

PROFESSIONAL TROUBLEMAKER



with LUVVIE AJAYI JONES

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Give the Praise (with Jason Mayden) - Episode 13

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Welcome to the Professional Troublemaker Podcast! This is the place where we help you cultivate the courage, authenticity and audacity you need to use your voice, take up space and live a life that is so bold, even your wildest dreams say #goals. I'm your host, Luvvie Ajayi Jones, New York Times bestselling author, sought after speaker and side-eye sorceress bringing you thought-provoking conversations with amazing people taken action, done scary things and rocked the boat to an audacious life. Like the late, great John Lewis said, these are the kind of people who are "Never, ever afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."

Before we jump into today's interview, know that this podcast is named after my second New York Times bestselling book, [Professional Troublemaker: The Fear-Fighter Manual](#), which is available now wherever you get your books!

Think of it! A million people who are out there, standing on the edge of something great and need that little push of encouragement. That push to be the domino. To say the hard thing. To have the hard conversation. A million people kicking their fear to the curb and step into the life they've been dreaming of. A million people asking for a raise. A million people starting a fierce job they're not sure they're ready for. A million people doing something so big that their wildest dreams say goals. My goodness.

And that is what writing this book has done for me, what it's already done for those who are reading it and gifting it to others. This book has empowered people to say yes to things they were previously saying no to. It's empowered people to have tough conversations they weren't going to have before. People have asked for raises and promotions and gotten them after reading this book and finding the courage to speak up. The domino effect of what has been happening when a few people have decided not to live in the realm of fear has been amazing - think of what could happen if a million people stopped letting fear be the first factor in their decision making?

An audacious mission like that can't happen without you, so let's get this book in the hands of people who need it. Buy a copy of Professional Troublemaker for yourself, or as a gift for your friend who needs a push. I know it will change your life like it's changed mine and I know it will change the lives of all these people who touch it, because domino effects are real. Order Professional Troublemaker (hardcover or audiobook) now at PROFESSIONALTROUBLEMAKERBOOK.com or wherever you buy books.

If you've been part of LuvvNation for very long, you know I am a shoe lover and a sneaker head and because of that, I am so excited about this conversation. Today I'm talking to designer and entrepreneur Jason Mayden.

After becoming the first Black design intern for Nike, Jason went on to design for the Jordan brand and is one of 8 people on the planet to design the most iconic sneaker of all time. Plus, he's the only Chicago boy to do it. The products he designed while at Nike and Jordan Brand have become some of the most coveted cultural artifacts of our time.

Jason is currently the CEO & Founder of Trillicon Valley, an award-winning design & strategy consultancy specializing in the creation of partnerships between athletes, entertainers and global creatives. He's also the president of Fear of God Athletics – Jerry Lorenzo's partnership with Adidas. Jason is an amazing husband, father and mentor and a man of deep character, plus he's one of the few men we've had on this podcast since the beginning and the first since renaming it Professional Troublemaker. You're going to love this interview.

Conversation with Jason Mayden

- LUVVIE All right, Jason. We're just going to have a good conversation. You have the honor of being one of the few men. I think there's been five men total that have been on this podcast.
- JASON Oh, that's dope. That's dope. So, that makes it even more special. I'm not going to mess up for the fellas then. I'm not going to drop the ball, I'm going to be [crosstalk 00:01:05].
- LUVVIE You're one of five dudes. I'm like, "Yo." Because how I choose the people who I want to be in conversation with are people who I think are disruptors, who are just high emotional EQ, and who are just doing amazing stuff, and I was like, "Got to have Jason in this place."
- JASON Ah, man. I appreciate that. I really do. You know me, I'm just on my little journey, just sticking to myself, drinking water and staying sucker free.
- LUVVIE Staying sucker free is the way to live, listen.
- JASON That's it. That's it.
- LUVVIE All right, so we're just going to jump in and have a good conversation, and just going to bless the people.
- JASON Perfect.
- LUVVIE All right. Jason, I start by asking everybody, "What did you want to be when you were growing up?"
- JASON Alive. I mean, it was that simple. I mean in Chicago, I tell people, most folks read about conspiracies, we grew up in one, and so you didn't realize the awkwardness of talking about

your mentality as a child until you became an adult, and so things like having a family, things like owning a home, those weren't financial milestones, they were indicators that I was an adult, which meant that I had made it to a certain point in my life. And so beyond just wanting to be a designer and a creative, I always just wanted to be older. I felt like that was an accomplishment in and of itself. So, when people ask me sometimes, "Man, I see the salt and pepper coming in your beard, man, and how do you feel about that?" I'm like, "Brother, sister, understand that it is a blessing for me to have gray hair because it means that I'm here."

JASON And so, I look at time differently than most people because I was sick when I was seven years old, and I almost lost my life, and so I understand the preciousness of each moment and how each moment is not guaranteed. And so when people ask me things about what I want it to be when I grow up, or what do I desire most, it's the simplest thing: I just want another day to show my family I love them and I represent for my ancestors. That's it.

LUVVIE I'm going to slow you down a bit and dig deeper into that. So, tell me more about your upbringing. What made it where you could not take each day for granted?

JASON Yeah, my parents have been together since they were 13 and 14. They were one of the first students, if not the first students to integrate at Fenger High School on the South Side, and just watching their sacrifices, watching the sacrifices of my family members who were activists in the community, church builders, math teachers, I mean working for the city. I realized the fragility of now, how fragile each and every second is because you lose people, and for me, it really stood out when I was seven years old and I had septicemia. And I remember the doctors are coming in and out of my room saying, "If he'll make it. If he'll be okay." And to have my life discussed with the word if, it changes your orientation with your childhood. I was no longer a kid. I was wrestling with an adult topic of mortality. And that really was the thing that woke me up.

