

PROFESSIONAL TROUBLEMAKER



with LUVVIE AJAYI JONES

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Be Less Apologetic (with Kimberly Blackwell) - Episode 12

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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.

With over 20 years as an entrepreneur and CEO of brand agency PMM, Kimberly Blackwell is one of the country's top executives in new media, marketing and advertising. She's a technical, strategic and creative consultant and trusted advisor to multibillion-dollar global corporations and has served in two presidential administrations as one of the country's eight female CEOs on the National Women's Business Council. Kimberly is someone I geek out on branding with and all things business. She's part of the squad and has so much wisdom to share in this interview.

I already knew Kim was brilliant, but it was amazing hearing some of the stories I didn't know about her growing up – starting school early and skipping grades and whatnot. We're talking about how a key conversation with a mentor gave her the courage to start her side hustle that is now her main hustle, how her family and family friends normalized hard work and success and how she shows up with excellence everywhere she goes. If out there feeling stuck or wondering what could be possible for you if you have the courage to just start and work hard - you need to pay attention to this conversation. Let's get into it.

Conversation with Kimberly Blackwell

LUVVIE Kim, welcome to Professional Troublemaker.

KIMBERLY Oh my gosh, I'm so thrilled to be here.

LUVVIE Oh my God, this is a long time coming.

KIMBERLY Too long.

LUVVIE Long time coming.

KIMBERLY Too long.

LUVVIE Too long. So, I always start off by asking my guest, what did you want to be when you were growing up?

KIMBERLY Fun fact?

LUVVIE Yeah.

KIMBERLY I actually wanted to be a sports medicine doctor.

LUVVIE Really?

KIMBERLY Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). So I have a passion for sports. And really for me, was very curious about medicine. And actually, my undergraduate degree, I went to Syracuse pre-med. And so everything by way of my preparation was to go to medical school.

LUVVIE sports medicine. So wait, how old were you when you realized that that's something that you wanted to be?

KIMBERLY So here's what I'll tell you. I feel like I thought I wanted to be a doctor probably as early as junior high. Not quite as young as elementary. But I think by junior high I kind of developed that curiosity around medicine. And then I played sports in high school. So I played volleyball and basketball. Okay, so listen at this. Had a scholarship for basketball to Yale.

LUVVIE Oh.

KIMBERLY Did not go to Yale, obviously. And to this day, my father does not let me live that down.

LUVVIE Okay, I'ma bring you way back because this is fascinating. Okay. So five-year-old Kim, how was she?

KIMBERLY Okay, let's back that up. So Kim started school at three-years-old. And so for Kim, I went to a Montessori school. I started early. Kim was also advanced a grade. So I tell folks, nothing I do or have done has ever been conventional. So started school early, advanced a grade, so I graduated fairly young. I pledged in my teens Alpha Kappa Alpha. Oh, yeah. It's like that.

But going back to your question, I think five-year-old Kim actually still has a lot of the characteristics of 40-something-year-old Kim. I think I always was a people person. I think I was always operating from a position of excellence. I put pressure on myself, and I remember this, even as a child. I wanted to beat you in everything that we played. Like kickball, I want to win. And I want to win not by two kicks but by 10. So I was very competitive.

I think as I look to areas to where I tried to kind of position myself as a team player, I think even then and having played soccer as a toddler, I went to a Montessori school so I was kind of raised in that environment of like we didn't sit at desks with chairs. We were taught to be free in our thinking. We roamed the room with blocks and all that good stuff. We called our teachers by their first name.

LUVVIE Oh, no.

KIMBERLY John Burnell. I will never forget him. John Burnell. It was really cool. My mother's an educator, so grew up in the fact where my mother started as a school teacher. And so we would come home to kids we didn't know sitting in the dining room at the table. Because my mother really kind of operated like it takes a village. And so I was like, "Who is that?" But I think I developed that sense of community and responsibility to community by seeing my mother embody that at such an early age.

And so she was an educator, teacher, then became an administrator, retired as the superintendent. My father was in public service. I grew up where he had been on the city council, but even before that, school board. We were Sasha and Malia without knowing it way back when, doing parades. My father...

LUVVIE Were you oldest or youngest?

KIMBERLY Oh, I'm the oldest of three. I'm the oldest of three. So I have pictures, like my dad was the mayor, so there are big plaques with his name, and we're sitting on his lap and council chamber. My dad is pretty well-traveled. He has served as an ambassador, UN ambassador. He served under secretary in HUD. So that's where I got a lot of my service responsibilities. And so to me, between the education and understanding service, that whole mindset of servant-leadership came into play.

LUVVIE So, you then got into sports. So now let's talk about you into sports. First of all, how tall are you?

KIMBERLY So I'm 5'10".

LUVVIE You're 5'10"?

KIMBERLY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

LUVVIE And Kim enjoys a good heel. So when you see Kim in these streets, Kim is like 6'2".

KIMBERLY Oh, yeah. Don't try to cheat me because I'm tall. I tell folks like, "What, I'm supposed to wear flats?" Nah. Uh-uh.

LUVVIE Exactly. Don't let them stop your game. Don't let them stop your game. All right, so the first sport that you play was which one?

KIMBERLY First sport and love of sport is basketball. Volleyball was really just designed to keep me in training for the season thereafter. So volleyball was before basketball, and that got me in shape to ball.

LUVVIE You started playing that, how old were you?

KIMBERLY Dang, I don't even remember how hold. Again, like I say, we did soccer, swimming. My mother grew up in West Virginia and she moved to Cincinnati. And I think my mother, she was one of seven. And for her, she just always wanted to provide the things that maybe they did not have growing up as a coal miner's daughter. My grandfather was a coal miner. And so they moved to Cincinnati. She and my dad met in grade school, they dated, went to the prom, went to college, got married. They've been married 50 plus years.

