

PROFESSIONAL
TROUBLEMAKER
with LUVVIE AJAYI JONES

SEASON 5, EPISODE 1

TAKE THE LEAP

So at 5 PM, I scheduled an email that landed in their inbox at 9 AM the next day, saying thank you for the opportunity. Yesterday was my first and last day. That is the point where I finally was like, you know what? I need to run my own company.

Part of what comes with being a Professional Troublemaker is telling the truth. And this season of Professional Troublemaker Podcast is about telling the hard truth about entrepreneurship and running a business. How it can be trash, how it can be rewarding, and how it will test you, trigger you, traumatize you, how it can bring you freedom, expansion, and community.

I'm your host, Luvvie Ajayi Jones, and I'm a four time New York Times best selling author, noted speaker, and book advisor who thrives at the intersection of culture, business, and leadership. I've been running my own company for 14 years. So let's talk about some of the things we only say to ourselves about entrepreneurship or things we only say in our group chats or to our friends.

Let's bring entrepreneurship to this red table and drag it for filth. We going to break it down to build it back up and let's just drop it all down to the floor and pick it up because 2023, I thought I was going to lose my business and go bankrupt. It stressed me out to the point where there was one week where I didn't get out of bed and it made me lose a lot of faith in humans. It made me lose trust in myself and it made me question what I was doing it all for. Like, I felt like I girl boss too hard.

Lady of leisure me, please. But I'll get to the specifics of that later. First, I want to tell you how I even got here. Running a seven figure company because it wasn't the original plan. Like being an entrepreneur was not the goal when I was growing up. So let me tell you more about my origin story and kind of how all this came to be.

So growing up, I thought I wanted to be a doctor, like, you know, being the good Nigerian girl that I was, the goal was for me to help people. And I thought being a doctor was the way to do that. So when I started college at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, my major was psychology pre med.

And I went in with the idea that I would get my degree in psychology, but then I'd end up in med school. Well, freshman year. I ended up taking chemistry and even though I tried, even though I studied, even though I went to class all the time, at the end of the semester, my grade was a D and it was like, Dr. Dream is dead. And I instantly was like, you know what? I don't think I want to be a doctor. I don't even like hospitals. So I literally went and dropped the pre med piece. I still love psychology. I was still really interested in it. So I was like, you know what? I'll just do that then. that same semester.

I got peer pressure into starting a blog because my friends were like, Oh, we're starting a web blog. That's what it was called back then. And I was like, all right, cool. I'm gonna start one too. And the blog was basically, Documenting my undergrad life and what I was dealing with on campus and the D I was getting that I clearly should have been studying for and the cool thing is the blog that I didn't expect to do much, like end up getting people's attention.

Fun fact, I actually ended up getting hired to be an advice columnist for the school paper by my friend Amara, who was the first black editor in chief that the school's newspaper ever had in its 150 year history. So she was like, I want to give you an advice column, shout out to nepotism. Okay. I'm a fan of it, especially when it comes to black people being, you know, hooking each other up, so yeah, that's how I started blogging.

When I graduated with my degree in psychology. I actually did not end up applying for grad school immediately. I started working as a marketing coordinator for a nonprofit because I also fell in love with marketing while I was in school. I got a bunch of internships. I was like, Oh, this is really fun.

And I think I'm good at it. So nine to five, I would go to work. as a marketing coordinator and then I would come home and blog and my blog started getting more and more attention and more people started reading it and in 2009 won its first award and it was for a best humor blog in the black web blog awards.

Now that blog AwesomelyLuvvie.com still exists by the way. I still have AwesomelyLuvvie.com y'all can go y'all can read. My evolution as a thinker, as a writer, as a human being. you know, blogging wasn't paying me back then. It

was considered playing on the internet. So my full time job was paying my bills, but then blogging was really where my passion was.

So I can tell y'all, I used to be at work blogging. Okay. Well, let's just fast forward. April, 2010, I got laid off. To be quite honest, I feel like I got fired. And they had all the rights to, because I was at work blogging. You know, I was probably being a trash employee. But they laid me off, you know, which, they did me a great favor.

I did not take that as a sign to now run my own business. I still did not believe entrepreneurship was for me. I wanted certainty of regular paychecks. And to be quite honest, it was not something that was on my vision board. I was just like, okay, cool. I got laid off. I just need to apply for more jobs.

And while I'm looking for more jobs. I will do marketing for other blogs and help them build their websites. Cause you know, I'm going to hustle. I always find the hustle. So I was applying for marketing coordinator jobs, but I was still making money on the side, doing freelancing and consulting.

Literally, I taught myself how to write code. So I was creating websites for fellow bloggers. I was helping small organizations do social media strategy. At this point, I even started my own nonprofit. I was doing a lot. But my writing was consistent. I would be blogging about, you know, what was happening in the world.

I'd be blogging about television. I'd be writing about social justice and politics. I'd be keen about why pink starburst is the best and yellow is the one you give to the person you don't really like. So my website became the place where people would come to hear. What they were thinking, but dare not to say.