JASON And it didn't wake me up in a negative way. I wasn't afraid of what would happen, I just understood I need to maximize and optimize every single second that I have. So, I just use my 24 hours differently than other people. My wife jokes that she thinks I get 36 hours per day because I do so much, but it's just because I'm so excited, and when you think about everything through the lens of how children see the world every day, they're seeing something for the first time, so they get to stay in this constant state of wonder and awe, and that's really all I do. I wake up and I find magic in the smallest things. I find wonder in the smallest things. I think that's what allows me to have that sense of urgency of getting the most out of each moment.

LUVVIE I love that. So, seven year old Jason, how was he spending his days once he got out of the hospital? What was he like? Was he serious? Was he goofy?

JASON Man, I was quiet. I was smaller than everyone. My family is multiracial, so oftentimes was asked what am I, because my hair is completely straight, and so I just kind of stuck to myself. I made my friends through drawing girls' names in bubble letters and selling Ninja Turtle trading cards that I would make on my own.

LUVVIE That's so wholesome! Oh, my.

JASON Yeah. So, I'm like, "Yo, I can draw. I can draw." And that was the thing is, is that was my gateway into being accepted. I was using my talents as a form of conversation. I wasn't a person that was trying to draw to get attention. I was drawing to hopefully find a sense of self-worth within my social construct, where I was at on the South Side, the people I wanted to impress, which were my classmates and my peers, and my family. So, the seven year old Jason wasn't as wild as 12, 13 year old Jason, he just was appreciative of every single second, and was trying to express himself visually.

LUVVIE All right. Tell us about 12 year old Jason.

JASON 12 year old Jason was in the streets, and a lot of the came down to just feeling a little bit tired of people, feeling as if they could say or do certain things because I stuck to myself, because I was quiet, because I was small. Most people knew that my father was in the military at one point, and he had trained all of us how to fight growing up, and so it's the trap of Chicago, where you feel that any transgression against you is a character assassination attempt, and you proactively bias towards physically violent outcomes or emotionally violent outcomes, where your anger became your badge of masculinity. And so, I carried that. And it wasn't that I wanted to, it's just it was a necessity for me to be able to navigate going from school to where I was living, and I made a lot of stupid decisions that could have cost me not only my freedom, but my life.

JASON But what I do appreciate about that moment is through it all, my grandmother was a steady force. My grandmother was amazing. My mother's mother, she showed up when she was fighting cancer and became a lunch lady at my school and would curse out all the other lunch ladies, and tell them, "You ain't my grandbaby food because you're nasty." She was that grandma, she called you out all the time. And it was her. She knew I was a fragile spirit, and I could have went either way. So, she completely assigned herself to me for the last of her days to let me know that I wasn't alone. It was those types of, I would say, divine intercessions that allowed me to stray from my path, but not completely deviate totally from my path, so that God can use my testimony to help other people.

LUVVIE You basically had these armors around you protecting you from yourself and the world?

JASON Basically. Basically, yeah.

LUVVIE When you finished high school, what was your plan?

JASON Get to Nike. That was it.

LUVVIE Get to Nike?

JASON Yeah, that was it. Get to Nike.

LUVVIE Walk me through that. How did you end up going to Nike from high school? Because you had this legendary career at Nike, but walk me through it.

JASON Yeah, so that was crazy. I transferred high schools my senior year because where I was going, I was going to Thornridge freshman through junior year, and anyone that knows Dolton, knows

Thornridge. Yeah, it was a wild place. It was where parents on the South Side sent their kids thinking that they would get a better environment, and actually realized they were sending them into the lion's den. So, my sister was coming into high school and so my parents decided it was time for us to move. So, my senior year, I ended up at Rich Central out of Richton Park, which was a complete culture shock for me because I had never been in that type of environment.

JASON Kids driving BMWs to school, I'm taking a bus. Parents having eight, nine bedrooms in their house, and we didn't have that. I was complete fish out of. So, I stuck to myself. Academically, I was pretty much done with high school. So, I was working in the athletic director's office, I was running track, throwing shot put, and he had kind of seen me sketch sneakers. I had been drawing sneakers and writing letters to Nike pretty much my entire life.

LUVVIE Really?

JASON Yeah, I started writing letters when I was around 10, just telling them, "Listen, I want to be there. How can I be there?" Calling, pretending like I knew employees. I did everything possible to make myself visible to them. So, they knew my journey. They knew I wanted to be a footwear designer, even though I didn't know the discipline I wanted to study. Go ahead.

LUVVIE Yo. Hold for a second. So, 10 year old you was like, "I know one thing. I want to work at the premier sports brand at the point, Nike." And you started writing letters to Nike corporate?

JASON Yeah.

LUVVIE At 10?

JASON At 1, yeah.

LUVVIE And would do it regularly?

JASON Yeah, probably once every couple of months, just checking in, sending letters, sending sketches.

LUVVIE Did you ever get a letter back?

JASON I did. I got a couple letters. I got a couple catalogs. I had a chance to talk to someone at HR once. They're the ones who told me about the word internship, and so I used each of those interactions as building blocks to build my confidence, because at the end of the day, I figured Nike needed what I had. It needed my insight. It needed a kid from Chicago. They had Michael Jordan, but I figured that there was no one there working from my neighborhood. I didn't see anyone, so I felt like I can be that person, and so I just inserted myself into the conversation. I figured that no one was coming to give me an opportunity. My parents often told me, "Closed mouths don't get fed."

JASON So, I opened my mouth and I advocated for myself, and ended up getting in contact, like I mentioned, with someone in customer service who referred me to someone in HR, and that person told me about internships and how I was a kid and I was too young, but that's the way

that you get into Nike is through an internship, and I just stuck with that all the way through high school into college.

LUVVIE Where'd you go for college?

JASON I went to CCS in Detroit.

LUVVIE What was your major?

JASON Industrial design, a minor in graphic design.

LUVVIE Oh, you've been so clear from jump. You've been so clear from jump. All right, so how was college? When did you get that first internship?

