open to me inviting community members there.

Menendez: That's amazing. At what point do you say to yourself, I'm not going to be able to grow and have the impact I want to have if I am relying exclusively on my time and my skills?

Lozano: It really came with a better understanding of what the mission was for Healthy Hood. It wasn't until I realized, oh my God, this is a lot more serious than I was making it in the beginning, which was that I just saw that there needed to be fitness classes and I provided them. It was that we needed to make this more comprehensive and more holistic, and in order to do that, I needed people to help. I needed other people who were just as passionate about this, and if they weren't yet, then it was my job to inspire them. So the team grew quickly. I talk a lot, and I pride myself on making relationships because I value them. As I was making relationships, I was bringing people in to give some of their services.

Lozano: Then also, you know how it is when you're building a business. You really don't know a lot. Everything is so new. I would think about like getting my 501(c)(3) and that process, I could have never done that alone. I needed somebody who knew how to deal with grants, because once you get a grant, it's a lot of work after you get those things. You got to report on that stuff. I can't do that stuff myself. Now, there's other people who specialize in these other things. You just have to make sure those people understand the mission and are just as passionate about it, because you know that they're going to work with integrity.

Menendez: Do you have a sense of what you want to do next?

Lozano: I do. I want the legacy of Healthy Hood Chicago to be that we created an alternative healthcare system by people of color, for people of color. And because I think it's time for us to recognize that we have knowledge and skills that date back to Indigenous times to help prevent us from getting sick in the first place, but also to treat sickness in our own community. We now have doctors and nurses of color who are trained in Western medicine and there is a way for us to really make sure that we're taking care of ourselves and taking care of each other. We just need to practice creating systems and structures for us to make sure that those resources that we naturally have and that we've gained and all of these generations of being a diaspora people, gets distributed back into our own neighborhoods so our people don't continue to get sick, that we can really start from there because I think health and wellness is the best umbrella when we talk about issues of social justice.

Menendez: Tonya, thank you so much for doing this. I appreciate you.

Lozano: Absolutely. Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Thank you as always for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua, and me Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuel Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. email us hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram. Tweet us at Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, Latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember, please subscribe or follow us on Apple podcast, Google Podcast, Good Pods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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