LUVVIE Oh, my God.

KIMBERLY Yeah, I haven't had that luck.

LUVVIE Ma'am. Oh my God, They were high school sweethearts?

KIMBERLY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

LUVVIE Oh my God, that's so amazing.

KIMBERLY And what's really cool about that, even beyond their love story, is that because they've known each other from such a young age, the families know one another. And so family is a big part in how I've been raised. Because my mother's family knew my dad's family because they all went to school together. My mother's brothers played football, my dad played football. He went to college and then played for the Dallas Cowboys. So there was all this synergy around this community of families that started for them in grade school.

LUVVIE All right, so you started playing basketball and then ended up being so good, you had a scholarship to Yale. When did they start recruiting you? Was it freshman year of high school?

KIMBERLY You know what, I'ma be totally honest with you. I don't remember when they started. It don't think it was probably until my junior year. Basketball's like a business now. All sports are like a business. I have friends that are on coaching staffs, and they start going to watch these kids at AAU in grade school. No. Uh-uh. For me, it was late. Nobody was checking for me.

LUVVIE Especially women's basketball at that point, was not...

KIMBERLY Exactly. So at that point, there was no WNBA. And so for me, it was like, "What?" First of all, I'm tall. So I got to Syracuse and I was like, "There's boys taller than me?" So my attention was on my studies, but it was on other things as well. I love the game, but not so much at Syracuse that I wanted to walk on. Because I remember when they came to me and asked me about it, because I guess somebody had told them by way of me having played, I just went there.

LUVVIE Wait, what made you turn down the actual Yale scholarship though?

KIMBERLY Because, again, and this is the debate that I still have with my dad, I did not... I knew Yale was a great institution. But I did not love basketball in that way, where that was the key driver for me in making the decision.

LUVVIE So you were pretty sure, pretty clear. You were like, "Eh, I'm not going to be motivated."

KIMBERLY I didn't love it in that way. I thought, again, and even later as I told you my initial passion was sports medicine, I was going to get basketball by being the sports medicine doctor. It was just going to be different.

LUVVIE It's interesting, a lot of the guests that I've had on this podcast, when I ask them what did you want to be when you were growing up, a really good amount of people say doctor in some form. Because that was also my dream too.

KIMBERLY It was?

LUVVIE I almost want to count how many times people have said this to me. Because the amount of us who's just been like, "Yeah, I wanted to be a doctor."

KIMBERLY But could that be, let me flip it on you [inaudible 00:19:49] could that be too that at that time, we didn't have these images of these creators. There wasn't a Lena Waithe running around at that time. And I wonder if just be what we were kind of taught and, or traditional exposure to

the career opportunities that were going to provide us with a nice way of living, it was like doctor, lawyer.

LUVVIE Correct. And I think that's actually very much a part of it, is because back then the idea of what your actions are was narrow. For all of us it was narrower. These kids nowadays are not like, "I want to be a doctor," they're like, "I want to be a YouTuber." Okay, so you went pre-med. My pre-med dream ended my freshman year of college because I got a D in chemistry.

KIMBERLY It happens.

LUVVIE So how far did you take this pre-med dream? It happens, girl. That's it.

KIMBERLY I took it actually pretty far. When I left Syracuse, I actually then went, remember I'm young, so I then went and did a post-baccalaureate program at The Ohio State University in preparation still, and it's a transition bridge for medicine. Now, when I graduated, I actually became a substitute teacher.

LUVVIE What?

KIMBERLY Wait a minute. Remember I told you my mother was an educator. My mother was the plug. Because when I went back home, I was never without work because everyone would call me because they knew call Ms. Blackwell's daughter. She's subbing. Well, then if you were smart and understood the opportunities there, you could get full-time benefits and a salary. Because you know with a sub, you get paid a daily rate. But if you are a long-term sub, somebody goes out on maternity leave, you get salary and benefits. Boom.

LUVVIE So that's how you became a substitute teacher.

KIMBERLY Yeah. And so first year, I think was more so on a rotation of elementary school students, but then went over to the high school, taught Spanish I and Spanish II in Cincinnati Public Schools. Now, you know what's funny? Look how long we've known each other. You're like, "Man, I ain't know..."

LUVVIE I didn't know this. I did not know this at all. Wow.

KIMBERLY Yep. But what was weird about that was, because I was so young, the seniors boy students, they trying to flirt, "Ms. Blackwell, let me holler at you."

LUVVIE And you're like, "Nah, man."

KIMBERLY I'm like, "No."

LUVVIE How old were you at that point? 21?

KIMBERLY Yeah, I might've been about 21.

LUVVIE Wow. So I know they had no respect. Listen, they're like, "She's one of us."

KIMBERLY It was hard. It was hard. Because think about it, I would go out, and you're junior, seniors, and you sneaking into places you shouldn't be...

LUVVIE And you see your students?

KIMBERLY ... and you see your teacher in the club.

LUVVIE No. Oh, my God. So how long were you a substitute teacher for?

KIMBERLY I did that for a couple years. I did it for a couple years. Now, I will tell you this. This is really where I think, even going back to me having seen and witness my mother in that role, there was student when I was in the elementary rotation, third grade student who brought a gun to school. And so I'm in my classroom, and they're like, "Ms. Blackwell, student X has a gun." So I'm like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Gun?"

And he was being raised at the time by his grandmother. He had been in the system as a foster child. And I think always I've had an affinity for our young people, especially those who are homes with less privilege. And so for me, that's a big part still of my mission and how I look at servant-leadership and where I make investments of time and opportunity.