JASON Oh, man. College was wild because initially I was supposed to... I wanted to go to Georgia Tech to double major in mechanical electrical engineer because while I was a seven year old kid, all I could do is eat popcorn and watch Batman in the hospital. So, I would watch old Adam West Batman with my dad and my uncle and I figured that for me, when I would get into the comic book, I saw this brother named Lucius Fox, and Lucius Fox was the engineer and he made all the gadgets for Batman. So I said, "Okay, that's the closest that I can get to someone designing for Michael Jordan is Lucius Fox designing for Batman," and so in my childlike brain I rationalized, "Whatever Lucius Fox studied is what I needed to study." So, he was an engineer, he was a financier, black CEO of Wayne Enterprises. So I wanted to be like him.

JASON Initially, I was headed to do mechanical electrical engineering. My coaches had found an article about a kid named [Chee Wei Lee 00:12:14] who actually interned at Nike and designed a car for Toyota and it mentioned industrial design. So, they were the ones who advocated and said, "You really don't need to be an engineer, you should be an industrial designer." They colluded with my parents, they both encouraged me to look into CCS. I applied last minute with portfolio full of, like I said, girls' names in bubble letters and illustrations, and actually got into CCS on what they would call probation because my portfolio wasn't strong enough to be considered directly an industrial designer at that time, but once again, I was so used to negotiating for myself and advocating that I figured out a way to be there in that major and if I failed, I would switch quickly to graphic design.

JASON Ended up not failing, thank God. Was not the worst of my class, wasn't the best. Came home freshmen and sophomore year, and I would go to the Art Institute every single day. I would hop on the train and go down to Art Institute to sketch and take classes. So, I figured I wasn't playing sports, so design became my sport. Michael put up 1000 jump shots a day to improve his jump shot, and I figured sketching is muscle memory. So, I would sketch 1000 sketches a day.

LUVVIE A day?

JASON A day. Post-it notes, napkins, paper. I would just count, I would just keep counting because I needed to catch up and in my mind, I figured all these kids have private art classes, their parents are wealthy. They've been to museums their whole life. But then I worked me. I was like, "That's the one thing they can't do without working."

LUVVIE Oh, my God.

JASON Yeah, I went through it. In and out of the hospital for exhaustion, everything, but I refused to quit because I had no plan B. My plan B was Plan A.

LUVVIE Which was Nike.

JASON That's it.

LUVVIE So then, when did you get that call?

JASON I got rejected two times before because I was too young. I got the call my junior year when I was supposed to actually go to Paris to study car design. I won a competition with Renault and Peugeot as a product designer because the myth was that all the best talent was in automotive, and I got into automotive just to prove that product designers weren't failed car designers, and so I would compete and compete with him, and won the competition, and at the same time, I'm making this choice to go study in Paris, which would have been huge because I knew that a lot of black revolutionaries went there, James Baldwin to be one.

JASON I mean, just the relationship with with Europe at that time for black intellectuals in the arts was unique to me, and I figured that I could be proud of extending that legacy, and Paris was the place where a lot of them went. And then that same summer was when Nike offered the internship, which coincidentally happens to be the first black design intern for product design and Jordan brand's first designer intern, so obviously, I had to make that choice.

LUVVIE And what year was this?

JASON This was 2001.

LUVVIE You're a junior in college, you just finished junior year?

JASON Yep.

LUVVIE You get this call, and now you have to pick between Paris and Jordan, and you pick Jordan because Plan A.

JASON Yep.

LUVVIE How'd it go?

JASON I got there. I ended up meeting Mike on my first day.

LUVVIE What?

JASON Yeah. Coincidentally, he was on campus. They were getting ready to unveil internally the Air Jordan 17. Actually, yeah, the prototype for the Air Jordan 17. It was a sales meeting. So, he's on the elevator, getting on the elevator. I'm getting off the elevator, trying to find my desk and we

had an exchange where we talked for a second and I explained to him my background, my story. He was like, "Man, how did you get here?" I was like, "Bro, I took the elevator." He said, "No, Jason. How did you get from Roseland to Portland?" And what was crazy, I didn't realize... And this is this is how God works. I didn't realize that my mom and dad went to high school with his ex-wife.

LUVVIE Juanita Jordan?

JASON Juanita Jordan over at Fenger, yeah. My mom was on the swim team with her, and all these things were overlapping in my life where I was in direct proximity to my hero my entire life and never knew. I never knew. And so I ended up designing the shoe that went to production that summer. They offered me a job right at the end of my internship, so I went back to school, contracting for Nike my senior year. So, I went pro while still in school and then graduated and went straight back.

LUVVIE You were designing shoes your senior year of college?

JASON Yeah.

LUVVIE What was that first shoe that you designed?

JASON The Air Jordan 17 Mule, so my first product was Air Jordan. It was a post-game recovery shoe because I told him, I said, "Most athletes have terrible feet because either if you're wearing cleats, or you wearing basketball shoes, a lot of times you have damaged toenails. So post-game, you don't want to have your toes out, so you might want something that covers your foot but let's you feel comfortable," and they loved the story and we ended up selling it. It sold out first release and I think they're getting ready to retro it.

LUVVIE I just googled it. Wow. You were batting 1000 out the gate.

JASON Trying to. Trying to.

LUVVIE You graduate 2002?

JASON Yeah, 2002.

LUVVIE So, you graduated the year that I started college, and you go straight to Portland?

JASON Straight to Beaverton, Oregon. It was the strangest experience ever. So strange, but it was amazing. Where we grew up, the only way we knew about Oregon was through that video game, The Oregon Trail. That was it.

LUVVIE Yes!

JASON And so I thought, "Man, I can't drink the water because I'll get dysentery-"

LUVVIE Dysentery and cholera.

