

PROFESSIONAL
TROUBLEMAKER



with **LUVVIE AJAYI JONES**

Professional Troublemaker with Luvvie Ajayi Jones

Kicking Doors Open (with Gina Yashere) - Episode 25

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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!

With this book and with everything I do, and I'm on a mission to help a million people live audaciously. To do that, they must fight their fear.

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.

My guest today is comedian, producer, author and fellow Nigerian Gina Yashere. From the UK, she was the first and only British comic to perform on Def Comedy Jam. She's got three comedy specials on Netflix and is a co-executive producer, writer and series regular on the CBS sitcom Bob Hearts Abishola, which she co-created with Chuck Lorre.

She became the first woman engineer for OTIS, the largest elevator company in the world, when she was only 19. During our conversation, we talk about how she's created her own opportunities and how other people's fear have opened doors for her greatness. We also talk about the release of her new book, Cack-handed: A Memoir, being disruptive,

Gina has always been a disruptor, never taking no for an answer. She went from being the comic that's never booked to now having a TV show on one of the major networks.

Persistence, betting on yourself, and taking responsibility for your own success can literally change your life.

Listen in.

Conversation with Gina Yashere

LUVVIE Gina, welcome to Professional Troublemaker.

GINA Why, thanks for having me Luvvie. And I've enjoyed all your works, I've read your books, I follow you. As far as I'm concerned we're friends. I don't care what anybody says, I consider you my friend-

LUVVIE We are. We be texting and whatnot, you know what I mean? Living our best lives. When the world opens back up, we got to meet up in some city in the world.

GINA Yes. I want to be in this Nigerian cool gang with Yvonne and Cynthia and everybody that you got. Because I've seen you lot on Instagram pre-pandemic and I was jealous as hell. I was like, "How come I'm not getting invited to these cool hangouts? Am I not Nigerian? I'm coming!"

LUVVIE You are getting an invitation! So, I am always curious, what you wanted to do or be when you were growing up? What was seven-year-old Gina's dream?

GINA Seven-year-old Gina wanted to be a scientist and an athlete at the same time.

LUVVIE Really?

GINA I was a sprinter, 100 meters was my jam, and I was talented. And you know I had a Nigerian family, so we've got five choices of career: doctor, lawyer, accountant engineer, or disgrace to the family. So my mum was like, "You're going to be a doctor, you're going to be a doctor." But even at seven I knew I didn't really like the sight of blood, but I was like, "I want to be a scientist." And she was like, "Well, sounds the same, okay."

GINA So scientist and athlete. I wanted to be a scientist discovering new amoebas and new cells and new things, and then in my spare time, win an Olympics 100 meters. That was me at seven.

LUVVIE Wow. So first of all, again, I wish I was keeping score, but if I had a running tally of the amount of people who came on this podcast and when I ask them that question, the answer was doctor. It was to be at least 60% of the folks who come on this podcast who, at one point in their lives, wanted to be a doctor. And clearly it didn't work out like that for any of us.

GINA Nope. I mean, I don't know if we wanted to be doctors, or it was just subliminally implanted by our parents. Because yeah, from about 10 to 18, I thought I was going to be a doctor. All my school, it was aiming towards becoming a doctor because my mum told me that's what I was going to be.

LUVVIE Yes, I think it's subliminal dream planting. It's like people tell you that enough you go, "Okay. Okay. I will be that." And that did not work.

LUVVIE So, what were you like at seven or ten, what was your personality like?

GINA Very boisterous. My mum says I was crazy from birth, because I came after twins, so I was born eight years after twins. My oldest sister, Taiwo and Kehinde. So my mum said there was a lot of room in there, and apparently I went AWOL in the room. So you know when the doctors come round and check, they couldn't find me because I had gone wandering around the womb, they couldn't find me. All the doctors were prodding like that, "Where is this baby? Where is this baby?" So my mum said that from that day she knew I was going to come out crazy.

LUVVIE You were the turn up queen from the womb.

GINA From the womb. So yeah, as a seven-year-old I was boisterous, I was loud, I was... I questioned everything. So my mum had to keep me on a tight rein at school. My mum was super overprotective and super harsh disciplinarian, so at school I let off steam. When I got to school I was like, "Yeah! Freedom!" And I was crazy. Every school report said, "She's very clever, she's very good, but she's disruptive, disruptive." Every school report said, "Disruptive." Because I finished my work and then I'd be clowning and making my friends laugh and all that kind of stuff, and teachers were like, "Can you just let the other kids finish their work before you..."

GINA So that was me as a seven-year-old, just nuts. Nuts.

LUVVIE So where did you grow up? Where were you born?

GINA I was born in Bethnal Green, east London. So I'm a Cockney by birth, proper Bow Bells Cockney, like, "Geyser, whatever, all the movies." That's how I talked when I was a kid. Like straight up Cockney geyser. So yeah, that's where I was born.

LUVVIE And how was that? Because here's the thing, most of my listeners live in the US, they have no clue, really, what it's like in England. What was growing up in that area like?

GINA Horrible. England in the 1970s and '80s, super racist. Now my mum came to England in the '60s, early '60s, and that was when they had signs on their doors, "No Blacks, no dogs, no Irish." So you go to rent a place, these were signs that people put on their doors to let you know, don't bother ring the doorbell, you're not getting a room in this house.

GINA So this was England. And in the '70s, it was very racist. I routinely got spat on and chased by skinheads, routinely, as a... In one of the chapters, the first chapters of my book, I talk about the first time a skinhead spat on me. We lived in what was considered the projects, it was a council flat, which is like the projects of east London. And you have those trash chutes, you throw your trash down the chute. And if those chutes get blocked you have to bring the trash down, and that was my job as a six, seven-year-old to bring the trash down and throw it.

GINA And I remember being accosted by a bunch of boys in the hallway going back and they called me names and spat on me-

LUVVIE Wow!

GINA ... my mum used to make me wear dresses, because Nigerians. And I remember they spat and it landed on my thigh as I ran away.

LUVVIE No!

GINA I remember going back up to the apartment and gave mummy the bad boys. Because that's what we used to call them. I had no concept of racism, I was just like, "Oh, they're the bad boys that hang around the estate and call everybody names." But they were calling Black people and Indian people names, because you know. England in the '70s, racist. So my mum just wiped the spit off and, "Ah, just stay away from the bad boys." Because we were used to that.

GINA My mum would be walking to school in the mornings, and a car would drive by, someone would scream an epithet out the window and literally swerve into a puddle and splash us completely in filthy London water. So these are some of my memories of childhood in England.

GINA People think that England is so genteel and, "Oh, tall-ho!" Everybody's so polite. You forget that the British Empire ruled and subjugated a very large amount of the planet. The British Empire ruled the world for a very long time. They were the first and the biggest slavers. So yeah. Do not get it twisted. The Brits are just as bad as the Americans.

LUVVIE If not worse. I mean, they were like racism original.

GINA Yeah, like 1.0, the first, the first and the largest. The Americans learned from the Brits.

LUVVIE Exactly. Exactly. England was so racist that they left.

GINA Mm-hmm (affirmative).

LUVVIE And then it was like, "We're going to bring our own version of racism over here."

GINA Exactly. Exactly. So England, it was... I mean, it wasn't all bad. I enjoyed my... When you're a kid, you don't understand that this is not the way things are supposed to be, just go, "Right, those are the people to avoid. And I'll go this direction." And so I was a happy child. I was a happy child. I didn't know the struggles my mum was going through, I didn't know that we were quite poor, that my mum had come from a wealthy Nigerian family to come to England to suffer. I didn't believe I was suffering, I had food, I had clothes. I went to school. I was a happy kid.

LUVVIE And see, that's really important, too, because parents... It's a testament of parents, when you are poor and you have no clue.

GINA No.

LUVVIE No clue.

GINA No clue. No clue.

LUVVIE Wow. So okay, so you got this boisterous kid who is disruptive in school, shout out to many of us who talked too much in class. And we were too smart, so we got done too early, and the next thing you know, we're talking to everybody. And we're funny.

GINA Mm-hmm (affirmative).

LUVVIE You used to crack folks up way early?

GINA Oh yeah, way earlier. I mean, I used it as a way to deflect from confrontation. So as an African kid in England in the '70s and '80s, we were not cool back then. We were not cool. And I used to get into a lot of hassles at school. And as I just mentioned how racist England was, funnily enough, at school it wasn't the white kids that were giving me trouble. It was other Black children. Children of African Caribbean descent.

LUVVIE Wow.

GINA Because they were not educated to their origins, do you know what I mean? They had the same education that white people got where Africans were primitive animals running around in the jungle, chasing Tarzan, and trying to cook white people in pots, with bones in our noses. The only African people you saw on TV were hungry with flies landing on their faces begging for donations. So this was the only image of Africa that they had, white kids and Black kids alike.