LUVVIE Wow. So people see Kimberly Blackwell the powerhouse that you are today, how did you go from that substitute teacher to owning your company?

KIMBERLY So I ended up going to grad school, and I went to Xavier University to get my master's. And then from there, I will tell you that I never saw myself owning and operating my own business. Just didn't see it. I was working for a company based in Columbus, Ohio. It was an apparel company, kind of like urban apparel what was back then, like the Phat Farm, FUBU, Sean John. So I worked between both Ohio and New York, and so it was two weeks on, two weeks off, and loved what I did.

I was serving as vice president of advertising and marketing. And probably a couple years into that role, I had a guy who I reported into who was a Nike alum, president of the company, and he came to me... Because I am a workaholic. My name is Kim Blackwell, I'm a workaholic. He came into my office one day and he was like, "Look, you work really hard, you do great work, just need to tell you something, this company, it's not going to make it."

LUVVIE Whoa.

KIMBERLY So at that time I was kind of like, "Okay, what do I do?" And I went to lunch one day with a then mentor that I was introduced to by my parents, and she was an executive at a Fortune 500 company, and she was like, "You know that companies pay you for all of the stuff that you and I are talking about today." She was like, "You really know your stuff, and have you ever thought about going into business for yourself?" And I was kind of like, "Don't really know."

And fast forward, that conversation I guess stirred with me a little bit longer, and revisited, had my side hustle that I saved has become my main hustle, and had an LLC, went in, and just kind of

took the leap of faith and started into my business, and haven't looked back 21 years [crosstalk 00:27:03].

LUVVIE What year was that?

KIMBERLY I started my business in '99. April 4th, 1999. April 4th.

LUVVIE 4/4/99.

KIMBERLY How about that?

LUVVIE 4/4/99. So, you as the no longer sports medicine person who ended up in marketing, back in '99 there were no YouTube tutorials that you could watch. There's no Twitter to teach you the ropes. There's no LinkedIn.

KIMBERLY No. Baptism by fire. It was continuous learning curve. It was really kind of connecting myself with the right mentors and champions. Leaning into folks within my immediate circle and developing other relationships. I will also say that my late uncle, who was actually my dad's best friend. You know how that works. He became uncle. He was the first Black head of advertising at Procter & Gamble. And that was really how I kind of got more curious about marketing. Because when we would go to their home, there were pictures up of P&G products. There was Tide up on the walls.

And, he was the reason, or one of the reasons why I went to Syracuse. So he was a Syracuse alum. If we get into it, I'll talk to you a little bit too about how he introduced me by way of kind of like where I play in this venture space and investing. Because he left Procter & Gamble. He, along with four other Black couples, so five Black couples total, my parents being one of them, when he left Procter & Gamble he started a radio station in Cincinnati, Ohio. Five Black couples, they buy one radio station.

LUVVIE Together?

KIMBERLY Buy together.

LUVVIE That's genius.

KIMBERLY Grow the business, sell it as the second largest minority-owned radio broadcasting to what you all know as Radio One and Cathy Hughes.

LUVVIE Whoa.

KIMBERLY So that too was, again, where I also had begun to see the power of investing, understanding that by way of taking risks, by way of also to doing the vetting and looking for other interested partners. I'm a huge sports fan, as was mentioned, and a very huge Magic Johnson fan. And so Magic Johnson, everybody knows them to be owners in the Dodgers. Well, my family and other Black families in Cincinnati put together an investor group and were actually among the first,

before Magic's and the Dodger's deals, to be minority owners in the Cincinnati Reds. So if I'm at a Reds game sitting behind a home plate, I'm in my parents' seats.

LUVVIE Because they still are owners of it?

KIMBERLY Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

LUVVIE Wow. Wealth building and legacy building in such an early time.

KIMBERLY Now, what I will tell you too, for folks who are thinking, "Oh, she must have had X, Y, and Z." No, I come from, by way of income, I would say middle class. Remember I told you that was not my parents' upbringing.

LUVVIE Exactly.

KIMBERLY So my father's father was a meat packer. And my grandmother, late grandmother, raised kids in her home. So again, to me, when I think about the dream and the American promise and what it can be regardless of color. We can have all that we aspire. We just got to put in the work. And so for me, even still with seeing that by way of example, it did allow me to have exposure in a way that most may not. But that's why I feel like it's my duty to make sure that I am paying it forward, and I do subscribe to the scripture to whom much is given much is required. And that's why hopefully, the folks that I know see me doing things by way of service in a way that only I know because that's how I was raised.

LUVVIE Here's the thing is, what we can hope for is that those who came before us, their struggle wasn't in vain, and those who come after us do not have to struggle like those who came before us.

KIMBERLY That's right.

LUVVIE So that's, honestly, the goal. Our parents hopefully are creating this type of wealth and legacy for us to now continue and move forward.

KIMBERLY That's right.

LUVVIE For you in that time as you're building this company, you're seeing your parents do what they're doing, what mistakes do you remember making early on as you're creating this future award-winning agency that you didn't realize you were creating?

KIMBERLY Not a lot. For me, I'm conservative by way of growth and also by way of span. I probably should have invested in help around my business much sooner when I did begin to develop the means. I think too I don't, kind of tangential or adjacent to that, I don't like to ask for help, and that's something that I'm working on. And it probably did not have to be this hard for me.

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 Let's drill into that. Because you know we had these conversations.

KIMBERLY We do.