JASON And cholera. I'm out there with cholera, fam? How am I going to explain to my grandma? And so I didn't understand the history of the State. I think now looking back, we understand why Oregon was created, what the structure of the state constitution included, the things that weren't accessible to black folks who came out there at that time, and so there was a little bit of that residue of Oregon's foundation when I got there, but I was seeing a change over because the younger generation was more aware of what was happening in the world. So it was extreme kind of like love movement with hippies and an extreme right wing separatist movement were militias, and they both existed in the same city at the same time.

JASON And so that was weird to me because none of it included people that looked like me, and I just kind of saw a different side of America. I saw poverty through a different lens, and that was the first time I really seen it. You hear about it, we talk about in the Midwest, but when you go and you see a predominantly white state, and you see people suffering, you realize like, "Okay, there's a bigger system here that's damaging for different reasons to different people," and it just gave me a more global perspective of what the system really entailed.

LUVVIE Man. Oregon is... You see it and you be like. People who you assume are trust fund babies on the streets. It's a mind-fuck. It is. It actually is. It's like, "Oh, okay." How were those early years in Jordan? Because you ultimately were part of the class that kind of put Jordan Brand back on the map after MJ had retired.

JASON Yeah, when I started, he was with the Wizards. He had just came back.

LUVVIE Yeah, the second retirement.

JASON The second retirement. So, it was kind of like that gray period of, "Okay, is he playing? Is he an owner?" What I can't tell you is that it wasn't peaches and cream. Nike wasn't necessarily excited for Jordan Brand. It was a necessity. I often tell people we would need it but not want it because they felt, "Who's going to buy a retired guy's shoes? They getting ready to sign Kobe, and LeBron is coming out of high school and Melo's coming out of Syracuse, and generation, they're going to move on from you," but what we had to do was sit down and decide what our fate was going to be because Michael is an idea. He's not a person. He had become kind of the bar of excellence that people were compared against. They would say, "I'm the Michael Jordan of. I'm the Michael Jordan of," right? How can you replace a person who has become the bar for excellence that people try to meet in various industries?

JASON And so in a lot of ways, I was the youngest and only employee from Chicago at the inception of what we now know as Jordan Brand. So the early days, we were just making stuff. I mean, we didn't have a large budget, there was no large team, there was only really two or three designers touching everything. So, I was thrown into conversations with Derek Jeter and Melo and Randy Moss and Roy Jones and all these people, and I'm just 21 years old, as a kid, working with legends and learning from them and traveling with them. So I grew up really fast, to be honest, because I was around these gentlemen, and these women who had conquered the world, and they were giving me game before social media and Clubhouse, they were giving me game in real life about how to navigate and how to survive and the power of delayed gratification, and that's the one thing that I've learned is slow money is for sure money.

LUVVIE How did you approach design? When you sat down, and they said, "Yes, Derek is coming out with a shoe. What does it need to be?" Because I do see some car and automotive details in some shoes. How do you approach design?

JASON Generally, I don't look at other products for inspiration, I look at narratives because I understand that the artifacts we create are part of other people's journeys, other people's stories, and so I have to think, "How does this fit neatly into this person's narrative?" So, I'll read history books, comic books. I'll read nature books. I try to pull from the world around me versus allowing someone else's ideas to influence me because there's enough inspiration just through God's creation. We don't need to look anywhere else for that. So, I typically start with nature and history, fantasy, comic books, stuff like that, stuff that sparks the imagination because at the end of the day, I understand, at that time, when a person picked up my product, it may be the first and only time they can afford this thing, so it has to give them a level of joy. It has to perform in a sense. It has to feel the way that they hoped it would feel once they walked out of that store.

JASON And that came from Derek Jeter. He's telling me about the stuff he learned from the great Yankees like Joe DiMaggio, when he said, "Look, somebody bought a ticket to come and see you play for the first time. You have to live up to what they expect," and I thought about that for footwear. Somebody saved their money to buy some Jordans, it has to live up to what they expected to be, and I took that seriously.

LUVVIE Do you have a favorite pair that you designed?

JASON During that time, I would probably say all the Doernbecher Children's Hospital stuff. That was the favorite stuff for me.

LUVVIE Oh, did it raise money for charity?

JASON Yeah, we raised money for charity with kids who were fighting life-threatening diseases, who had traumatic experiences, and so I was the first designer in Jordan Brand to tackle that project, obviously because of my relationship with being a hospital kid. Yeah, the Doernbecher 3, the Doernbecher 2, the Doernbecher 1. So, all the ones that kind of set off the movement for the brand, but my personal my babies because I really wanted to give back to the kids in the hospital because I knew what it felt like to be them.

LUVVIE Man, and what's your favorite Silhouette?

JASON The 4. Probably the 4. Yeah, the 4 is my favorite. I like the 4 and like the 20 as well. The 20 was pretty cool.

LUVVIE I like the 4s. I just got the starfish ones. Oh, the 20s. I have not seen these. The 1s are my faves of all time because they go with. You could be wearing dress, you could be rocking whatever, it goes. What people don't realize is you all were underdogs at Nike.

JASON Yeah, very much so.

LUVVIE Jordan Brand that everyone knows now is a name. It is a multi-billion dollar entity. It has its own force. You all were the underdogs. During that time, what drove you?

JASON What drove us was the commitment to each other. Mike, Black, depending on how you know. His nickname is Black Cat. I call him Mr. Jordan. He treated us like teammates, he treated us like we were in a huddle with the Bulls. It wasn't us working for him. It was us working with him, and we all felt a sense of, I would say, responsibility for the lives that we were influencing with the work we did, especially me coming from Chicago. So what motivated me was knowing that a lot of my friends wouldn't get this opportunity to work on Mike's, a lot of my friends probably would never even get the opportunity to travel to Oregon. Myself and my boss at the time, Dwayne Edwards, who's from Inglewood, California, we understood the sensitivity and the honor and gratitude we had to exude in our positions because we were one of ones.

