

A full-page photograph of Cardi B performing on stage. She has long, straight blonde hair and is wearing a vibrant red, fringed jacket over a matching skirt. She is holding a gold microphone to her mouth with her right hand and gesturing with her left hand, which is adorned with multiple rings. She is also wearing large gold hoop earrings. The background is a dark, textured wall with a vertical blue and red light strip behind her.

GIANTS of
RAP and
HIP-HOP

CARDI B

Stuart A. Kallen



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BORN IN THE BRONX

Cardi B was born Belcalis Marlenis Almánzar in the Bronx borough of New York City on October 11, 1992. Her father, Carlos Almánzar, immigrated to New York from the Dominican Republic and found work as a taxi driver. Cardi's mother, who has African and Spanish heritage, was born in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago; she worked as a cashier. Although Cardi will rap about every subject—from working as a stripper to the most intimate details of her personal life—she refuses to reveal her mother's name in order to protect her identity. Cardi B has a younger sister, Hennessy Carolina Almánzar, who was born in 1995. Soon after Hennessy was born, their parents divorced. Their mother eventually remarried and Cardi and Hennessy grew up with a stepfather, but they also saw their father on a regular basis.


It was Carlos who both directly and indirectly influenced the naming of his daughters. According to Hennessy, Carlos named her after his favorite brand of French cognac. At some point in their childhood, friends picked up on the liquor theme and began calling Belcalis by the nickname Bacardi (after a brand of Cuban rum). As Cardi explains, “My sister's name is Hennessy, so everybody used to be like ‘Bacardi’ to me. Then I shortened it to Cardi B. The ‘B’ stands for whatever, depending on the day . . . beautiful or bully. . . . No one calls me Belcalis except for my family, my mother and my daddy.”⁵

While Cardi went on to become a rap superstar, Hennessy studied at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. Known for her unusual fashion sense, Hennessy was working to launch her own clothing line in 2019.

A Tough Neighborhood

Cardi and her family lived in Highbridge, a Latino neighborhood in the South Bronx. Because their mother worked two jobs, Cardi and Hennessy often lived with their grandmother, Esperanza Almánzar, in Manhattan's Washington Heights neighborhood. Although Cardi maintains a close relationship with Esperanza, she blames her grandmother for her strong accent. Cardi's parents both spoke Spanish; her father is not fluent in English, and Cardi says her mother speaks "broken" English. Cardi's first language was Spanish, and though she learned to speak English fluently as a young girl, she has a slight Spanish accent. Added to that is the strong New York accent she picked up from her grandmother. This accent is noted for its rounded vowels and elongated consonants, as Cardi explains: "I don't got the best English in the world. . . . I will say, 'turning you awahn,' not 'turning you on.' . . . [Or I'll say] get awhff me. . . . It's a really bad pet peeve of mine. I can't help it."⁶

Washington Heights was viewed as a better neighborhood than the South Bronx. Even though the South Bronx was undergoing extensive renovation during the second half of the 1990s, it was still considered a tough area with a legacy of poverty and violence. Cardi went to school in Washington Heights until she was eleven. When she started sixth grade in the South Bronx, she says she was unaccustomed to how much everyone cursed. And all the girls wanted to fight her. By the time she was in middle school, Cardi says she just accepted that this was normal—she had to defend herself every day at school.



"I don't got the best English in the world. . . . It's a really bad pet peeve of mine."⁶

—Cardi B

Cardi's Strict Mom

Cardi was an eyewitness to violence when she was thirteen. She was driving in a van with Hennessy and her father when a man fell in front of the vehicle. Cardi screamed that her father had hit the man. But when they got out of the van to help him, they discov-



Cardi (left) poses with her younger sister, Hennessy (right), at the 60th Grammy Awards in 2018. Hennessy is a fashion designer.

ered he had been shot in the head—apparently a victim of gang violence. Cardi’s takeaway from the shooting incident was not what might be expected. Rather than thinking she should avoid gangs, she saw the man’s death as just another normal part of daily life. She also noticed that the most popular kids in her school were gang members, and she wanted to hang out with them.

Cardi was attracted to gangs because she believed they might provide a sense of security that was lacking at home. She saw her mother working extremely hard at two jobs, but her family continued to struggle. This made her realize early on that life could be full of disappointments. As Cardi said in 2016, “You know when you’re a kid, it’s like, ‘Oh my god, I want to be an astronaut!’ or

like ‘Oh my gosh, I want to be an actor.’ But then when you’re in high school reality kicks in.”⁷

Cardi’s reality included a very stern mother who severely limited her social life—including prohibiting her daughter from going on sleepovers with friends. And Cardi was afraid to disobey, saying she was always more afraid of her mom than the gang-bangers at school. While Cardi’s mom imposed restrictions to keep her daughter from joining a gang, she had another reason to be protective: Cardi’s health was fragile. She suffered from chronic asthma; after a severe attack, she might end up in the hospital for two weeks or more. At home, Cardi used a breathing apparatus called a nebulizer machine, which delivered medicine to her lungs to help her breathe. However, the medicine gave her tremors. Cardi later recalled, “My mom used to cry a lot be-



Cardi grew up in the South Bronx (pictured in the 1990s) in New York City. The area was impoverished and had a high crime rate.

cause she used to be scared that I would fall asleep and die of an asthma attack. . . . People used to tell my mom, ‘She’s not going to make it.’”⁸

When laid up after an asthma attack, Cardi had plenty of time to watch television. Her favorite show was *That’s So Raven*, which featured an African American teenager, Raven Baxter, who had psychic abilities and a talent for fashion design. Cardi identified with the lead character. While all of her friends wore the latest fashions, Cardi dressed in hot pink and purple like Raven.