LUVVIE Where you'll text me, be like, "Luvvie, what you doing?" And I be like, "What's up, Kim?" And you be like, "I didn't want to bother you." And I'm like, "Ma'am, we are friends for a reason." This whole thing about not wanting to ask for help is a universal problem, especially with Black women. Especially with Black women who have built lives that feel and look big and are big. Especially with Black women who are just bosses. We don't like to ask for help. It is our kryptonite.

KIMBERLY It is. You know what, I do think I'm getting better because I do think that what I love about what I see with you, and I hope I can share this. If I can't, then...

LUVVIE Go for it. You good.

KIMBERLY So one of the things that really kind of carried me through 2020 was that we developed our Sunday afternoon calls. And so it's me, it's you, it's Britney, Pat [inaudible 00:34:22], it's Debbie Brown, it's [inaudible 00:34:25]. Yvonne Orji. Everybody. We just had a great group. Felicia, Erica. It started out, we were every Sunday.

LUVVIE Every Sunday. Because that was it was super shut down. Nobody could leave their house.

KIMBERLY Every Sunday at 4:00. I had another regularly scheduled with a group of women of the ELC. But going back to your question, the one of the anointed squad was special. Because I saw a lot more cross sharing of information and resources, where folks were in there, guards down, Kahlana, I'm sorry Kahlana. I'm in this room, or these Zooms, with a group of dynamos. And again, you all are in your thirties, I'm in my forties, I'm inspired coming to the calls. You all thinking I'm the OG on the call. And I'm trying to scribe notes and take as much as I can.

Because, to your point, I think we need to get better with where is it that we tap into our tribal, vibes, energies, efforts, because it all was always in love. And as the world opened back up even

a little bit, I miss those calls. And I know we are getting them in a different cadence and they're not weekly, but that really was a lot in the sense of feeding my soul, my hustle. Remember, I'm an entrepreneur still. My business is scaled. And I say this, I started from a 600 square-foot bedroom apartment. I say this too now to say we are a multi-million dollar firm, but I don't say that to brag or boast. I say that because somebody is listening and is sitting at home questioning one, should they even be doing what they're doing, and how big can it get. And what I will tell you if you put the work in, the right talent around you, you find a place in market for the product and service, it can be as big as you want it to be.

LUVVIE And can be.

KIMBERLY It can, absolutely.

LUVVIE It can be, yeah.

KIMBERLY It can absolutely be. And so for me, as an entrepreneur even still, I tell people, I eat what I kill and every day I'm hunting.

LUVVIE And that's why the whole ask of it all becomes tough. And I think one thing I'm also learning in the last few years is the fact that to build the company that I want to build, to build the life that I want to build, to have the squad that I want to have, I had to get out of my way of being afraid of asking. And to your point, having the anointed squad, that vulnerability also lets you be able to ask. It lets you know that, you know what, I can go to these people to talk about...

Literally, if I have a question about building an eight-figure business, I know I'm coming to you. If I have a question about meditation, I'm going to Devi, be like, "I need to steal your time right now. Can I ask for your time?" So that in itself is such value. And the other thing that you have been able to do really well, and the reason why you were able to scale your company really well, is the fact that you are a branding and marketing genius.

KIMBERLY Thank you.

LUVVIE We can geek out on branding all day, every day. One of the things about being a woman of prominence, a woman who's running her company, and one thing that has made you stand out over and over again is the fact that you make it look good. You make it look good.

KIMBERLY You know what though? I try to. Because at the end of the day, I am Black and I'm a woman. And so I don't get the same level of forgiveness and do-overs as others might. And so first impression is lasting impression for me.

I can be a driver in my organization. I have this whole process where we have an HR person, they work their way through the organization in management. My sister works with me. So I recruited my sister. My sister, practicing attorney, barred in two states. But as you grow your empire, that immediate circle around you... You could have the most talented people by way of technical expertise, but there are some trust areas that you have to kind of navigate. And so I begged her, and so she's with me. So all of that to say, once they get past her, then they come to me.

But I'm always pretty transparent, to your point, in my standard of excellence for myself, for my company, and for my team. It's because I don't rest on any laurel. You can tell we got all the awards and recognitions. But every day, I approach the day as though I'm in that 600 square-foot apartment. That's how I wake up. I love what I do. Doesn't mean I don't have bad days. But the same level of passion that I had and understanding, to your point, that I needed to be best in class as a brand manager, marketer, and understanding the ecosystem of comms and integrations, and then investing, and how I grew within the sector and the industry as well.

So here's the other thing, when you work for yourself, there's no continuing education program initially. But no, for me, remember too my mother's an educator. I was going to Harvard, I want to Dartmouth, I went to Cornell, I went to Northwestern. I don't even know that there's an Ivy that I have not been to, in the sense of investing in my development.

And so I think we should all be looking at, not saying you have to go to an Ivy, but how is it that you are looking each day driving into a better self? We should never get comfortable in any position of accomplishment. Because every day I feel like somebody's chasing that account. And I'm telling my team, uh-uh, we as an organization cannot afford to be in the now. We already must be thriving into the next. And we should bringing those innovative solutions, business transformation and ways in which we're bringing all types of new ideas to the industry, ahead of the client. We are essentially a consultancy arm.

LUVVIE So question for you though. For you to be in this industry of marketing, business, branding for 20 years, as a Black woman, I know you have been in a kajillion rooms where you've had to over-prove yourself. How have you navigated this industry as you? You've basically been in the boys' club. White boys club.

KIMBERLY I've been in the boys club. I'm still in the white boys club.

LUVVIE What is the way that you navigate it?

KIMBERLY You know what? I always try to look at - am I adding value? And that's in any room. Because what I do come to find is that if people feel like you're going to bring something that's going to help them win, they want you on a winning team. And it's like dial back even as far back as kickball again. Remember, there were two captains.