AwesomelyLuvvie.com was a place where, yeah, one day you might come and laugh about why I hate kale. and then the day after that, you might read a blog post on the stages of injustice against Black people. And then you might come back on later and then read a scandal recap. So it became this place where people built community, and we all laughed, and we thought, and we gave our opinions.

AwesomelyLuvvie.com. Yet and still I did not think writing or entrepreneurship was a mission probably until 2012 Mind you, this is two years after I got laid off. I did not have another full time job. I was actually working for myself already, but I think I fought it because the uncertainty of Entrepreneurship is real without a blueprint.

I was like, how am I gonna do this? And I think we often talk about It's hard to be it if you can't see it. For me, I thought about entrepreneurs as people who did these grand scale companies like Facebook, right? Mark Zuckerberg was an entrepreneur to me, so I didn't realize what it could look like in the way I did it.

So again, 2012 happened, big year. What happened that year is Scandal started and I ended up in an event where Shonda Rhimes was getting an award. Kerry Washington presented her the award and said, you know, in a month we have this show coming out called Scandal. And I was like, oh. So then when Scandal started, I fell in love with it and I started recapping it.

And my Scandal recaps started becoming the thing that Everybody started reading. It's like you watch Scandal on Thursday nights and then Friday morning, you will come in AwesomelyLuvvie.com and read a 3000 word recap where even if you miss the show, you got all the details, everything that was important.

And my scandal recaps took off and it really brought eyes onto my blog. And I remember finally, I got hired to work for a company. I was hired to do marketing for a global. Food brand. And I went in there the first day and **I was working on a deck by like 11 AM and by like noon, I felt like the walls were closing in on me.**

It felt like, Oh my God, it was uncomfortable. It was physically uncomfortable. And I remember being like, yeah, nah, I'm going to have to actually make this work for myself thing work because this is clearly not where I belong anymore. So at 5 PM. I scheduled an email that landed in their inbox at 9 AM the next day saying thank you for the opportunity. Yesterday was my first and last day. That is the point where I finally was like, you know what? I need to run my own company and I need to run my own business and I need to take seriously this writing, this speaking that I'm doing, this teaching that I'm doing.

This is natural company. That is the point. And so it took me over two years to do that. So. Yeah, I started running my company for real for real. I would say in 2012. It is now 2024. A lot has happened. let me keep telling you the story. So I keep blogging. I'm speaking now like I'm getting hired to speak at different conferences.

I'm doing a lot of projects and partnerships. I'm making decent money. My last paycheck with company is I was making 35,000 in the year as a full time marketing coordinator. So I was like, as long as I can make more than that, I'm

doing all right. between all those different things, I ended up making more than that.

And in 2014, I remember I woke up one day and there were a bunch of messages from my audience and people were like, Hey, we just read something. That didn't have your name on it, but it sounded like you. So I go I check it out and it's this University website like a journalism website and somebody had written a piece That actually plagiarized me did not give me any credit and my audience had peeped it and they snitched and I remember I went on a Ranting rampage across social media where I dragged this dude up and down like yo How you gonna use my words and you're not gonna tell me, You know, give me credit y'all.

I dragged him so bad. I actually had to go take a nap because I was so tired. Whatever I had to do that day. I ain't do so when I woke up from my nap I had an email from the guy who was like, hey I've been seeing your messages and your tweets and people have been tagging me. I'm so sorry I didn't know I wasn't supposed to do that. So I remember I went to Twitter and I said, is there not a limited edition handbook on how not to be a terrible human being?

And I pressed publish on that tweet and it's like a light bulb blew up on top of my head where I was like, Oh snap, that's the book I need to write. I need to write that book, the limited edition handbook on how not to be a terrible human being. And that's when I got the idea for my first book. I'm Judging You: The Do Better Manual a few months later I got an email from an agent a book agent who's like I've been reading your blog for years There's a book in you and I was like funny that you said that I actually have my book idea So I signed with that agent.

I wrote my book proposal in a couple of weeks. In February 2015 we started sending my book proposal out To publishers. What also happened February, 2015, Issa Rae's Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl, the book came out. So literally the week that Issa's book came out, my book was being shopped out to publishers.

again, I'm at this point, I don't have as big of a platform as people would imagine. I had an audience that was really dedicated. I had people who trusted my work and my name. I had a good network that cultivated over years of just showing up and being excellent. But when my book was coming up, a bunch of the editors were like, Hmm, I don't know if this book is going to sell.

I don't know if you're a blogger, you're not famous. Also, will bloggers actually be able to write books that's actually gonna sell, especially a black blogger? Y'all, my book got declined by 11 editors. They thought it was too risky and only one editor said, yes, we want it. And I signed with Macmillan, Henry Holt, my first book deal in March, 2015.

And I knew that my mission was to make it. So another black woman would walk into publishers and be taken more seriously. So I was like, yo, this book, I got to kill it. It needs to do so well because I wanted to open doors. And that is how I put, I'm Judging You on my back. And I was like, I'm gonna work on all my stuff.