GINA So they weren't taught. African Caribbean kids were not taught that they were descendants of slaves. They just thought that they were from the Caribbean. That Black people were in the Caribbean, there's different types of Black people. So they were like, "In Africa you're this, that."

I used to get called names, in America it was African booty scratcher, in England it was African bubu, spearchucker. All of that stuff. So yeah, I went through at school...

GINA A lot of African kids hid their African-ness. I couldn't, my mum would turn up at parent-teacher conference full African attire, all her gold on. She used to come like she was going to some kind of Nigerian ceremony, so I couldn't hide my African-ness. So yeah. I went through it at school, I went through it at school. Kids calling me names, I was constantly getting into fights. When I tell kids, "Hey, we're all from Africa. What are you talking about?" They'd be like, "Uh-uh, I'm Jamaican! I not to goddamn African..." Because they weren't educated to where they originated.

GINA It wasn't until Bob Marley started singing the songs and telling people where they came from they're like, "Oh?" Or when Roots came out. When Roots came out, that's when people, they were like, "Oh, oh?" So up until then, no idea. So I was constantly fighting other kids at school, Black kids.

LUVVIE So how did you maintain your Gina-ness as this is happening? What had you being like, "I'm still dope," what kept your confidence?

GINA My confidence was definitely knocked for a very long time. It was a tough exterior, I just maintained a tough exterior. So I was that kid who would fight anybody. And I carried that attitude right into my 20s, mid-20s. I was still fighting people out in these streets. Literally.

LUVVIE You were scrapping, Gina, you were out there just fighting people?

GINA Still scrapping. I was scrapping until I had to stop and say... I tried to use my humor to deflect, so I learned early on to use my humor, I made people laugh and deflect from confrontation. But if you stepped on me, I was that kid, I will fight you. Male, female, big, small, I will fight you.

GINA And so I got that reputation of being the crazy kid. So then people never really messed with me as much, so I never got bullied because I made a point of fighting everybody. So then they'd go, "Don't mess with her, she will fight you." And that's how I deflected. So it was humor or fight, and I tried to use humor.

GINA As I got older, I developed my sense of humor and my skill at comedy to deflect from that.

LUVVIE So when you turned 18 and you were about to, what, start university, when did the doctor dream die?

GINA Advanced level biology. My mum picked all my subjects in school. So I loved languages, I loved languages. I wanted to study French and German and Spanish. And I wanted to do arts. I felt artistic as a kid. I remember a drama teacher, because we did drama up until the age of 13 at school, it was just one of the compulsory subjects. And I loved that class. I remember this parent-teacher conference, the drama teacher saying to my mum, "Your daughter, she's very talented, she's got personality, she's funny. She should consider doing drama further than 13 years old." Because you can continue it. "She can act."

GINA My mum looked at this teacher and was like, "Yes, well, she can act like a doctor when she becomes a doctor." And that was the end of that conversation. And come next year when you had to pick your subjects, drama was out. My mum picked all of my subjects. "You'll do physics, you'll do biology, you'll do chemistry, you will become a doctor." So I managed to hold onto French, by convincing my mum that a bilingual doctor makes more money than a regular doctor. I was able to study French.

GINA But the dream at 18, advanced level biology. So we did these things in England called O-levels, GCSEs, and A-levels, so you did those at 16 and those, depending on how many you passed, you could leave school at 16 in England and go and work and do apprenticeships and go straight out into the working world, or stay on at school til 18 to do advanced levels. And then advanced levels are those subjects that get you into university [inaudible 00:16:00].

GINA So I was doing advanced levels, A-levels in physics, mathematics, and French-

LUVVIE Oh my God.

GINA I skipped chemistry because I was never good at chemistry. But I said to my mum, "I can still be a doctor with physics, maths, A-levels." So she was like, "Okay." No, I was doing physics, biology and maths, that's what I was doing. So I said, "Forget chemistry, I can still be a doctor."

GINA But then it got to biology advanced level and we had to dissect animals, and I remember we had to dissect a rat. And as soon as they sliced open that rat and everything oozed out, I was like, "Yeah, this doctor thing is not going to happen, I'm about to faint in this class, this is disgusting." So after that I went back to my mum and said, "Listen, mum, the doctor thing is not going to work out. I'm going to switch biology to mathematics, and I'm going to do physics, maths, and French, and I'm going to become an engineer."

GINA A month before they were trying to introduce more women to go into the engineering profession, and so they'd had a bunch of women engineers come to the school and talk to the girls, because I was doing advance level at a girl's school. And they came and talked to us and I was like, "Engineering, that sounds way more interesting. I can fix things, I don't have to be in an office, I can be out in the streets just doing my own thing, I'm going to be an engineer." So I told my mum and my mum was like, "Well, this is on the list. Okay, engineer." And then turns to my younger brother, "You'll now be the doctor! Forget engineer, you are the doctor, Gina is the engineer!"

GINA So literally the doctor thing just went down the conveyor belt of her children, until it fell off the end, because none of us became doctors. My mother's disappointment is palpable.

LUVVIE Listen, first of all, everybody has their moment of, "Oh yeah, no, my doctor dream died in chemistry 101," at least you got to advanced level biology. I quit at chemistry 101, so...

GINA Yep.

LUVVIE I didn't even wait for advanced levels.

GINA I kept my mum's dream alive as long as possible, right til 18, I kept that dream going. And I assumed I was going to be a doctor because she told me I was going to. And you know what? She used a really fantastic version of reverse psychology on me, because I don't think I would have been that good at school. I don't think I would have been that good at school, if my mother had not had these high expectations of me. So I assumed I was good... Clever. I assumed I was intelligent. I assumed, because my mum told me, "You're going to be a doctor, you're clever, you're going to do this, this is happening."

GINA So because of that, I assumed. If I think back, I was not that academically gifted. I had a good memory, I was wonderful at memorizing stuff.

LUVVIE Yes, that comes in handy on tests because you remember the page that you read that answer.

GINA Exactly. Exactly. But I was not that gifted. But, because my mum told me I was clever, I was like, "Damn, I'm clever." And so the assumption made me work harder to attain those goals.

LUVVIE See, that in itself is a lesson.

GINA Mm-hmm (affirmative).

LUVVIE You were basically convinced that you were good at this, and you were like, "Yes," and then you were good at it. That's a lesson, y'all. Tell your kids that they're good at stuff.

GINA Yeah, absolutely. Tell them, because they will manifest what you instill in them from a very young age. So I've always assumed myself to be intelligent, even though if I think about it, I'm all right. I'm average.

LUVVIE But according to mums, you're clever. And it worked.

GINA I'm the best.

LUVVIE Because here you are today making a living being clever, okay?

GINA Mm-hmm (affirmative).

LUVVIE So engineering, how long did you do that?

GINA Six years. I passed my A-levels, I got accepted into university, but my mother was so overprotective she wouldn't let me go to university outside of London, because I wanted my freedom. I wanted to be away from my mum. I wanted to be away, because she didn't let me go anywhere, do anything, have friends over. I just, I was in a... Couldn't wait to escape. So I was like, "I'm going to go to college, I'm going to go find a college far away, I'm going to live on the student dorms, I'm going to be free."

GINA But my mum was like, "Uh-uh, you're not going to college outside of London. You're going to go to college in London." So she was keeping me in the house. So I was like, "Well then, fuck college." I said, "I ain't going to college, no university." I did not turn up for university. I said, "I'm

not going to university, because I don't want to be stuck in this house with no money." Because as a student, I would be... If I continued to be a student, which means I would still be financially reliant on my mum, which means I can't go anywhere or do anything. So I was like, "Nope, I'm going out into the working world. I'm getting a job. I'm getting a job."

GINA So I applied for jobs as a trainee engineer and I said to my mum, "Don't worry, I'll still get my degree, but I'm going to study for my degree part-time while I got a job earning a salary, because the first thing I want to get me is a car so that I can be out and free." So that's what I did. I studied, I passed my A-levels and then I got a job as a trainee engineer with a full-time salary, and I studied for my electrical electronics in the evenings and weekends, part-time. So I was working, and it was a beautiful thing.

GINA The first thing I bought at the age of 19 was a car, and from that day, my mum couldn't stop me, I was out in the streets. I was like, "Mum, I'm going to the nightclub, you can't tell me nothing because you talk about me being kidnapped and murdered on the streets, I drive my own car now, nobody can kidnap me." So I was out. I was clubbing every weekend, doing my Running Man, doing my Cabbage Patch, I was out there.

GINA And I was working and studying, and she couldn't tell me anything, because I paid bills. I was like, "Okay, I will pay you rent for my bedroom," I hooked up cable in my bedroom, I had cable, I had everything. My bedroom was a palace. I had my own phone line-

LUVVIE What?