LUVVIE Yes.

KIMBERLY I always have kept myself in the mindset that I want to be selected if not first, among the first. So what is it that I am bringing by way of skill and talent to make people choose me? And so when I'm in rooms, I try to add value through perspective, through solutions, through challenging status quo.

LUVVIE Yes.

KIMBERLY You want to talk about being a professional troublemaker, I get paid to bring trouble.

LUVVIE There it is.

KIMBERLY

But there's an evolution to that, Luvvie. I didn't start out the way I am in this sense of confidence. Now, I have points on the board. There's a lot by way of case studies and proof of concepts. I can go into Fortune 1s and Fortune 100s and say, "Hey, we have looked at segments where there was low to even zero market share, and now they're over indexed. What? Give us the problem."

But a lot of that still, even when I'm looking at ways by way of my ventures and investments. I sit now more on boards and advisory groups where the men at the table, they don't care. Can you bring them the green? And how are you going to help them by way of business bottom-line? And that's really what I try to do. For me, it's really about looking for how I know what are the key differentiators around my presence in the room and outside of the room.

Because I tell folks, one of the biggest compliments that anyone can tell me is, "I hate that you missed the meeting." Because to me, then it kind of shows me where I fit by way of the value chain. And I think we should all be challenging ourselves, where is it that we fit in the value chain?

The reality of it is, is that all of us are dispensable. We really are. But I really want to kind of operate in a way that where I'm trying to position myself to my clients as, "What is it that we would do and what were we doing before PMM? Oh my gosh, where have they been all our lives?"

Because I will tell you too, most of our clients are 10-year clients. "I've been with Nationwide 10 years. Toyota, 10 years." When I look at the companies that we work for, global brands, and I don't take it for granted. Because what I also know is that when a CMO changes out, usually they change out the agencies. But what I try to do and what my teams try to do, is to bring enough value to the company or the enterprise, to where somebody in that organization is like, "New CMO, you can make some changes, but hands off PMM."

LUVVIE

Because y'all have proven yourself to be valuable over and over again. You've proven that whatever money they pay you, it is actually a deal because you show up and give value.

KIMBERLY

But I was going to say, to that point too, I always try to go into relationships with any corporation. I don't use the word vendor. I don't use the word supplier. We are a partner. We go through the good, the bad and the ugly, in a sense that we are navigating these waters together. And it should not feel transactional. We don't sell widgets. That's not what we do. We're in a professional service category. To your point, we need to be bringing undeniable value to the organization by way of impact, and impact is measured in all types of KPIs.

LUVVIE

So one of the things you and I talk about is even in team building. Team building is one of the toughest things about building a company. It is an art, not a science. And it is something that a lot of us struggle with. In your 20 years in business, what is the longest somebody has worked for you, one, and two, what have you found to be the key to building the right team for a multi-million dollar company?

KIMBERLY

Longest someone has worked for me will be either 12 years in March or 13 years in March.

LUVVIE Wow.

KIMBERLY And then what I find as it relates to kind of team building, another area in which I've grown. I've learned in many ways to get out of the way of my team. So they have this saying where it's like, when they feel me kind of hovering as a helicopter CEO, they're like, "Trust the team. Not even trust the team, trust da team." They're like, "Kim, trust the team." And I have grown more and more to trust the team.

Now, I will come in and give a POV, and give some areas of guidance, but I also find too that they build their own relationships across the team. I've been blessed and fortunate to see folks, and I don't even call my... I'll say it for the purpose of this example, but I don't even refer to my team as staff. They are always the team. It is rare if ever that you hear me say staff.

But I've seen them in weddings. So like I'll go to the wedding as a guest and there's a team member in the wedding. They throw one another showers. So to me, that is probably one of the highest form of reward to me as an employer, to know that through that culture, folks have developed life-long relationships, or at least special ones at that time that would allow for that.

LUVVIE I love that. That's so dope. I'm definitely trying to build the type of team that feels like that, and that team culture that's like there is no I in team. And me, I'm trying to move out the way too, similarly. I'm type A perfectionist, I got to know what's happening. And I started being like, "All right, let me step out of the way and see where I am the bottleneck to progress," because we can be.

KIMBERLY We can be the bottleneck. And I say that. And then I will say to them, even with a client, like I have had to say, "Hey, guys. It's not them, it was me."

LUVVIE It was me.

KIMBERLY It was me. I take full accountability. But I will tell you, Luvvie, of all of the things that I deal with as a founder and employer, the people part is probably amongst the hardest.

LUVVIE Yes.

KIMBERLY It is what it is. Because here's the thing too, I had to really get back to kind of managing expectations too. Because the reality of it is, is that it's my company. And so my thing is, one, I don't want folks to feel like I don't realize there's a life outside of PMM. So I want them to have that quality of life and balance. But I do expect that when you come to work till you sign-off, that you are going as hard as I am for the company. But what my reality is, that's what I expect, by my reality is different from that. And I have too, at times, kind of recalibrate and understand, "Kim, that's not what you're going to get out of everyone." It's not.

LUVVIE So how do you think your leadership style has changed in these 20 years? 22.

KIMBERLY You know what, I think it's changing in the fact that I'm trying to... PMM is definitely where the bread and butter comes from in the sense of the agency and the relationships across, not just corporations, but with government agencies, and even in the sense of representation of talent

as clientele. What I'm trying to do now, to your question is, there are so many things now that I'm involved in. I'm on the ELC board, I'm on the board at the chamber, I sit on a board for privately held fin tech company. I'm involved in different venture deals.