JASON No one in the industry had done what we were doing, and so that's what motivated us. It wasn't the numbers at the time. When we started we were around \$175 million business unit. We weren't really a separate brand as people thought. Small team of about 70 people, majority of that was sales, product development. And so it was a really small, tight family. And it was just you look across the table and you see other people with the same level of hunger and commitment in their eyes. It's not hard to be inspired. And we just moved as a unit. We took losses together, we took victories together, but at the end of the day, we all were supportive of each other's aspirations, and we wanted to get to the place and do our best work on behalf of the kid.

LUVVIE Man, so 13 years. You helped build this brand to be what it is today. You're part of that ragtag team that is no longer ragtag. What do you think you learned in those 13 years?

JASON That the people at the table are not smarter than me.

LUVVIE Yes!

JASON Right, that was the thing. I had imposter syndrome a lot. I used to downplay my intelligence because I felt like they expected me to not be smart, so I just kind of would use simpler constructs and simpler vernacular because I felt like, "Well, this is the expectation that I need to fit," and it was when I got to the table and realized that a lot of people were just really good at not getting fired versus really good at their job. That's when I decided that I wasn't going to hide my intelligence, and I was going to be unapologetically Jason, and I started to speak the way that I want to speak, the way that I spoke to my intellectual friends, I started to work on things that I wanted to work on, and it wasn't years, it was months when I made that switch. After really getting in there and realized, I'm like, "These people are just exceptionally mediocre at some things."

LUVVIE Exceptionally mediocre. Goddamn! Bars.

JASON Yeah, and that's the trick of corporate America is that people think it's a pyramid. It's not, it's a diamond, and there's a lot of people who are in the middle who just sit in the middle, and they become a bottleneck for people who have aspirations and talent, and if you're not open and understanding and have discernment as to why they're stuck in the middle, you can rage against

them versus putting the energy into pursuing your goal, and I knew that not everybody wanted to take the risk I took, not everybody had the level of ambition that I had, and I didn't judge them for that. I just wanted to move and operate in a way that I moved and operate because the thing they would tell you is, "Jason, slow down. It's a marathon, not a sprint," and I'm like, "According to where I come from, it is absolutely a sprint. I'm racing against the age of 25." My whole life you told me I wouldn't make it to 25.

JASON Now I'm 22, and I'm thinking, "Okay, this three year windows is real. How much can I get done in this three year window?" Once I crossed over that threshold of 25 is when I kind of understood that that was a psychological trick that they were playing on me, and I didn't have to subscribe to that type of thinking, and so I reframed my reality and I started to manifest the things that I felt were important, and I started to speak life over myself instead of waiting for somebody else to do it. And that's kind of how I survived.

LUVVIE Yes. You spent 13 years at Nike, what makes you leave Nike, which was the brand?

JASON Honestly, it was a combination of things. It was personal growth. My dream job was my first job. So, there was a little bit of like, "I need to move on to discover what else I can do." I had always had aspirations to get an advanced degree. So, going back to Stanford was a big deal for me, and that experience changed me a lot, and then also my son had a few health challenges that I simply couldn't ignore it, and I decided and I told everyone on the record, "The only reason I will quit is if it's my family, or if I feel there's nothing else left for me to do." And at that time, it was my family. And then it became more about, "Okay, I've achieved the things I wanted to achieve, and if I stick around, I'm pretty much just waiting to be promoted versus challenging myself."

JASON And I was raised as an athlete to believe that if you want to run faster, you have to run with faster people, and I saw people running faster in the Silicon Valley than Oregon and I wanted to use my youth to get ahead, because I don't come from generational wealth, and sitting and waiting on someone to give me something is not the way that I was raised. So once again, closed mouths don't get fed. So, I took the leap of faith along with my wife, we came back to the Valley and we pretty much pivoted careers and started from scratch with the knowledge I had to build the stuff I'm currently doing today.

LUVVIE Yeah, you've been quoted as saying that instead of using the industry of health and wellness to fix broken adults, you wanted to use play as prevention to build stronger kids, so you started a shoe company called Super Heroic, which in itself was also history-making, and the goal of the company was to convince every young kid who puts on a pair of its shoes that they're a superhero capable of solving problems and saving the world. So, tell us more about Super Heroic.

JASON Yeah, it started with a research project I was doing at Stanford when I was part of the design fellowship at the d.school. I had stepped down from the advisory board, was lecturing and researching and teaching, and initially it was intended to be for middle school-aged black boys and Latino boys. It was something called The Trap. So, I was trying to reimagine the Boy Scouts and said, "What skills do young boys of color need today to survive?" We don't need to know how to start a fire. We need to know how to start a company in a revolution, so how can I teach them this? And then I expanded it out and said, "Okay, here's what I do for little boys of color, how can I support little girls of color?" And then it just became an evolution of like, "Wait,

there's a system here. There's a system that we create using the construct of play in order to empower kids to give them a mindset of resilience," because I realized it was mental stability and mental health that would be the topic that they would have to tackle the most in their generation.

JASON Ours was external. I saw the challenges in my neighborhood, but when you're around kids today, a lot of the challenges are interpersonal, they're inside of their mind. My favorite character, obviously, is Batman. I came across a research study called the Batman Effect out of University of Minnesota, that talked about kids who wore capes and who were told they were heroes, they performed to the level of the hero because it wasn't them. It was their exemplar self.

JASON And I remember the power in make believe and what it did for me, and so I started a company that honestly put make believe into a system, in the products, in the play experiences, in the narrative and vernacular, and the imagery of kids of color being heroes was all intended to let the child know, "You are the hero. You don't have to wait on someone to save you. You have all the skills and tools you'll need to be magnificent," and we ran for four and a half years, did a lot of tremendous work, helped a lot of kids, and it was a beautiful thing because I saw the confidence of my children increase through that project. And if that's all I did, then that would have been enough, but to know that we've touched a lot of the thousands of kids across the country, had numerous Super Heroic Days across the country. It is a blessing. It's a true blessing.