GINA ... I had my own phone line. Yeah. I didn't even tell my mum what I was doing. My mum just came home one day and this engineer was putting the satellite dish on the roof and she was like, "What's going on?" I said, "I'm hooking up my bedroom, don't worry, I'm paying for this, and I'm paying my rent, and I've got my own phone line." So I had my own little HQ in my mother's house and she couldn't say nothing, because I paid her rent every month-

LUVVIE What?

GINA ... so I was an adult in that house.

LUVVIE Oh, you were living your best in the house.

GINA Best life.

LUVVIE Wow.

GINA Best life.

LUVVIE And your Nigerian mom was probably like, "I'm too mad, I can't say nothing."

GINA She couldn't say anything, because I'm working, I'm bringing money into the household, I had a car, so whenever she wanted to go the market on Saturday morning, she would be knocking on my bedroom door, "Get up, I want to go to the market." So I was her unofficial cab driver. So

she couldn't say anything, because she had my car at her disposal, I was paying her rent. I bought groceries for the house, so I was contributing. So I was like, "Well, for my contribution, I'm hitting these nightclubs every week, and you can't say nothing."

LUVVIE You were in these streets.

GINA Yeah.

LUVVIE The streets was calling your name early.

GINA Yep. Calling my name. But even then, I was still a good kid. I wasn't out there having one night stands, I wasn't doing drugs, I wasn't drinking. I never drunk. I've never liked the taste of alcohol, so all these things that my mum was terrified of, I did none of them. I know what I'm like, I've got an addictive personality, so I like things, I like things too much. I get addicted to chocolate and I'll eat nothing but chocolate for seven months straight. So I've never done drugs because I know I will like it too much. So I've never tried it.

GINA So even though I was out in these streets, I was dancing. All I was doing was going to the clubs, and dancing my arse off for eight hours straight, and then coming home and sleeping. I was not drinking, I was not drugging, I was not having sex with strangers. I was living a pretty clean life. So all my mum's fears were kind of unfounded with me.

LUVVIE Wow. So how did engineer become standup comic?

GINA I got a job working for Otis. Building-

LUVVIE Wait a minute, Otis, the people, the elevator folks that we all walk in the elevators and we see Otis on the floor?

GINA Yes. Otis is the biggest elevator company in the world. They are all over the world. And I got a job working for Otis, building and repairing elevators, that was my job. I did that for four years. So I got that job, I was the first woman engineer they had ever had in the UK in their 100 year history. First woman.

LUVVIE First woman?

GINA I applied for the job, I walked in with all the confidence. I'm a qualified engineer, I've got my qualifications, I'm better than all these kids. I walked in with full confidence and they gave me the job, and I was like, "Furthermore, I know it's a five-day week job, or sometimes weekends, here's the thing: I'm going to need one day a week because I'm still finishing my degree, so I'm going to need one day a week off to study. Just telling you that right now in the interview."

GINA So that was my confidence levels in the job interview.

LUVVIE What? You asked for a four-day week in 1990?

GINA Yeah, yeah. Four-day work week. I was like, "This is what I want." So they were like, "Okay." And I got the job. And I was their poster child because... Every poster, I was there with my hardhat and my tools. They loved it. I was the first woman, and Black. Oh my God. Amazing. For them.

GINA For me, not so much. It was a baptism of fire. Bearing in mind, I came into this job already... I already had various qualifications, electrical, electronics engineering, so I came in on a higher pay grade than a lot of my white counterparts, or equal to a lot of these guys that were married with kids with a house and all that kind of stuff. And there's this little 19-year-old coming in, fully like on the same level as them. They hated me, hated me, hated me. And I went through a baptism of fire. A lot of racism, a lot of sexism.

GINA Remember, I'm an engineer, I'm out in the field, I'm on construction sites, and there's no HR on construction sites. Guys would call me the N-word to my face. I'd come into work in the morning, remember, we're on construction sites, so it was all... There's no woman's toilets. I used to sometimes have to use the men's, because we're on a construction site, and I'm the only woman. So I had to pull my hardhat down, and just walk to the men's.

GINA And I refused to have separate changing quarters from the men, because I was like, "I am one of these engineers, I don't want them to think I'm getting any kind of special treatment." So I was in the same changing quarters with these guys. And I'd come in and there'd be bananas stuck above my hardhat. Pictures of monkeys on the wall, that kind of thing. And they'd all be giggling as I pulled the bananas out of my pockets and put them in my overalls. So this is what I went through as an engineer with Otis in the '90s, this is what I went through. Every day I'd have to psych myself up to go to work, because I'd want to go in and kill these people.

GINA Eventually I had to physically threaten a man, every day-

LUVVIE Really?

GINA Oh, every day. He kept calling me the N-word every day and told me how, "We don't want no Black people living next to him because we stink and we're animals." These are the conversations that took place every day in front of my face at work.

GINA So one day we were working alone and I said, "Yeah, keep talking about niggers every day, tell you what, you say that word in front of me again, I've got two brothers, I will send two of them niggers round your house, because I know where you live."

LUVVIE Ooh, ooh.

GINA I mean, I don't know if I can say the word, so I can edit myself-

LUVVIE No, no, you're fine. No, no, no, people need to hear that.

GINA Yeah. So I said, "I will send two of them round your house to beat your arse if I ever hear you say that word in front of me again." And you know what? He never spoke to me again.

LUVVIE Amen!

GINA Never spoke to me again and I was happy with that. But yeah, these are the issues. It's all in the book, I talked about it. And not even just the white engineers. There was a young Black engineer that came on the construction site, and I was so excited when he came, I was like, "Oh, great, me and him, we'll be able to handle these racists." And he sided with the racists.

LUVVIE No!

GINA "You African with your big rubber lips, I'm happy that we got enslaved, because we got mixed with the white man and now I'm pretty and my lips ain't big like yours."

LUVVIE No!

GINA So he was saying this stuff to me at work in front of the white dudes. So then I'd be screaming at him, and these white dudes would be standing back laughing at the two of us. Until one day I looked at these guys laughing at us and I was like, "Why am I putting myself through this?" I stopped talking to the Black dude as well, I said, "Don't ever speak to me again, just..." And I just stopped.

GINA And I'd just come into work, do my work, only speak to the engineers that were nice to me, and I stuck it out for four years, just to prove that I could do it. But eventually I left because as their first engineer, they didn't know what to do with me. They didn't know what to do with me. I was their first engineer. And I did all the things to get my promotions, and when it came to give me my promotions, they're like, "Yeah, well..." Because a promotion would mean running your own site and managing other engineers. And they were like, "Well, we don't know if the guys will listen to a woman engineer, so we can't promote you. But we'll give you the money, but you just can't..."

GINA And this is what I was up against, and at some point I was like, "No, this is not good enough, I'm going to go to a grievance hearing with the top brass at the company and say, 'I want my proper promotion, I want my site, I want the things that all the other male engineers are getting, and they're less qualified than I am.'"

GINA The union that I'd been paying into for four years, my union rep came to me and was like, "Well, I don't know about this woman's lib stuff, sorry." And refused to represent me at my hearing. So I went to this hearing with the top brass of Otis, unrepresented by my union. At this point I'm 21 years old, and I'm in this meeting with the top brass, all old white men that run the company, and obviously I lost. They were like, "We don't see we've done anything wrong. Off you go little Black girl."

GINA And so I got dismissed from this hearing because I had no union backup. So after that I was like, "Ah, I've got to get out of this job. This is not working for me. I've stuck it up for four years, I'm qualified now, I know that I can walk into any other engineering job. Let me find a job where there are Black people." So I left the job, I left the job. And they were making people redundant anyway, there was a building slump in the mid-90s in England. They were never going to lay me off, because I was their Black poster girl. But I walked into my manager's office and said, "You best lay me off and give me my money and let me go, or else I'll go public with what has been happening in this company."

GINA So they paid me off and let me go, and this was in the summer. And in that summer I was like, "All right, I'm going to take this summer off, I'm going to do all the things that I wanted to do but my mum had never let me do because I've got this money. I've got a little apartment." By this time I'd left home, I had my own little apartment, my rent was cheap, my car was paid off, bought cash. So I got this nice little chunk of money, I can enjoy the summer, and then go back to engineering later.

GINA And it was in that period that I fell into comedy. I went to a couple of acting workshops because I always remembered what that drama teacher told me, so I did a couple of things. I discovered myself. I joined the Nation of Islam. I was so angry after my experience at Otis, I was like, "I need to know my Black history, I need to know the stuff that they never taught us in school." And yeah, I joined the Nation of Islam for a while. I wore the hijab, I went to all the meetings. All of it. I was Nation of Islam for a while. So I did all of these things in that time off that I had after Otis.

GINA And I was in the Nation of Islam a while, but as a woman in Nation of Islam, I'm too mouthy, I asked too many questions. They didn't really work out. And they were very polite with me, "Sister, you are asking too many questions. Sister... Sister Gina." And I was like, "Well, I'm being constrained in this Nation of Islam, I'm out." And I couldn't do the six times a day praying anyway. That early 6:00 AM prayer, I always missed that one.