My ultimate goal in where I see that I'm evolving, is I'm actually spending less time day-to-day at PMM because I really do believe that I have quality talent and teams that allow me to do that. So I've evolved in the sense of letting go, trusting more, delegating better, outsourcing where needed. I do think that there's some things that we're good at, but we're not great at. And for me, you know my standard of excellence is great. So if I have to bring someone else in to get us from good to great, then I will make that investment. And then also too is really not cutting corners with talent.

LUVVIE Now, put that into terms that people need to really absorb.

KIMBERLY You get what you pay for.

LUVVIE There it is. Y'all hearing that?

KIMBERLY I think, again, everybody has to kind of figure out and seize your superpowers. As a leader, is it people leading? Is it around ideation? Is it around problem solving? Is it around logistics? Identify where you fall among the food chain, own your lane, seize your superpower, and just come hard with that as a way of an organizational contributor, and boy, you all good with me.

LUVVIE So what do you think your superpower is, Kim?

KIMBERLY Man. This going to sound a little arrogant.

LUVVIE No, no, no, no. It has to be arrogant if it's a superpower. Let's go. It's not even arrogant, it just is what it is.

KIMBERLY I think I have a unique ability to problem solve and really put it together quickly. And so that's by way of mitigation, it's by way of execution, it's by way of contingency, it's by way of resources around the table and are necessary. And I think that's really, to be honest with you, what's afforded me distinct position amongst corporate leaders in the C-suite to be able to do so.

I will say this too, I think I do it in a sense of trusted share as an advisor. I think people know that they have a place, a safe space of share. And as great as the problem is that I may be solving for, I never think that highly of myself. I'm just a very humble person.

So it's so funny because you keep saying superpower this and power and all that, I don't even see myself at all in that way, at all, at all. And it's always so funny that when I meet people, they're like, "Oh my gosh, you're so personable. Oh, you're so cool. Oh my gosh, I can't believe you called me back." Well, you called me. Didn't you call me? "You answered my email. Oh my gosh, you answered my DM." To me, I just really try to appreciate people and meet them where they are, and try to see where it is that I might be of assistance.

I'm also of the belief too that, as I continue to develop, and I still consider myself fairly young in my career, but what I've seen happen too, and let me tell you this, is that... I've seen this happen. Folks who don't help people along the way, and then they retire, they lose their job, something unforeseen happens, then they're the first people calling you. But I always kind of operate from the beliefs that if something like that were to happen, I feel like I have a lot of people who I will be okay with because that's the way I've treated people along the way, so I know that there will be enough of a tribe or community of support. And that's not why I do it at all, but I feel good knowing that I'll be okay if something like that were to happen, you know what I mean?

LUVVIE You've made deposits so you can make withdrawals.

KIMBERLY That's right.

LUVVIE Some people want to make withdrawals without making any deposits, and they look up and wonder why they're bankrupt. That's the thing.

KIMBERLY That's a word. That's true.

LUVVIE You ain't got no credit though!

KIMBERLY Hello. Hello.

LUVVIE How you going to pull something out of something you never put anything into? And that's why the ones who win, the people who really win are the ones who are lifting as their climbing. They're constantly making deposits, and that's significant, that's huge. And that's something that you constantly do. And that actually reminds me of the next question I was going to ask you, which is, you might even have already answered it, which is the thing that people most misunderstand about you.

KIMBERLY That's a part of it in the sense that I think people kind of misread me by way of my personality. I think people read me well on my character. I lead by my character. I try to tell folks, I don't even want to hear about something that is going to be questionable by way of integrity. That doesn't mean that I've never made mistakes by way of how I live and things that have happened along the way. I'm a God-fearing person and woman. I'm unapologetic in my faith as much as I'm unapologetic in my boss. That is something that I do not hide, marginalize.

See, because you got to understand, for almost 22 years it's been me and the man above. There have been things that have happened to me by way of my business, by way of things outside of my business. It's just been me and Him. And so I'm always quick to give God the glory. I'm always quick by way of understanding. See, for me, there's not a lot that I don't think that I can't achieve without putting in the work. Faith without work is dead.

LUVVIE Dead.

KIMBERLY But once I have kind of ignited that sense of spirit of faith, child... I've been in rooms that, Luvvie, to this day I cannot tell you, people are like, "Well, how'd you do that?" Favoring fear.

That's my answer now. Because it's not because I think I'm just that great. But I do know about that grace. For me, to have been appointed in the Obama administration and then asked to stay during the Trump administration around the National Women's Business Council. See, because to me, it's important that we have advocates that understand public policy.

Remember, I told you this ties back to my parents and me understanding what policy means. I serve on the advisory council for The Collective, Stephanie Brown James and Quentin' James' organization to get more representation of Blacks in all areas of office. You and I have worked in the area Win With Black Women. I got the call for the first meeting, and that was actually by a corporate executive, Tanya Lombard of AT&T.

LUVVIE Oh, Tanya.

KIMBERLY Tanya said, "Kim, I need you to come to this meeting." So when we did the roll-out and everybody had the overlay, and this was before our vice president was announced as the selection. We knew that we wanted to galvanize and be unapologetic about a Black woman being considered on that ticket.

KIMBERLY And I've always kind of made myself present. Before, I was supporting Vice President Harris when she was running at the top of the ticket. And what I want more people to understand too by way of policy, and again, I was mentioning my advocacy for women business owners, we serve on that council, 15 member council, only eight CEOs in the country, as independent council to the president of the United States, SBA, and Congress.

LUVVIE Oh, wow.

KIMBERLY Anything that I do, in any role. Now, I was selected for that role. Remember that woman that I mentioned that actually told me I should be in business for myself?