I'm gonna create the best marketing plan I've ever created. And I'm gonna leverage my whole network and do what it can. So this book can hit the times list because if it does, it will change the game. So September, 2016, the book came out, I'm judging you. And it instantly hit the times list. And not just that, it went above and beyond any type of sales that they were expecting from the book.

Yo instantly changed my life open doors that I didn't even think existed and the fact that I could say I was a New York Times bestseller Also strengthened my credentials as a CEO, as somebody who's running a company. And at this point, I only had an assistant. I didn't have a team. I had an assistant, but 2016, when I hit the times list, I was able to get representation, so I started being represented by Andrea Nelson Meigs at ICM.

She's now at UTA. I'm at UTA with her too, but literally hitting the times list changed. So much for me. It allowed me to be taken seriously in a way that I hadn't before. And it also gave me the confidence to understand that, listen, I can do the things that I put my mind to even the hardest things, because that is a tough task.

First time author who did not have a massive machine behind her, who did not have a massive budget to market it. And I ended up hitting the list at number five. That was epic, epic, epic. And honestly, it also allowed me to retire my mother. It was a significant accomplishment that went beyond just the bragging rights of, Oh, I'm on the times list.

It now also allowed, I'm judging you to be used in other people's book proposals. And honestly, my goal of people being taken more seriously because of my work happened. People started putting, I'm judging you in their book

proposals. And I know people got. Giant checks because of that book. And that makes me really proud.

And then 2017, I came out with the Ted, I did a Ted talk. It came out December, 2017. It went viral. It had a million views in a month. That also changed my life. I started really being invited to speak all over the world. My company, Awe Luv Media is a company that creates content to make people think critically, feel joy, and compel them to take action that would transform the world and leave it better than they found it.

So throughout the years, I had many of these moments that were catalyst moments that pushed the company. Onward and upward in ways that blew my mind. So I was like, started slowly building my team. I started slowly getting it really to become a company that wasn't just about me and what I was putting out every day.

And my book started enabling that. So in 2021, my second book, professional troublemaker, the fear fighter manual came out. Hit the times list instantly had me geeked because I was like, great. Now I know that was not a fluke. The 50 page marketing strategy that I came up with. It works. The cheat codes that I have now, it works.

The formula that I know works for me actually can be replicated. And that came out in the middle of the pandemic, right? Another time where nobody knew how business was going to go. We were all nervous, but I will tell you my business transformed and soared during the pandemic. my speaking picked up.

There was one day where I actually had two speaking engagements from my house. Okay. I was in my pajamas with a blazer and I had two speaking engagements. So yeah, over the years, my company has transformed. And then I looked up one day and I had a team. I had seven people that I was responsible for full time, salaried.

It became less about how much money do I need to live and became more about how can I make sure I'm making payroll? yeah, that is the cliff notes version of how we got to where we got to today, how my company started, how I became an entrepreneur. So I am a failed doctor who became an entrepreneur by accident and God's plans.

And 14 years later, And a lot of grace and a lot of mistakes and a lot of blessings. I'm over here still learning hard lessons and trying to make it work this season. I plan on digging into the specifics of why 2023 was really hard. I

want us to talk about how being a CEO and being a business owner should require you to also go to therapy because it will trigger you in ways that you don't even realize you have triggers around.

I want us to talk about, how do you build a team that's sustainable and foundations and systems that can actually work without you. I want to talk about some of the top mistakes that I've made that I had to pivot from. I'm going to be interviewing certain people who also run in their own business, who I deeply respect to bring their perspective to the table also on.

All the lessons they've learned, cause I'm telling you the tussle is real. I am surrounded by other entrepreneurs and I'm telling you we are all in the same struggle. So I'm like, clearly there's this, this collective lesson that we're learning at the same time. And. One of the things that I'm also trying to work on is how do we run a business with an abundance mindset, even during the seasons when revenue might not be as great.

So yeah I'm excited for the season of professional troublemaker next episode, y'all I'm gonna tell you what happened in 2023. I'm gonna tell you how I ended up firing my whole team and basically starting from scratch. How? Man, it was tough. and I was doing all of that while launching my first children's book, Little Troublemaker Makes a Mess.

I was firing people while I was getting off a stage from doing press. so yeah, this next episode is gonna be good. I mean this whole season is gonna be good. So tune in, tune in. And y'all, by the way, I'll see you. I'm probably going to have some ads this season because one of the things I also learned last year is I do not have to sacrifice my pockets as I aim to serve people.

Somebody got to pay for these studio sessions, editing and whatnot, but as always, you know, I stand by whatever I bring to the table. So if I'm vouching for it, I actually like it. So you ain't got to worry about kale commercials or whatever, authenticity and profit. Can still mesh. So, you know what I'm saying?

We're going to bring that to the table too. So let me know if y'all have any questions for me. Subscribe everywhere your podcast fix is and tell your fellow entrepreneur friends to listen in. I think we're all going to learn a lot this season.