LUVVIE That's a dedication. That is a dedication.

GINA So yeah. I left the Nation. And I started doing comedy. I started going to these groups that used to do stuff in the community, these Black groups that were all about empowerment and stuff in the community. And one day they were doing a fundraiser and they were like, "Listen, we need singers, poets, dancers for this fundraiser to raise money."

GINA And me and two of my friends were always messing around doing our parents' Nigerian accent, and I wrote what I thought was a play for us to perform for this fundraiser, and we performed this play. And it was no play, it was a comedy, people laughed their arses off. And I was like, "Ah, comedy." And that's how I fell into comedy.

GINA And we did this sketch, we kept winning competitions with it, and then from there I diverted into standup comedy. And I was like, "Yeah, I'll do this standup comedy thing, it'll be a bit of fun, and we'll see how long it lasts and then I'll go back to engineering when the comedy thing dries up." Well, that was 26 years ago. I never went back to engineering. Otis was my last job as an engineer.

LUVVIE Your first and last job.

GINA Well, it wasn't my first. I'd had a couple of other jobs before that. I worked for the council, the government and then I worked for British Telecom, which was the British version of AT&T, so I was wiring up telephone lines in the telephone exchange. So Otis was actually my third job. Yeah, I had three jobs between 18 and 21.

LUVVIE My God!

GINA Mm-hmm (affirmative).

LUVVIE So standup comedy becomes a thing?

GINA Yeah.

LUVVIE How did you end up in the US, because I know for Black Brits, Black British women in entertainment, and in comedy, there's so few that we know that break through the wall.

GINA Mm-hmm (affirmative). It's been my dream to live in America since I was a child. Since I was a child. I'd watch TV movies and kids running along the beach, going it's a hangout with Brad and Chad after school. I watched children being sleuths, detectives solving crimes on their bikes. All of the American TV shows, kids looked like they were having a better life. So from childhood I always wanted to live in America.

GINA That's why I worked for Otis, because Otis was an American company. Even as an engineer, I had my eye on America. I was like, "I'm going to work for Otis, it's an American company, I'll qualify in England, and then I will transfer to Otis in America." So it's always been my dream since four years old to go to America.

GINA So when I started in comedy, the dream just got bigger, because I was like, "Comedy, America's the home of comedy in the movies and TV, that's where I need to be." And in England, there was a glass ceiling when it... I used to do a routine where I'd say that English TV and comedy scene is like they have a nightclub policy when it comes to Black people, one in, one out. So when a Black person got on TV, all the rest of us had to just sit back and wait til they died or messed up before one of us get an opportunity. So that's how it was.

GINA So I never got my own TV show in... I was always on other people's TV shows. I was the token. Whenever they needed a Black comic, a woman, they booked me. So I worked consistently on TV. I was on everything. I was appearing on every show. And then I started to realize, they were using me as a token. Because whenever they got accused of racism, they'd go, "But we've got Gina! We can't be racist, we have Gina!" But I was always the bridesmaid, never the bride, I never got my own show.

GINA There were opportunities where they dangled the carrot in front of me. "If you do this, we'll give you the show." And it never happened, I hit that glass ceiling. I became very successful, I was living a good life, I had my house, I had my nice car, I was... I hustled and I was selling out theaters on my own, doing my tours. So I always did well, but white male comics who came up under me, who would open for me on the road, would then pass me within a year to become stadium-filling multimillionaires while I was still hustling. So I'd be like, "How are these white guys just passing me when they opened for me and I gave them their first..." So I hit that glass ceiling.

GINA So I was like, "You know what? I need to go to America," because yes, the racism in America is rampant, but at least it's in your face, you know where it is. And yes, there's a ceiling for Black entertainers in America, but it's a lot higher than the British glass ceiling. So at least when I hit that ceiling in America, I'll be a multimillionaire and I can cry in my money.

LUVVIE Facts!

GINA So yeah. I planned to come to America. And I got to America via Last Comic Standing, which was a TV show, it's kind of like American Idol but for comedians. It's called Last Comic Standing, and they went around the world and I auditioned for that. I was on tour in Australia and I auditioned for the show and got through to the semifinals in Los Angeles and to get... So for them to bring me to Los Angeles for the semifinals, they had to get you a work visa, and they got me a two-year work visa.

LUVVIE Ooh, turn up, turn up.

GINA I said to the lawyer, "So when you say two years, this means I can live and work in America for two years without being deported?" And they were like, "Yes." I was like, "Done!" I sold my house in England, I gave away and sold everything I owned, I came back for that semifinal with just two suitcases to my name. I threw a party at my house before I sold it, threw a big party, said, "I'm out. I'm going to America, I am not coming back. This is the dream, I am off." People, "Are you crazy? You've only got a two-year work visa, you're going to have to come back," and I was like, "Trust me, I am going to make this into something, I am not coming back. Goodbye England."

GINA People laughed at me, people talked about me behind my back, talked shit, laughed at me, "Yeah, she going to make it." All these white comments, the racist white comments were saying, "Who's going to want to hear her Nigerian jokes in America?" Laughed at me. But I went, and I came, and I struggled. For years. I came to LA, I struggled, but I was like, "I ain't going back to England, I'll make this work."

GINA I sat in the back of comedy clubs that wouldn't book me, and if somebody was running late, I'd go, "Oh, that comedian's running late? Look, let me go up and do five minutes until they get here." And that's how I got on. In fact, that's how I got Def Comedy Jam, I was sitting in the back of the club, they were... I didn't know this at the time, but they were showcasing for Def Comedy Jam, I was just sitting in the back of the club watching. Damon Wayans's son, Damon Wayans Jr went on and crushed the stage. The other comedians who were showcasing did not want to go on after him.

LUVVIE Are you serious?

GINA They didn't want to follow him, because they didn't want to look bad in comparison to him. And I was just sitting in the back of the room and I was like, "I'll go on, I don't give a damn. Yeah, give me five minutes, let me go out there."

GINA So I went out there and did my thing. Not knowing that it was a showcase for Def Comedy Jam, I just went up there and did my thing. And the next day I get a call, "This is Def Comedy Jam, we'd like you to do a set." So I always hustled, Luvvie, hustled. When Netflix and HBO and Showtime were giving out specials to comedians, and they wouldn't give me a special, I be like, "You know what? I'm going to make my own."

GINA I rented a theater, I handed out flyers, I did shows, and I stood outside the shows handing out flyers. I booked my own camera crew, and I made my own specials. And then I was like, "I've got a special, do you want to buy it?" I sold my first special to Showtime in 2010, I sold another one to NBC, and now I own these specials. I own the rights to them. So those three specials that you see on Netflix, two of them I shot myself with my own money on a credit card.

LUVVIE I'm going to pause this right there, because that... That piece right there-

GINA Mm-hmm (affirmative).

LUVVIE ... is so much... There's so many lessons there and I'm going to start with the first one that you talked about. First of all, people who are listening to this, if you are not an immigrant, you don't understand how hard it is to actually get a visa into the United States. The United States, where we hear stories about people risking everything to come here, the United States has some of the toughest immigration laws in the world. And it is the place that is supposed to be the dream spot.

LUVVIE So when you got this two-year I-can-work-visa, I know your whole spirit was like, "Here it is." Y'all don't understand how hard that is to get, because when people come to the US to visit, US be like, "You can show up, don't even look like you can even catch \$1."

GINA Mm-hmm (affirmative).

LUVVIE So you got this two-year visa and you was like, "Bet, this is my in."

GINA This is it. This is it.

LUVVIE And then let's talk about the fact that you sat behind just visiting random clubs. It was like, "I'm just going to do my craft. I'm not expecting nothing from it."

GINA They wouldn't book me. They wouldn't book me. I was like, "I'm from England, I'm famous in England, I'm really good at what I do, please book me." And they'd be like, "We don't know who the hell you are, and we ain't booking you for nothing."

LUVVIE And you said, "I'm just going to sit here and I'm going to wait for the opportunity to present itself." And because of other people's fear of going behind Damon Wayans Jr, you was like, "I'ma go. Forget this. I'ma go." And that ended up opening another door. I hope y'all are listening to this and picking up some of these gems, because these are some real life lessons. Because we are usually waiting for permission to do what we're supposed to do. We're waiting for other people to open the door for us, and you said, "I see the locked door, I'm just going to wait until you crack it open and I'm going to just dropkick it."

GINA Exactly. Exactly, Luvvie.

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 luvvnacion.com, that's luvvnacion.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 Wow. And then you shot your own comedy specials?