LUVVIE Yeah.

KIMBERLY Her name was Donna James, and she was the former executive over at Nationwide. And when Donna was appointed by President Obama, she said, "I need you on this council." And what I say to folks, especially as they think of their brands, Donna chose me because she knew that I would do the work around that council. She chose me because she knew that she could trust that I would be in there advocating in the interest in a way that she could be proud of as a collective. She knew that I would be bringing ideas, thoughts, as to where and how the council should be operating. And I say all of that because again, National Women's Business Council, I've stood at the New York Stock Exchange ringing the bell with a group of Black investors.

LUVVIE Sure have. This epic icon.

KIMBERLY Well, you know what, it was there too. Go back to Cincinnati. Remember I told you between my dad and his best friend, I was introduced to that whole world. But when my uncle passed, there was another executive at PMG that took me under his wings. When he started doing deal flow, they would call me. And when they did this spack that raised over \$300 million, he said, "I'm not

bringing you in here just to take your money, I'm bringing you in here because I know that you can help us as we go to this IPO."

LUVVIE Yes.

KIMBERLY And so again, I have been nothing but blessed. I live a good life, a real good one. And if I say it again I may start crying. But what I understand about that is that as quickly as he can give it to you, he can take it away. And so for me, all of what I say in around that whole sense of who I am as an individual, I realize that a lot of that comes from me understanding who I am and whose I am.

LUVVIE Come on. Come on. That is significant. That's a blessing. So, you are this boss, you are the CEO, you are the sister, this friend, this fashion maven. How are you taking care of yourself as you're doing all of this stuff? What is your self-care looking like?

KIMBERLY My name is Kim Blackwell and I'm a workaholic.

LUVVIE Hi, Kim.

KIMBERLY There you go. So, you know what, I'm getting better. I'm getting better. And as I look to, I am closing on a place in Florida soon. My whole thing around that, I live between Ohio, Atlanta, and soon to be Florida, is that I want to check out more. And I know that it's going to mean me totally unplugging. Florida and where I'm going is designed to be that place of recharge. And for me, that's a part of it. I travel. I mentioned I'm a sports enthusiast.

LUVVIE Yup. You be at courtside games. I be seeing you.

KIMBERLY I work hard. Courtside Kim. You saw courtside Karen last night at LeBron.

LUVVIE You courtside Kim.

KIMBERLY So here's the other thing. You know how I am about COVID. So I have season tickets and I do sit courtside. So this is a struggle for me, because as badly as I want to go to the games, I'm not. The Hawks are very good about it. They take your test as you enter, but no, I'm not taking any chances. So for me, just to watch the games from home is like torture. And so I have season tickets to the Hawks, to the Falcons, to the Bengals. So sports is an outlet for me, travel, I mention, what I hope will be a little more... I love a good spa.

LUVVIE Yes.

KIMBERLY So this is killing me too, because with COVID I haven't been to a spa. And then too, I want to get back, I was golfing. I want to get back into golf and tennis when the world opens up because I do miss activity by way of exercise. I have a Peloton bike. And girl, it is one nice hanger, in the sense of what it is not doing and should be doing.

For me to be disciplined in business, the stuff that I need to be disciplined in around my self-care, which again, the anointment squad, Sundays at 4:00, between what you all have really

kind of shared in your self-care, and you know you can't be in Devi's presence without being challenged around what and how we need to be fueling ourselves. I do think that I have kind of committed with more intention about self-care.

LUVVIE Yeah. I am with you on the spa. I'm looking forward to the world being open because I will spend a full day just...

KIMBERLY What are you going to do? What are you going to do when the world opens? What do you miss most?

LUVVIE I miss being able to see my homies. I really do. Seeing y'all at events. We got to conferences almost just to go see each other.

KIMBERLY That is. I think about Debra Lee Leading Women Defined.

LUVVIE Yes, Leading Women Defined.

KIMBERLY That's like a family reunion. Yeah.

LUVVIE Man. I miss that so much. Because I be like, "I ain't got to worry. I'ma see them next month at Leading Women Defined."

KIMBERLY Exactly.

LUVVIE "We going to be at the St. Regis for four days. We'll be all right. And I'ma see them after that at Essence Black Women in Hollywood. And then after that I'ma see them at..." I miss seeing y'all and being able to be like, "What's up? How you doing? I haven't seen you in a long time." I miss all of that. So I'm looking forward to that piece.

KIMBERLY We said we were going to plan a trip, so you all need to get on that.

LUVVIE We got to plan a trip. We got to plan a trip. So we going to do somewhere tropical. And it's going to be luxurious. I want us to spend a lot of money to be in paradise, have a villa, a chef.

KIMBERLY Where was that up? Someone was saying, "Can we normalize..." I think that might have been Ming Lee and Karen Civil. Can we normalize luxury and where and how we're comfortable making those type of investments for ourselves. We work hard. We deserve it.

LUVVIE Yes.

KIMBERLY I want us to be less apologetic about the things that we deserve and work hard for. And I will tell you. I give you full credit, Luvvie. And you don't realize how much you really challenge me without you knowing. I've told you, people have come to me and they're like, "Kim, you need to write a book." I called you and you were like, "Kim, I will help you." It's just the little things by way of encouragement. You were like, "You need to look at your own community." Because what we need to understand too, is that we're not competing.

LUVVIE No.

KIMBERLY There is enough out here for everyone. And I think sometimes as a people, the crab in the barrel mentality that we have seen operate in the past, I feel a sense of hope and promise for it. Because I think in what we provide for one another, nobody comes in with any titles, nobody comes in with any egos, everybody is just there to enjoy great company.