LUVVIE I mean, innovation is real. Innovation is super real. I met you, I think it was right after you had left Nike, and you hadn't launched Super Heroic yet. All I saw was a black man speaking my language. It was at AfroTech when we actually met in person, and the one thing about you is that you do move with a different light. You know what I mean? You move with this grounding force. What would you say to 12 year old you today?

JASON You're enough. You're enough. That's it. I mean, the thing about being young and a person of color, we're hoping that life will get better when we obtain certain things, that you magically have this life of joy and abundance and peace all at the same time, but it really doesn't work that way. It comes first by accepting who you are, and loving who you are. So, I think 12 year old Jason, I would just tell him, "You're enough. You're enough, man. You don't need to do any more. You don't need to be any less. God made you the way you are. That's enough."

LUVVIE Oh, that's powerful. That is powerful. And how has your growth in these last 20 years even, what has changed it? I know you do therapy, but what is the thing that you have found has been integral for you, especially as a black man who is in Silicon Valley, you're often the only in the spaces that you're in, and you're trying to build a healthy whole life.

JASON Servitude. I'm not a person that looks at myself and feels sorry. I tell everybody that in my lowest days I find a way to serve. Also, I separate being black from being a man. I tell everybody, "At the end of the day, I'm a man. I'm over six foot, speak English as a first language, was born in this country, and I'm heterosexual. I got a lot of privilege with that. What am I supposed to do with this black privilege?" And so I use a lot of my time to advocate on behalf of people who may be affected by the privilege that men hold, whether it be women or people of color. I speak up for others a lot.

JASON So, I think that's the thing that I've learned that's the thing that's helped me stay grounded, and that's the thing that I feel empowers me the most is my service and my desire to want to teach because none of this is about me. None of what I do is about me. I really am here to try to create space for others and to give people other opportunities to just live their dreams the way I've been so blessed and fortunate to do.

LUVVIE What does leadership mean to you?

JASON Leadership means honesty. Honesty. Yeah, when you don't have an answer, just say you don't have an answer. People talk about leading from the top or leading from the front. When you look at nature, the most powerful people within the pack, specifically lions, they're in the back of the pack. The leader of the lion, the king or whatever you want to call it, the female lion and the male lion, they're in the back because they understand that's the weak side. They want to make sure that the side that's unprotected is the one that they protect, and that's how I look at leadership. I'm the person in the back. I'm not in front. I don't need to be in front. I'm a supportive person. I'm the person that advocates. I'm the person that speaks out. I'm not the person that's going to dictate.

I don't lead with a iron fist. I try to lead with a velvet glove. It's very different because I know that people are fragile, and leaders can affect how we feel about ourselves. I've had a lot of, quote unquote, leaders in education who said some very damaging things that have haunted me for years because I took their words more seriously because of their positions and stations in life. So, I understand the impact of my words and actions on others, and I try to just be a safe place where people know I'm here to serve them. And I tell my team a lot, "As the leader, I take the blame, but I give the praise," and I mean it. If something goes wrong, it's my fault. I didn't give you clear instruction, I didn't give you a clear game plan. It's my fault. But if we win, you did that. You executed the vision. So, I try to make sure I keep that that mantra a lot because I fundamentally live by that, and I believe it.

Imagine being in an online space where people's foolishness doesn't make you want to fight the air. That might sound impossible with your current choices for social media, but I was sick of wading through nonsense to find like-minded people, so I created my own online community. And if you are the kind of person who is striving to be a professional troublemaker and fight fear, we need you to join us in that community, because you need people to cheer you on.

[LuvvNation](#) is my online community and app that is a safe space in a dumpster fire world. It's the place for the most thoughtful, funny, most chill deficient people on these interwebs. We're a community that comes together to make each other better with curated conversations, opportunities to connect, and challenges to help us transform and do better in every area of our lives. So, I want you to come in there, join us. Become a citizen of [LuvvNation](#). So go to [luvvnation.com](#), that's [luvvnation.com](#) L-U-V-V-N-A-T-I-O-N. Download the app in the App Store or on Android, it's on iOS and Android and come on through! All right. Back to the podcast.

LUVVIE you are now in a different form of leadership. Your latest title is President of Fear of God Athletics. Talk to us about how that came to be.

JASON Man, Jerry and I have been friends for many... And it just kind of organically evolved. When Super Heroic had to shut down, we started to see the early signs of the impact of corona by late 2019. So, it's a combination of having to wind my company down and then sell off some of the assets in order to just make sure everyone was okay, and this industry had already decided that what I was working on was cool, but it wasn't cool as doing something in fashion week. It wasn't as cool as doing something with a rapper, right? Because I'm working on kids. That's not the thing that gets you clout at ComplexCon, it's not cool. But Jerry, knowing me and knowing my personality, knew that what I was showing was different than what I was carrying, and so he just would check in as a friend like, "Hey, man. What's going on? Hey, man. I know you're carrying a lot. Hey, man. I'm here. Hey, man. If you need anything, let's talk, let's figure something out."

And it just started as us checking in, and our conversations just continuously evolved, and then we realized, "Man," it was the right time to do something together, and it was the right time to have our complimentary skills alignment to one effort because we joke about being this industry's version of the Splash Brothers because we're both excellent at what we do for different reasons, and we don't have ego so we don't overlap, we don't compete.

And it's dope to see it play out in how we work and how we communicate and how we complement each other, because for one, this industry hasn't seen two highly creative, successful black men work together in this capacity, let alone give each other props and let alone trying to bring everyone along with them, women and other marginalized people. So, we know that we have a responsibility to each other as friends, but also to the expectations placed on us by the people that I look up to. So, it just happened naturally, it was no gamesmanship. There was no strategy. It was just good people being good people when we decided that we should rock on something together.