GINA My own specials. My second one I shot in San Francisco. Nobody knew me in America. And I was living in Los Angeles at the time. So every weekend for a year, I would drive or fly from Los Angeles to San Francisco, I would do shows for free, so I'd just turn up for San Francisco clubs and just go, "Just give me five minutes." I'd go on, I'd do a set for free, and then I would stand outside that club afterwards just handing out flyers. I did this for a year. Handing out flyers, handing out flyers. Saying, "I've got this special, I'm shooting this special."

GINA And I rented this little 300-seater theater in the Mission area of San Francisco, an old theater, I rented this theater a year in advance, and I was like, "I've got a year to sell these 300 tickets. I think I can do it. Nobody knows me, but if I just keep grinding for the year, I will sell out this theater." I booked a camera crew, I flew over my director from the UK, I got an Airbnb in San Francisco and there were about 10 of us was in this Airbnb, the woman who owned the house was furious. But I couldn't afford hotels, I couldn't afford none of that, I was doing this off the little money that I had saved.

GINA So I booked this Airbnb, flew my guy over from England to direct and produce it. He was the guy, I was like, "Okay, you're the director, you're the producer, you know about all this camera crew. I've hired the crew, you source all the equipment, I'll pay for it, and let me just deal with the theater and getting my set together." So yeah, I'd hand out flyers after every show in San Francisco for a year. Fly up every year, every week, and do shows and then hand out flyers. And I did, I sold out this little 330-seater.

GINA Now when you shoot a standup comedy special, you usually do two sets. Two sets. So that if anything goes wrong, you can edit between the two sets or whatever. I didn't have money for two sets. I sold this theater out for one show, 330 people, and I had... I couldn't afford to film two sets. So I had to get this set right in one take. There was no messing around. One take. And I

did it. And that's the special that's called Laughing To America, which is playing on Netflix right now.

LUVVIE So you can go watch that on Netflix right now. Just type in Gina Yashere's name-

GINA Yashere, Yashere, Luvvie!

LUVVIE Yashere. See, people always call you Yashere.

GINA Nah mate, it's Yashere.

LUVVIE Yashere, [crosstalk 00:45:06] put the Naija accent to it. Yashere.

GINA Yashere, Yashere, yes.

LUVVIE Wow!

GINA So yeah, those specials I own the rights, so I've sold that special a couple of times. This is my hustle. I sold my special to NBC, I sold one to Showtime, they had it for 12 months, it reverts back to me. I own it. Then I sold it to SiriusXM, leased it out to Sirius. So when you listen to me on Sirius, those specials, I made them into sound, made them into audio. And now those specials... I earn a cheque every month from Sirius, from the royalties of my specials, because I own that stuff. And then we gave it to Netflix. So I've sold those specials several times over the years because I own it. I made them myself, they are mine.

LUVVIE You did this one time, and have been collecting cheques on, cheques on, cheques off this work that you did 11 years ago?

GINA Yep, because nobody was giving me nothing, so I had to make it happen.

LUVVIE That is so smart, and such an... Ownership, do your own work when nobody wants to give you the work to do, and grind until you break through. So what do you think was the breaking through the wall?

GINA I still believe I'm braking through the wall. It's been a slow, steady... You know, the first seven years in America I was making no money. I was living in LA, had an apartment in LA, but I was making no money in LA, so I was constantly going on the road. I had to leave LA for four months at a time, and go travel the globe doing shows, making my money, then bring that money back to LA, live off it, and when that money ran out, I'd call my agent in England, "Oh, I'm coming back for a couple of months." I used to call it the bank raid.

GINA Because I still had an audience in England who loved my work. I sell out theaters in England, so I'd call my agent and go, "All right, time for another bank raid." And I'd fly back to England and I'd put some theater shows on and do a quick tour, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, make all the money and bring it back to America and then live off it because I was still hustling trying to make my way in America. And that's how it was for seven years in Los Angeles.

GINA And then I moved to New York, because I was like, "Well, New York, they've got a much more happening comedy scene, there's money there, I'm going to New York." So I went to New York and I lived there for six years. And what brought me back to LA was my TV show, Bob Hearts Abishola. I get a call out of the blue from my agent saying, "Chuck Lorre," who was the genius behind the Big Bang Theory, Two and a Half Men, The Kominsky Method, Young Sheldon, Mike And Molly, "Chuck Lorre wants to meet you."

GINA So I get flown over to Los Angeles for a meeting with Chuck Lorre-

LUVVIE And what year was this?

GINA This was 2018.

LUVVIE Okay.

GINA 2018. So I'm living in New York happily. Happily in New York. Me and my missus loving life, I'm doing my shows, I'm touring, I'm making a nice living, I've sold some specials, I've got money in the bank, I'm doing well.

GINA Get this call, "Chuck Lorre wants to meet you." So I'm like, "Okay, cool. They're going to fly me over first class? Yeah. Two to Los Angeles?" "No. It's a meeting, they're not going to fly you first class for a meeting." I said, "Listen, you guys told me to google Chuck Lorre after... I googled him and I googled Warner Bros., and I know that they've got more money than God. If they really want to meet me, they need to fly me first class."

LUVVIE Come on. Come on.

GINA My agent is like, "Oh, God." So he puts the phone down, he calls me back an hour later and goes, "All right, they're going to fly you first class." [crosstalk 00:48:39] exactly, you've got to know your worth, people. So from then I think they got an idea of what they were going to be dealing with.

GINA So I fly into this meeting. Chuck says, "Look, I want to make a show, I've traveled all over Africa, I met beautiful people," and we were in the middle of Trump craziness, "I want to make a show with Billy Gardell, my actor from Mike And Molly, but I don't want to just make another Mike And Molly, I want the female protagonist to be a Nigerian women. We've been researching African comedy and Nigeria just keeps popping up." Because you know we're the loudest-

LUVVIE We are loud.

GINA We're the loudest. "So Nigeria just kept popping up, so I want to make this character a Nigerian, and obviously we're white guys," he was in the room with Eddie Gorodetsky, Al Higgins, who are his other exec producers, and he's like, "We're three white guys, we can't write this thing, we need you. We want you to be, I don't know, a consultant."

GINA And in my head I'm like, "A consultant on all things African? This sounds bullshit." But that was in my head. In the room I was like, "Interesting." And I was like, "So, how did you guys find me?"

Did you see me on Def Jam, did you see me on The Tonight Show, did you see me on The Daily Show, have you seen my Netflix specials?" This is what they said, "We typed Nigerian female comic into google."

GINA So in my head I'm like, "This is the epitome of white privilege. You just brought me over first class on a whim from a Google search." This is what I'm thinking in my head. In the room I'm like, "Interesting, thank God for Google. Okay, continue."

LUVVIE Wow!

GINA And they found this clip of me doing a show in London where my mother was in the audience and I was talking about my mum. And my mum stood up, and that clip went viral.

LUVVIE I remember. I know that clip.

GINA And my mum stood up. That was the clip they found, and they were like, "Oh, bring this woman out here, she can probably help us." Literally a google search. I mean, I was hustling, I put those clips out online so it may sound like dumb luck, but I've been out there hustling for years, and that was the set that brought them to my attention.

GINA And they needed my help. I remember me asking them, "What do you want the character to be called?" And I remember one of them, Eddie saying, "Well, we're thinking Lupita." And I was like, "Okay, stop there."

LUVVIE What?

GINA Lupita Nyong'o is Kenyan, wrong country, wrong side of Africa, wrong. Just wrong.

LUVVIE Not Lupita. And why would you want to name them after...

GINA Because she's an African and that was their knowledge of Africa. Americans think that Africa is a country and not a continent. So they were like, "Well, there's this famous actress called Lupita, so maybe we call the character of our show Lupita." And I was like, "For one, she's Kenyan. Two, she was born in Mexico, and her parents gave her that name for shits and giggles. I can guarantee you there is not an African, another African on the planet called Lupita."

GINA "I want to pick the Yoruba tribe, because being brought up in England, I was surrounded by Yoruba people, even though my mum was from Benin City. So here is a list of Yoruba names and their meanings, pick one of these," and they landed on Abishola.

LUVVIE Wow!

GINA At first I said no to this gig. I said to my agent, "I'm not interested, this sounds exploitative." I was picturing shows for years with my Nigerian family and getting turned down left, right and center. I pitched shows to Netflix, I pitched to HBO, I pitched to... And turned down. And then I was like, "Ugh." I wasn't sure about this, I thought they were going to steal my idea or make

some bullshit show that Nigerians will be embarrassed by, and they'd make me look like a fool. So I said no at first.

GINA But luckily, my brother, my best friend from England called me up and screamed at me for hours saying, "You really turning down an opportunity to put Nigerians on the map? You're complaining about the lack of opportunities for you, here's an opportunity in your lap and you're about to walk away from it." And I was like, "You know what? You're right." And that is another lesson, Luvvie. Have people around you who have your best interests at heart who would tell you you're being a fool when you're being a fool.

LUVVIE Yes! Surround yourself by those people because they will make sure you don't say no to yes opportunities like this.