“My mom used to cry a lot because she used to be scared that I would fall asleep and die of an asthma attack.”⁸

—Cardi B

A Good Student Gone Bad

Cardi’s hours in front of the television led her to develop a love for performing. This inspired her to attend Renaissance High School for Music Theater & Technology, which is affiliated with the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Lincoln Center is home to a number of world-renowned performing arts organizations, including the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, Jazz at Lincoln Center, and the New York City Ballet. Students at Renaissance High attend performances at the Lincoln Center and at professional theater productions in New York’s famed Broadway district.

Cardi says her mother pushed her to study hard and do her homework. Her teachers also encouraged her, telling her she was smart and had the potential to achieve her dreams. Cardi says she always raised her hand in class, was outspoken with her opinions, and participated in every class activity. Cardi also loved reading, and she says her favorite books were *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. Another favorite, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, is about the hip-hop-loving daughter of a drug kingpin in Brooklyn. It was written by rapper and political activist Sister Souljah. Cardi describes *The Coldest Winter Ever* as “a hood book, but it’s really

good. The main character is like my alter ego. She is a bad girl. I like a bit of bad-girl [stuff].”⁹

With her bad-girl attitude, Cardi was the class clown who often teased people for fun. But her outgoing personality made her a standout performer in the musical plays staged at Renaissance High. Despite her success at school, she felt torn between school and a need to rebel against her mother’s restrictions. This led her to attend what she calls hooky parties—afternoon gatherings in friends’ apartments when parents were not present.

The parties took precedence over school, and Cardi’s grades slumped. She was expelled from Renaissance High when she was sixteen. She later said she chose her friends over her education. By that time, many of her friends were members of the notorious East Coast Bloods street gang, also known as the Brims. As Cardi later recalled, “My mom tried to stop me from all of that, but I still did it. I joined a gang. If she had let me out as often as I wanted to, I probably would be dead or got my face cut up.”¹⁰

Cardi does not resent her mother’s attempts to prevent her from going down the wrong path. Most of her high school friends ended up in jail or became teen mothers with limited options in life. Although Cardi resented her mother’s tough love when she was growing up, today she credits it for her success. She has even remarked that she will follow her mom’s example when raising her daughter: “I’m going to be very strict. Like, you can *have* whatever you want, but you can’t *do* whatever you want.”¹¹

Becoming a Stripper

When Cardi was kicked out of high school, she did not tell her mother. While pretending to go to school, she spent her days hanging out with her friends. Her mother discovered the ruse and kicked Cardi out of the house. Cardi got a full-time job working the late-night shift at a small grocery store called the Amish Market, where she made \$250 a week. She also took courses at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, located down the street from the market. Cardi studied history,

Cardi Comments on Gang Life

Cardi B joined the East Coast Bloods street gang when she was sixteen. Years later, in a 2018 interview with *GQ* magazine, she talked about the negative aspects of gang life:

One thing I could say, you could ask any gang member: Being in a gang don't make you not *one dollar*. And I know for a fact every gang member, he asking himself, "Why did I turn this?" Sometimes it's almost like a fraternity, a sorority. Sometimes it's like that. And sometimes I see people that's in the same gang kill each other. So sometimes there is no loyalty. Sometimes you gotta do certain things to get higher [in the organization], to get higher and higher. You're doing all of that and you not making money off of it. That's why I don't talk about it much. Because I wouldn't want a young person, a young girl, to think it's okay to join it. . . . The person that I'm under [in the gang], she would tell you, "Don't join a gang." It's not about violence. It's just like [a fraternity]—it doesn't make your money. It doesn't make your money.

Quoted in Caity Weaver, "Cardi B's Money Moves," *GQ*, April 9, 2018. www.gq.com.

political science, and French. The struggle to balance work and school was too much, however, and she dropped out of college after a few semesters.

Cardi's life was complicated by her domestic situation. Her living arrangement was far from ideal. She and her boyfriend at the time were living with his mother. As Cardi recalls, "There was two pit bulls in that house, and I had asthma. There was bed-bugs, too. On top of that, I felt like my . . . boyfriend was cheating on me, but it was like even if he was cheating on me, I still can't leave because—where was I gonna go?"¹² Cardi often complained to the market manager, saying she could not afford her own apartment with her low salary. The manager suggested she

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Important Events in the Life of Cardi B

1992

Cardi B is born Belcalis Marlenis Almánzar in the Bronx, New York, on October 11.

1995

Cardi B's sister, Hennessy, is born.

1998

Cardi B drops out of high school.

2011

Cardi B begins her career as a stripper.

2013

Cardi B begins posting humorous videos on Instagram.

2014

Cardi B has around 1 million Instagram followers.

2015

Cardi B performs at a strip club for the last time on her twenty-third birthday; she is cast to appear on the reality television show *Love & Hip-Hop: New York*.

2016

Cardi B releases her first mixtape, *Gangsta Bitch Music, Vol. 1*.

2017

Her breakout single "Bodak Yellow (Money Moves)" hits number one on the charts.

2018

Cardi B releases her hit album *Invasion of Privacy*. Cardi B gives birth to a daughter, Kulture Kiari Cephus, on July 11.

2019

Cardi B appears as a judge on the Netflix hip-hop talent search show *Rhythm + Flow*; she interviews senator and Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders.

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