LUVVIE The announcement broke the internet for like a week. The announcement broke the internet, and it was awesome to see. Yeah, you and Jerry Lorenzo represent a different type of black male leadership, one that feels that it's being led by vulnerability, by honesty and real true good work at the core of it, and it's real chill, Essentials and what Fear of God has been releasing so far, I've been like... It's so funny. It's not flashy, but you can just tell it's just high quality. To your point, it's like the real Gs move in silence, the leadership that's leading from the back, that is what it feels like. For you, what are you most excited about in this new work that you're doing with Jerry Lorenzo?

JASON Man, just the legacy we get to leave behind. Exactly what you just described, showing people a different way. There's no lack of strength in being vulnerable. It actually is the strongest thing you can be, and we openly often talk about our emotions and what's going on because for so long, toxic masculinity has robbed us of the ability to be a whole human, and we rage against our emotions so unhealthily. We turn our emotions inward, and it becomes destructive. So, if we can show people like, "Look, we're not suckers. We're not pushovers, but we're fathers, we're husbands, we're community builders, we're brothers, we're sons. We're in service of the higher calling, and so in being in service, we also have to be transparent and congruent not only in what we say, but what we do because we know that this isn't about a clout chase. This is about impact."

So, I think that's what I'm most excited about is when the story's written on us, people will talk about all the products we've made and all that. That's great, but it's like what is the real impact we've made in our community, what is the real impact we've made in people's lives and what is the real legacy we're leaving behind for our children to build upon? Because none of this is for us. We're playing for forever. This is an eternal game that we're playing. We're trying to get a crown that shall not perish, we're not trying to get a temporal award that fades away with time. I mean, history's forgotten more heroes than its created, and we know with the time that we've been given, we need to do something that doesn't necessarily directly always point back to us, but points towards something more meaningful or more bigger than us, which is the concept of possibilities. So, now we've created a new possibility for people that look like us that didn't exist before this moment.

LUVVIE That's real. You all are going to have me wearing... Again, I've already started wearing Adidas. I'm trying to let you know right now. I got to let you know, I have been a Nike girl for decades. I was the one who was going to Footlocker after stacking her coins for three months, and being like, "I got to get those Nike Fresh. I got to get those things." I have been a sneaker head for a long time, but I've been a very specifically Nike sneaker head, and I'm telling you between Ivy Park and Fear of God, I'm like, "Well, I guess my loyalty might have ended." I think I have become two brand sneaker head. I'm over here with Adidas down to my socks today, okay?

JASON There's enough out there. They can eat too. They can eat, let them-

LUVVIE Everybody can eat. That's the power of it, but you all are shifting culture. You all are shifting loyalty, okay? That is the power of when you get the right names aligned with your brand. You shift decades-long loyalties. I literally was like, "Well, shit. Let me go... I'm over here waiting for the first pair. The moment it drops, go ahead and take my coins, take my money." That is power. That is real power, and you know people don't play about their brands.

JASON Nah. Not our people.

LUVVIE Our people do not play... I told my husband, I was like, "We are now also an Adidas household just so you know." He was like, "It's because of Jason," and I was like, "A little bit, yeah. Yeah, that's what happened. I'm not sorry about it." So, he has accepted it that we are now a two brand household. But that's power, yo. I hope in your quiet moments, you're understanding that you are a culture shifter. It's wild. It's wild to see, and it's amazing to see. What do you want people to say about you when you're not in the room?

JASON That's a great question. That I'm the person that people don't think he exists. A nice person that just genuinely wants to see everybody win and is happy for everybody's success, even when he's taking a loss. That's it. If people can say that about me, then I did my job correctly because I live by that. I'm the biggest cheerleader. Even in my lowest moments, I don't feel an ounce of jealousy because I look at everybody's success like, "Man, I could do that too. If they did it, man, that's motivating me. I could do that too." And there's been plenty of times, I'll reach out to ask you about, "How do I write or how do I start?"

Because I'm not embarrassed to tell people what I'm not good at, or what I admire about them because most people look at that as a sign of weakness to tell another person, "I admire you. I

respect what you do. Wow, that's amazing. I can't do that." I get joy from it because I'm like, "Wow, I know a person that could do something that I can't do. That is so fascinating." And I can point my kids towards different role models, different versions of exceptionalism that doesn't have to just be in my industry. So, that's what I hope people say about me that Jason is the dude that we say doesn't exist, successful and nice, and I really do believe in that.

LUVVIE Successful and nice. I'm ready for you to write that book, so let me know when you ready to write that book. The world needs the Jason Mayden memoir, whatever it is, whether it's a business lesson book, whether it's the story of you being this black man from Chicago who basically wrote his own path, I am excited for that. What do you want your kids to say about you when you're no longer here?

JASON That my dad earned everything he had. Nothing was given to him. We've never hidden difficult moments for my kids. We talk them through it. When they were younger, the thing that I did, and I'm so thankful I did this is I taught them how to express themselves with their words versus their emotions, and I used the book that Frederick Douglass used to teach himself how to read to give them a command of the English language, and also to teach them the art of oration. And so the book is called The Columbian Orator and it was a collection of the world's greatest speeches, and it broke it down in a way that allowed you to read it and understand it. So, I would have my kids read a speech, like Sermon on the Mount, or a famous piece from Cicero, highlight the words they didn't know, we go to the dictionary, we look it up, we use it in a sentence and they repeat it back to me.

Now, they're four or five, six years old, could barely read and comprehend, but what I was trying to do is to let them know that A, just because someone tells you it's difficult doesn't mean it's difficult, you just need someone to explain it to you, and B, learn how to build your vocabulary now because when you get older, I don't want you to have to resort to using your physical abilities to defend yourself. There's power with words. Words frame reality, and that was the thing that I learned later in life because I was so quiet as a kid. I was able to listen to everyone and I saw that a lot of times conflict happens because people misinterpret each other's words.