GINA Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. So I listened to them, I stayed, and I started working with Chuck and the guys. And once I got in the room with them, I started to really like them, I kind of fell in love with them, and I was like, "Oh, these guys want to make a good show." And I told them straight, "Okay, if we're going to do this show, it's going to be authentic. The lead character, Abishola, is going to be a dark-skinned Nigerian."

LUVVIE Yes.

GINA This is where we're going. Don't be sending me pictures of any Halle Berry looking women, because I'm going to strike them out immediately. No shade to light-skin women out there, but you know that in Hollywood, that is the ideal of beauty for Black women. And I was like, "If we're going to do Nigerian, they were going to do Nigerian."

LUVVIE Naija proper.

GINA Proper. Abishola is going to be dark-skinned and preferably a Nigerian actor. I don't mind having non-Nigerians play Nigerians, because as long as we get the story right and get the authenticity, but Abishola has to be Nigerian.

GINA So I made a point of this, I made a point of saying... And I created the characters, I named the characters, and I was like, "Okay, this is what we're going to do, this is how we're going to make it authentic, and you have to listen to me. If I say this is not right, you have to believe me and let me do my thing. Because I don't want to be involved in something..." And they said yes, and they were listening.

GINA And after two days in the room I got promoted from consultant, they were like, "Okay, you're not a consultant, you're actually writing this show with us." So I became co-creator and producer of the show. Yep. And I was involved every step of the way, when they were casting the actors I'd sit in the room. So when these Nigerian actors walked in, they saw me. They saw me, and they went, "Oh, this is legit, I'm not going to be asked to do any kind of buffoonery, because there is a Black exec producer sitting in the room." And I made sure I was there for all the castings.

GINA Abishola, I was still in New York, I hadn't moved over yet, but they were sending me... I said, "You need to send me every audition, and I will pick the people that work, because you lot don't know what you're looking for." And when we saw Folake who auditioned, I said, "That's the one. This is the one." And then Auntie Olu, Shola Adewusi, she's a British Nigerian actor, I saw her on Chewing Gum, the Michaela Coel show. And when I was picturing my show in previous years about my family, I had Shola in mind to play my mother in my show.

GINA So when we were starting to do this show, I was like, "I really want to keep her for my thing, but here's the thing, if this thing goes well, I'm going to be putting most of the elements of the show idea that I had into this show anyway, so let me give them Shola." So I said, "Here we go. But Auntie Olu, I know the perfect actress for this role, it's this woman called Shola Adewusi, she's in England, but trust me, get her out here, she'll be perfect."

GINA So I had my hand in the casting, I made sure I was there in the room when these actors came in, and I let them know which were the ones that we needed to cast. So I was there every step of the way. I got Black writers in the room, because Chuck world is a very white world-

LUVVIE Very white.

GINA And I didn't want to go, "You have to get Black writers!" What I did, I did it this way. I'd invite them to comedy clubs where I was headlining. And then I'd put my friends on the show. And then when they said, "Ooh, we really liked her. She was really funny." I'd go, "Really? Well that's good, because she writes. Did you know she writes?"

LUVVIE Wow.

GINA And that's how I got my friend Gloria Bigelow into the writer's room on a CBS show with Chuck Lorre. I called you, Luvvie, you don't remember.

LUVVIE No, I remember. You text me.

GINA I text you-

LUVVIE You text me.

GINA I said, "Listen, I'm making a show, do you want to be a writer?"

LUVVIE No, Gina, you text me the day before I was about to leave for Ghana.

GINA Oh.

LUVVIE And I was so swamped and so overwhelmed by life and stuff, and at that point, girl bless it. God bless it. But I was like...

GINA You did your own thing, but I tried to get you in there. I tried to get you in there. I gave them copies of your book, and I said, "This woman is intelligent and funny and Nigerian, I think she'd make a good writer on this show." So I texted you, I was like, "Do you want to come write on

this show? Because I'm trying to get Black people in the writer's room." And then I never heard from you-

LUVVIE It wasn't the right time, Gina, it wasn't the right time.

GINA I now, but you know what? Everything for a reason, you're flying on your own back, you're doing your own thing, and-

LUVVIE Listen, invite me for the next show, because I know you're going to have another show.

GINA Listen-

LUVVIE You're going to have another show, so when you doing the other show, call me for that.

GINA This is the next show, this is the next show. I want to serialize this book.

LUVVIE When that get options, Gina, call me, okay? Call me.

GINA I will call you. I will call you. And you better respond to that text.

LUVVIE I got you.

GINA I called Yvonne, I called Yvonne Orji, I was like, "Luvvie ain't responding to my texts, have I got the right number for this woman."

LUVVIE Because I was in Nigeria, man, I was in Ghana. I didn't know... You know what's funny? I don't think I even got the text until I got back. Two weeks later.

GINA Because I was like, "Why hasn't she responded? This is an opportunity and I'm trying to bring her in, I'm trying to bring her in and she ain't responding to the text."

LUVVIE Oh my God, don't worry, the next one, the next one. Because I do want to write on a TV show one day.

GINA I tell you...

LUVVIE But that is incredible. Gina, you went from the person who couldn't get booked to doing your own specials, to being randomly googled by Chuck Lorre, flown to LA for a random meeting, and now being EP of a show. EP and co-creator of a show that is now on season two.

GINA Yeah, and we've been picked up for season three. And I'm a series regular on it. Because as you know, as a comedian-

LUVVIE Yeah. I'll be seeing your wigs.

GINA Yeah, my dream has always been to be the best friend on someone else's sitcoms. And when we started writing this show, I wrote this character, they didn't know it, but I was writing it for me.

But I was like, "I think Abishola's needs a friend. Don't you think she needs a best friend? I think she needs a confidante. I'm thinking Kemi." I created this character, they had no idea.

GINA They thought I wanted the role of Abishola. On the day we started casting, Chuck comes in and goes, "Okay, CBS is interested in this pilot, we're going to start casting. But here's the thing, if you want to play Abishola, you're going to have to audition with the other actors." And I looked at Chuck and I was like, "I don't want to play Abishola. I want..." And Kemi didn't even have a name at that point. She was just a line on the board, on the white board, woman on the bus. And I just turned to the white board and was like, "I want woman on the bus." And Chuck looked at me and he went, "You're very fucking smart." So I wrote myself into that show as well. I was like, "That is my part. You ain't looking at no other actors for that, I'll be the woman."

GINA And they didn't know what they had. I knew what I was bringing, because they only googled me and found this one little set. They didn't know that I had a wealth of experience as an actor in England, sketch, writer, actor, everything. I have credits upon credits and they didn't know that. They just thought my little part was a little one liner thing in the pilot. And I let them think that. Because I knew that once they saw what I was bringing to this character, that character was going to get bigger, and that's exactly what happened.

GINA When the pilot came, I only had two lines in the pilot. The first episode only had two lines. But when the trailer came out for that pilot, my two lines were all over that pilot, so I was like, "There you go. They see it already."

LUVVIE There it is, there it is.

GINA And I ended up becoming a series regular on the show. I'm getting all the cheques, Luvvie. I'm getting all the cheques I can possibly get.

LUVVIE Gina, can I tell you that I am living for the way you finessed it and the smartest way and how you just cashing multiple cheques on top of cheques on top... That brings me so much joy.

GINA Listen, it took me a long time to make it. It was a long hard struggle. But I'm glad I made it later in life, because it makes me appreciate it more, I know I'm not going to squander it, and I'm just watching and learning as much as I can. Because I never saw myself as a writer on a show, I used to turn down writing gigs, because I was like, "I'm a standup comic, that's what I do, I don't want to do nothing else, I don't want to be in the office, I don't want to do none of this." I never saw myself.

GINA People offered me jobs writing on shows and I said no. I didn't want to be involved in the politics, I heard a lot about the racism and the misogyny that goes on in writer's rooms. But the universe, the universe was like, "Mm-mm (negative), this is what is happening." And yeah. The pilot got picked up. I was still living in New York at the time, the pilot was getting... We shot the pilot in April, and I said to Chuck, "So, if it gets picked up, when do we start work?" And he was like, "June 2nd."

GINA So I was like, "Well," so I said, "So after the pilot, after you shoot the pilot, they let us know on May the 15th and I start work on June 2nd? So I'm going to have two-and-a-half weeks to pack

up my life in New York?" So while we were doing the pilot, I was like, "You know what? I'm going to manifest this." I bought a house in Los Angeles, I was like, "You know what? If this show gets picked up, I'm going to buy this house, and start furnishing it. The missus is going to be in New York, we'll have to do long distance for a while, I'm going to buy this house." And people are, "Why are you buying a house? The pilot hasn't even been picked up yet, you haven't even shot it yet."