I knew Yvonne from Leading Women Defined, but I didn't really know Yvonne until after our calls, and then she was down here filming. I think we need to make sure that we are checking on one another more. It amazed me at how she was in the middle of a film but calling to check in on me.

Everybody likes to say, "Oh, I don't want to call you because I knew you were busy." And I always stop people, and I say, "You know what? I am busy. And I'm likely always going to be busy, but I'm never too busy."

LUVVIE Correct.

KIMBERLY I don't want people putting those type of expectations that, "Oh, I can't call Kim."

LUVVIE You know why people are doing when they do that? And it's something I learned from one of my coaches when I was like, "Oh, I can't hit you up and Slack at all hours," and she said, "Don't manage my boundaries. My boundaries are not your responsibility. Let me manage that."

KIMBERLY Thank you.

LUVVIE So when people are saying, "Oh, I can't call Kim," y'all are managing Kim's boundaries for her.

KIMBERLY That's right. That's right. Because the reality of it is, is that my plate is always probably going to be full.

LUVVIE Exactly.

KIMBERLY But that's because that's the way I like my platter to look. I think I probably have a lot of my work ethic from my father, and I tell folks too. My father's in his early 70s. I tell folks, I worry that he would stop working. Because I think if he stopped working, that's when... You know how you see folks when they stop working, they get sick? And I'm okay with that for him. Now, my mother on the other hand, when she retired from the Cincinnati public school, she was like, "I'm retired." But she had been working since she was 14. For her, she needed the rest. And I see a sense of youth around my mother that shows me the sense of her health. So for him it's working and for her it's not working.

LUVVIE It's because Black women, all we do is work, all we do is labor. So the fact that now she can breathe, she's gotten her energy back, and she's probably being in all types of clubs.

KIMBERLY You know what? It is. To me, even by way of how she manages her calendar, I'm like, "For you not to be working, you're awfully busy." But I think for her, she has kind of curated it in such a way that worked for her. So I'm minding my business and allow her to do her.

LUVVIE Look, she grown. I love it.

KIMBERLY She grown.

LUVVIE I love it.

KIMBERLY Grown, grown.

LUVVIE Listen, I got this. I'm here for any time I hear Black women talk about resting, luxury, taking care of themselves, and just being unapologetic about how dope we are. So that's why I'm like, "Listen, yes, let's talk about the superpowers. Yes, let's talk about how we going to spend money and go on the best vacation because we working our assess of this whole time to do it."

So, as you know, for me, I think one of the highest compliments is to be called a professional troublemaker. And that's why I have you on this show right now, is because you are professional troublemaker to me. So what do you think that means?

KIMBERLY I think it's earning a reputation, rightfully so, around disruption. But disruption in a good way. It means flipping status quo on its head. It means challenging authorities. It means charting new paths. It means bringing in other troublemakers. To me, if you receive it as good trouble... And I tell folks all the time, "If you know Kim Blackwell, then you know her intent." So even when I'm direct, even when I'm saying something that might pierce a little bit, you know I'm raising it to be discussed by means of opportunity, change, and how we develop and build better, not just for ourselves, but for others.

LUVVIE Yes. And you are one of the ultimate professional troublemakers in my life, and I am always inspired by you, and so appreciate your friendship and sisterhood, and I'm so glad I got to do this.

KIMBERLY No. I've been waiting and looking forward to doing it. Again, I can't say it without underscoring it enough, Luvvie, I'm loving what I'm seeing in the way in which you're contributing and bringing your energy, your vibes, your professional troublemaking skills. I told you this even with this book. Remember, you shared the cover with me? I see it as, your star power, I can't even describe it. I think you are clearly on an uptick. I'm anxious to be a spectator as you navigate your way on your private jet in this world.

LUVVIE Look, you be getting the invite. Don't worry, we're going to be PJing together. Don't worry.

KIMBERLY That is the plan. Wouldn't that be something?

LUVVIE I'll be like, "Kim, can I borrow your private jet next week? Because I got to go to this place."

KIMBERLY Claim it, claim it, claim it.

LUVVIE Claimed. I'm be like, "Kim, I just need to borrow your private jet real quick." Like it's about to be sugar. Let me go ahead an borrow your private... Real quick.

KIMBERLY You good for it. You good.

LUVVIE I'm good for it, you know what I mean? I'm like, "I'ma bring it back. It's going to be fine. I got this real quick adventure I got to go on." Shit, you probably going to be coming with me like, "Where you going? I'm coming."

KIMBERLY I was getting ready to say, "From your lips to God's ears. Let's go."

LUVVIE Amen. Let's do it. Appreciate you, boo.

KIMBERLY All right, babe. I'm sure I'll talk to you soon.

LUVVIE Word.

KIMBERLY All right, stay safe.

I'm so grateful to have that woman on speed dial! It's so true what she said at the end of our conversation – we need to build these communities where we can challenge and support each other. Where we don't have competition, but encouragement for everyone to be their best. The thing that we forget out here is that the superpower you have, the magic you have is because of who you are. So we're not competing. We're just out here being our brilliant selves, shining right next to each other and I love that Kim brought that point out. And can we please keep normalizing that we need to be less apologetic about the things that we deserve and work hard for? I loved hearing Kim say that she can achieve anything because she puts in the work, and that she deserves the things she works hard for. Kim has earned the position of trust she holds with the corporations she partners with because she is willing to show up, say the things that need to be said, and do the hard work. She is a professional troublemaker through and through.

Kim is out here living brilliantly on social media – bringing business excellence and fashion excellence and all the things. She's @kimblackwellpmm on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#). And let her know how much you loved this episode by tagging her when you share.

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.