So I felt like if I can clearly articulate myself, I can reduce the amount of conflict I have in my life, and I can neutralize anyone not understanding where I'm coming from. And so that's what I want my kids to say about me is that I gave them the gift of critical discourse and rhetoric, how to articulate themselves, how to speak and advocate, and how to hold other people accountable to the standard that they held themselves to because that's all I try to model for them.

LUVVIE That's beautiful. That is stunning, and your kids just beautiful. You're doing an amazing job. You are doing an amazing job. You and your wife doing awesome. So, what do you do for self-care?

JASON Therapy. Therapy is essential. Any black person, a black man, I speak specifically to men right now that think you're a sucker because you go to therapy. It's a myth. We all need a objective point of view to just tell us the real and just listen. I get up every morning, I journal, I meditate, I do yoga, I read my Bible, and then I do [inaudible 00:46:47] time. So, that's my daily routine every morning. I don't skip a beat. I tell myself, "Movement is medicine," and then I try to decide how I want to feel about Friday versus how much I need to get done by Friday, and I just work towards that like, "How do I want to feel about Friday? Do I want to feel accomplished, do I want to feel busy and hurried?" And anything that takes me off that path or forces me to have

an opposite inner dialogue, I just eliminate it. I focus on, like I said, my feelings versus my productivity at this stage in my life.

LUVVIE That's a key. That's a key right there. How do you want to feel by Friday not what do you want to have done. That's a great question. So what do you consider a professional troublemaker? What does it mean to get into good trouble?

JASON Man, I believe a professional troublemaker is a accomplice not an ally, and I tell people the definition for an accomplice is benevolent co-conspirator, somebody that's going to go back-to-back with you and throw hands. We all got that friend that we know if it pop off, they right there. No questions asked. I think that's professional troublemaker is speaking out when it's not convenient. Speaking out when I may lose my job because I feel like I've seen something happen to you that's an injustice, and just because I'm in a position of power, and I may lose some stock and a little bit of salary, doesn't mean I can turn a blind eye. I think it's doing the inconvenient thing when it's not popular, and the reason I define it in that way is a good friend of mine, she expressed to me that a few years ago, she was denied a job by another good friend and his explanation was he wasn't ready. Yeah, he didn't understand why women should be in leadership. He wasn't ready.

I'm like, "Ready? Bro, why do you have to be ready to know that discrimination is wrong? It's not like we're making food. It's not like a meal that's prepared. Equality's not prepared. Equality should be accessible to everyone instantaneously," and so that's why I speak up when it's inconvenient. That's why I speak up when it's uncomfortable. I never waited until I was in some powerful position to do what was right. I did what was right every step of the way even when I thought I had no authority that man gave me, I knew God gave me all authority because I believe in His Word, so I don't worry about men. Psalm 56:4 says, "In God's word I trust and praise, in God I'm not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" They're mere mortals, what could they do to me? So, I have to speak up. That, to me is what I believe in. Professional troublemakers have to do the inconvenient thing at the inconvenient time because that's how history is made.

LUVVIE Come on! And that is why I wanted to be in conversation with you. I think you are an amazing professional troublemaker, you are somebody who's been disrupting your industry for a long time, disrupting your own life for the greater good, and that is also what it means to be a professional troublemaker. I know your vulnerability, and I think it's really important for people to hear and see because it is so different from what the picture they try to paint about black men is. So, thank you for being you. Thank you for rolling in the way that's authentic, and for being somebody who's already iconic, and a lot of it is even beyond all the shoes you've drawn. It's about this path that you're paving and this model that you are for other people. So I appreciate you, sir.

JASON Thank you, ma'am. I appreciate you, and I feel tremendously honored to be one of five. I take that seriously. For real. For real, man. For real. Brothers don't make space for sister the way sisters make space for brothers, so I appreciate the space you all made for me and I do dedicate a vast majority of my time to check in men and letting us know what we could do better. I'm not a man-basher. I am a guy, but I feel like we could do better and we have to educate ourselves. We have to educate ourselves. Just as much as we talk about racial equality, we got to educate ourselves about what's happening and make sure that we check ourselves, and so I appreciate

the space you made and I honor this platform, and I honor everybody who's listening to me on this platform because I know that when they come to you, they coming for something meaningful. They're not coming for the cap, and so I don't take that lightly. So, I appreciate the space that you've created as well.

LUVVIE And I appreciate your brotherhood too, man. Listen, this is so dope and I'm really excited that if people hadn't heard about you, now they will know. Jason, I salute. More to come. And listen, the moment you all drop a collection, I'm ready with my monies. Just send me the link. I am prepared. The drip. You're going to be see me in the full drip. I just need all the excuses. Full drip, up and down. So, I'm ready for you.

JASON For sure. We got you. We got you.

LUVVIE Oh. All right, sir. Have a good week.

JASON All right. You too.

LUVVIE Bye.

JASON Peace, peace..

I've been thinking so much in the past few months about what it looks like to be a professional troublemaker as a leader. As my company grows, as I watch my friends step into these positions as leaders thinking about how to give people cover to be their best selves, or as Jason said – to be honest with them. Because leadership means honesty. Speaking out and speaking up as a leader doesn't mean you're a dictator, it means you can lead from the back of the pack and be supportive and be an advocate. It means you can lead with a velvet glove.

And I love his commitment to Plan A throughout his career. Writing letters to Nike and sending them sketches at age 10?! He opened his mouth and advocated for himself and made that dream come true. And he's spent his career opening his mouth and advocating for others so their dreams can come true. I can't wait to see what he creates next.

Be sure to follow Jason on social media. He's @JasonMayden on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#), and be sure to check out

Much love to Chicago Recording Company, who I've been partnering with from the start of this podcast and they've been such a huge help putting my recordings from home together and making the sound on point.

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Until next time, have the courage to speak your truth and show up as yourself. Create good trouble.