GINA And I was like, "Well, if it gets picked up, then I'll have a house to move into, to start work immediately. If it doesn't get picked up, I will have a very expensive investment property." Either way it's going to work. I'm manifesting that. I'm manifesting it. And it got picked up. And I literally moved out at the end of May, furnished the entire house in six days, and started work in the week.

LUVVIE What?

GINA Yep. Ordered all my furniture online, everything just online. We got to the house, and the first day I just sat in the house and furniture was coming all day. Furnished the house in six days.

LUVVIE What?

GINA And then, yeah. Boom.

LUVVIE My God.

GINA And I started work. Because I was like, "You know what? I'm going to manifest this." I've always followed my instinct, just follow the instinct, if it works, doesn't... But I tell you what, on my deathbed, there will be no regrets. I'm going to be like, "I tried everything. I know I failed at some things, but at least I gave it a shot."

LUVVIE Wow! Gina, like, girl. First of all, people never understand the journey. And that's why I always want people to tell the story before all the glow-up happens, right? People gonna now see you and not understand all the different things that had to go right for you to be here in this moment, and that is magical. And today that we're recording, is your launch day for your first book.

GINA Yes!

LUVVIE Cack-handed.

GINA Yes!

LUVVIE You have to go get this book. Go pick up this book. What made you realize it was time to publish and write this book?

GINA You know what? I didn't. What happened was, I was doing you know the Flashback Thursdays and... Throwback Thursdays and Flashback Fridays. I post an old picture and I tell the elaborate story behind the picture. And people kept commenting on my Instagram saying, "Oh my gosh,

this story's so interesting, I didn't know this about you, you should write a book, you should write a book, you should write a book." And this was happening for a good year, people just, "You should write a book."

GINA So I started saving those Throwback Thursday and Flashback Friday posts in a folder. I was like, "Maybe one day I'll turn this into a book." I was saving them. But I didn't know how to go about that, so I never really thought about it. And I never saw myself as a writer, I was a standup comic, I'm a comic. I write my material, but I... My attention span is short. So I was like, "I don't think I can write a book, but I'll hold these and maybe we'll see."

GINA The universe was like, "Okay, let's make this happen." I get a call out of the blue from Michelle Buteau, another comedian who's the host *The Circle*, we're good friends, she's wonderful. She goes, "Listen bitch, I'm writing a book, my lit agent loves you and is a big fan and he wants to meet you to talk about a book. I'm putting you guys in touch." So she put me in touch with her lit agent, I met him and he was like, "Yeah, I follow you on Instagram, I see all your posts, I love what you do, I love your comedy, I think you should write a book." And that's where it came from. And so I was like, "Okay."

GINA I put together these, the throwbacks, and I wrote a sort of a synopsis of what the book was going to be about. And then we sent it around to publishers, and HarperCollins Amistad, a subsidiary of HarperCollins and Tracy Sherrod, a beautiful Black woman, editor, picked up my book and was like, "Yes, yes. Don't bother showing it to anybody else, yes. I've been a fan of yours for a long time, yes, yes." And she contacted my agent around the same time saying, "Has Gina ever considered writing a book?"

GINA So all of this stuff was coming together-

LUVVIE Come on universe, come on universe.

GINA The universe. So yeah. I got this book deal, I didn't know what I was going to do, because I was like, "All right, I've got this book deal, I've never written a book in my life." I was like, "Let me get a ghost writer." So I was like, "Let me get a ghost writer to help me write this book." I'm going to hire the ghost writer, and it did not work out as I thought. She was wonderful, very smart woman. But when somebody says the word, diaspora 76 times in a sentence you go, "Hmm, that is not really my vibe."

LUVVIE Okay. No.

GINA So I had to fire her and start again. And around that time the pandemic happened. So I was like, "Well," I'm a hardcore procrastinator. I got the book before this TV show, this was back in 2018, beginning of 2018 I got this book deal. And I hadn't done a thing because I was like, "I'm going to let someone else write it. I'll tell them and they can write it."

GINA But then the pandemic happened and I was like, "I'm going to write this book. I'm going to write this book myself." So I sat down and wrote this book myself. This ain't no ghost writer-

LUVVIE It's all you.

GINA ... I wrote every single word in this book. I didn't know I could do it, now I know I can. And I'm very glad that this happened. I'm very glad that it didn't work out, because I sat and wrote it. And I don't know how you write, Luvvie, but I am a sporadic writer. I'll write, and then at 6:00 in the evening I'll go, "I've got to write," and I'll sit there and write right through to 4:00 in the morning. And then I won't pick it up again for another three weeks.

GINA And then I go, "Oh God, there's a deadline coming! I've got to..." And then I write. And that is how I wrote this book. And then I'd go back and re-edit and re-edit and read it again and read it again. And then I sent it to my brothers, sent it to family members or friends and go, "Just read this. Do you think people would be interested in this? I don't know whether it's good or not." When I write my standup I know what I'm doing, when I was writing this, you know? It's funny, it's a funny book, but there's also some serious stuff in there. Suicide attempt when I was 16. A horribly abusive stepfather. There's a lot of stuff in there that you will not know, that has not yet made it into my standup.

GINA But I think it's a really good book, personally. When I did the audio, because I wrote it and you can't see when you're in the book, but when I went to record the audio for it, I was like, "Now, this is a good book. This is a good book."

LUVVIE Yeah. Yeah.

GINA So I hope people enjoy it.

LUVVIE My folks like to read, so I want them to go pick it up, because your story is so deep and you've been through so much and now you are here living this joy life. I be here for your tunes, okay-

GINA I bet you don't know none of them, you baby. How old are you, 12?

LUVVIE First of all, I am a geriatric millennial, okay? I'm a geriatric millennial, all right. Oh my gosh.

LUVVIE So as you are doing all of this, and just living out loud, how are you taking care of yourself?

GINA Food, me and my missus love food. We love to eat.

LUVVIE Yes, yes.

GINA We love to eat, and I do hot yoga, I try workout, because I suffer from lupus, I don't know if you know that?

LUVVIE Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

GINA I suffer from lupus, I got diagnosed back in 2005, and I was very, very sick for a long time. Full body arthritis, couldn't move, had raised toilet seats, couldn't walk very well. I was getting to the point where I was going to have to walk with cane, it was that bad. And doctors were experimenting on me, giving me all these kind of drugs, steroids. At one point they suggested chemotherapy. They were like, "Let's just..." So I'm like, "You guys are experimenting on me like a guinea pig. You don't know what you're doing."

GINA And then I started researching how to heal myself naturally. I flew myself to Thailand and did a detox where you fast for seven days and do colonic irrigations and clean out your system. And that's where I got introduced to raw food and veganism. So I thought let me try it. You know, we're Nigerian, we eat meat with everything. I put cow foot on my corn flakes.

GINA So I was like, "Well, let me just try this thing, because I don't want to do this whole medication." I hit 270 pounds with the steroids, I'd blown up. I'll send you a picture. Every year or so I post a picture of me when I was huge from the steroids and just the illness. And yes. So I went to detox and I started changing my diet. And I went raw vegan for a year, raw. Nothing cooked, everything warmed or raw. And I tell you, when I say my lupus symptoms disappeared within months. My arthritis disappeared. The horrible migraines I used to get disappeared.

LUVVIE Whoa.

GINA I suddenly realized after a few months, because I had a raised toilet seat because my knees were so bad I couldn't... I had rails at the side of my toilet and I'd have to lower myself down on... After a few months I was able to throw out that toilet seat and go, "Oh my God, my knees, the swelling's gone down, the pain..."

LUVVIE Wow.

GINA I've been in pain for so long, that it took me a while to realize that the pain was diminishing. I came off all that medication, the doctors thought I was crazy. They were like, "You can't come off this medication, your body will go into shock, you'll die, you..." I was like, "Yeah, whatever. I know my body." I came off all of that medication.

GINA That was in 2009. I've not been on medication for lupus since 2009. I sent my lupus into remission. Now I'm not stalwart vegan, I'll eat vegan as often as I can because you know, look-

LUVVIE Wow.

GINA I ain't punishing myself. We do Fun Food Fridays, which then turned into Fun Food Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays. But I'll eat as vegan as I can, and eat as healthy as I can, and then the weekends I go, "Let me just have some fun and eat whatever I want." But I do hot yoga, that really helps with the joint pain and the arthritis and the hot yoga's helped me, I exercise. I play badminton, that's my sport, don't laugh at me. It ain't that garden variety badminton that you guys think it is. It's proper. Go watch the Koreans and the Malaysians play badminton, that's what I play.

GINA So that's what I do to try and keep myself healthy. I eat good food, I do my yoga, I keep... Because I know, my body will tell me. If I eat horribly for too long, the joint pain. I wake up in the morning and the arthritis starts to come back, my joints start to hurt and I go, "Oh, let me get off this, let me get back on my healthy eating." So my body will tell me when I'm messing up.

GINA So that's what I do to look after myself. I love to read. I love to watch good TV, I love to eat and that's it. And travel. Before the pandemic, travel was my jam. I've done shows all over the world. I've done shows in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Brunei, all over. I will go anywhere to do

comedy and just to immerse myself in different cultures. I can't travel as much now because of the TV show, it's taken over my life, I can't go nowhere. But I spent 26 years traveling the globe, and I consider myself so blessed. You know?

LUVVIE Yeah.

GINA Despite all the trials and tribulations, despite the illness, despite the horrible pain I suffered for many years, I still consider myself blessed.

LUVVIE Wow. So first of all, I'm on your Instagram right now.

GINA Yeah, you don't even follow me, Luvvie. Do you follow me?

LUVVIE Gina, of course I follow you. You stop it. I be in your DM, you stop it. First of all, I'm cracking up at the post you put up when everybody was posting about them, who looks like them, and you put up Arsenio Hall.

GINA People keep telling me I look like Arsenio Hall. So I'm like, "I'm not going to take that as a dis, I'm going to embrace it, whatever."

LUVVIE Oh my God, it's hysterical. But no, yeah, no, man. I'm telling you, that's why I was like, "I want to have Gina on the podcast." Because people got to know your story, the full where you came from, how you became this person. And just how you continue to put people on, like you said, you walked people into the room and now you have... People have TV credits because of you, and that's really powerful. That is really, really powerful.

GINA I said to Chuck, "Listen, you guys discovered me, but there's a lot of mes out there. There's a lot of mes out there, and I can help you make more money, and at the same time bring in this talent that has never had a look-in in this industry before." Bayo Akinfemi, one of the actors on the show who plays Goodwin, one of the guys in the warehouse, I remember him coming up to me one day and he goes, "Every day, I thank God for the day your mother gave birth to you."

LUVVIE That's Naija dramatic, yes.

GINA "I thank God for the day." Because these talented Nigerian people, the fact that we... On CBS, which is a very white old-

LUVVIE Super white, and old.

GINA Let's be honest, it is an old white station. On CBS we have authentic Nigerian characters speaking Yoruba! Speaking Yoruba on CBS. And the show is good. I'm not just saying it because it's my show, the show is fantastic. People were a little bit suspicious of it when it came out, they're like, "Oh, white guy, Nigerian woman. It's going to be another white savior thing." And in the room when we were writing the show, I said to Chuck and the guys, I said, "Listen, this ain't going to be no white savior show, she's going to have her own job, her own money, she's going to be self-sufficient. This white guy is going to have to work hard and earn her love. This ain't

going to be no white guy coming in and sweeping her off her feet and she has nothing. It's not going to be that." I wanted her to be a strong character in her own right.

GINA So people who have not watched the show yet, because there's a lot of you out there, Nigerians, Black people, everybody, because this is [inaudible 01:16:26] story, not just a Nigerian story, support the show. It's a really good show, it's well-written, the characters are three-dimensional, and it's funny. And I am involved every step of the way. So I'm keeping it 100 authentic behind-

LUVVIE You keeping the gate on, like, "Listen, we're watching, we're watching." And that's needed.

LUVVIE So my last question for you is, what do you think a professional troublemaker is?

GINA A professional troublemaker is somebody who does not let the gatekeepers, does not wait for the gatekeepers to tell him or her when they can shine. They make their own way, they don't wait for anybody. They make their own path, they keep kicking doors open. They say what needs to be said, they live in their truth. Honesty, 100% honesty with yourself and with other people. To me that's a professional troublemaker.

GINA I didn't even know the term existed til you brought it to my life and I was like, "Yeah, that's what I am. That's what I've always been."

LUVVIE Yes, yes, yes.

GINA [crosstalk 01:17:38] wait to be validated by others. Do not wait to be validated by others. Make your own way. That's a troublemaker, a professional troublemaker.

LUVVIE Yes! And that's how I choose the people for this podcast who I am interviewing. It's not just about people who I know, it's about people who I think are disruptors and trailblazers who are kicking doors down and who are constantly finding ways to blaze trails.

LUVVIE And they do it even when the shit is not sexy. They do it even when they get in trouble for it, because I know you got into a whole lot of trouble in the process, right? You've had to fight in rooms where you're the only, and you still are like, "Let me stand up for myself." And I think that's really important for people to see that. I don't think professional troublemakers are necessarily people who were born extraordinary, they just made a habit out of taking up space without apology.

GINA Yep, just by virtue of who I am. I mean, I'm trying to change hearts and minds. I'm a Nigerian, British Nigerian lesbian immigrant at that.

LUVVIE Come on!

GINA You know I'm illegal in Nigeria.

LUVVIE You illegal in a whole bunch of countries.

GINA Yeah. But the country of my parents' birth. I am illegal there, and it upsets me because I'm like, "This religion," I believe in God, I believe in the power of love, I believe in all of that. But I think it's been corrupted-

LUVVIE Yes.

GINA ... by people for their own agendas. And unfortunately, when them white people came to Africa, they corrupted the religion and forced it on my people, and that is what they carry on to this day. We were not homophobic, we didn't care about people's gender or sexuality.

LUVVIE No.

GINA We were spiritual people, it was about the spirit, it was about the person. That's what it was before. But these people came over and corrupted us. And I want us to get back to that. I don't know if it will happen in my lifetime, but I want us to get back to that.

LUVVIE I just want to thank you for taking up your space, for being this visible, Black Nigerian lesbian woman, who is living in joy. I enjoy watching your [inaudible 01:19:59] videos. I enjoy seeing you just take... Just having a good time and living in such joy. And I think somebody else is watching you and you're giving them permission to be exactly who they are, and I am just deeply inspired by it. I am such a fan.

GINA Thank you.

LUVVIE And I, listen, I'm trash by text message, WhatsApp me Gina, you know you being WhatsApp.

GINA I'm all over the WhatsApp, mate.

LUVVIE Gina, that's why I've been missing your text messages. I been on WhatsApp more than text.

GINA Yeah, me too, me too. Me too.

LUVVIE So we need to be WhatsApping, not texting.

GINA Okay, I'm going to be WhatsApping, and the next time you and Yvonne and Cynthia hanging out, if I don't get that call, I swear to God...

LUVVIE Beat me. Just beat me.

GINA I will beat you all on the street. I will turn up and beat you like your grandmother. [crosstalk 01:20:52].

LUVVIE Just come and beat me, I'll be like, "Ya right, ya right. In fact, it was us, we did it."

GINA I'm proud of you, proud of Yvonne, proud of Cynthia, just out here. When I see you guys, the joy it brings me to see you guys just excelling in your fields. It's just wonderful. It's just wonderful.

LUVVIE I'm so proud. And everybody, please go buy Cack-handed, and let's support Gina in all she's doing, check out Bob Hearts Abishola, is Abishola.

GINA Yes.

LUVVIE Which means, let the people know what Abishola means.

GINA I've forgotten!

LUVVIE I'll tell you. I'll tell you.

GINA I've forgotten.

LUVVIE Abishola...

GINA There was a few meanings for it that-

LUVVIE Yeah. Abi usually means to give birth. Abi means to give birth.

GINA Yeah.

LUVVIE Shola means... wealth. To give birth to wealth.

GINA That right. Because some people said it was bringing wealth to the family, giving birth to wealth-

LUVVIE Yes-

GINA ... it was various meanings.

LUVVIE ... bringing wealth to the family is a metaphoric meaning. So Abishola means we gave birth to wealth, which means you're bringing wealth to the family, so yeah. No, look, my girl was loving that, I was like, "Yes."

GINA See, I picked your tribe, I picked your tribe. Yoruba. My family's from Benin City.

LUVVIE Yeah, [crosstalk 01:22:19] Benin.

GINA My tribe is tiny, and in England my mother speaks fluent Yoruba. She speaks Hausa, she speaks a little-

LUVVIE She speaks Hausa, too?

GINA Oh yeah. My mum was very well educated, her dad took her all over. She traveled as a child learning. So I used to hear my mum speaking Yoruba all the time as a kid with all her friends. So that was the tribe that came to mind when I wrote the show.

LUVVIE Well, if I ever meet your mom, I'll speak Yoruba to her.

GINA Oh, she'll love that. I'll have to tell you the story one day where Nina, my girlfriend, met my mum. Nina's a white Jewish woman. When she met my mum, she went down on one knee, she did the whole bow.

LUVVIE Yes!

GINA She did the bow. And my mum looked at her like, "Okay, this white woman, I like her. She's-"

LUVVIE I like her.

GINA "She's a better Nigerian than you, Gina, look at [crosstalk 01:23:04], kneeling before me. Kneeling." So she played [crosstalk 01:23:10].

LUVVIE We must prostrate. Don't worry, when I meet your mom, I will do the proper, I'll kneel. I'll ask her if she's eaten. That's how you know, that's their love language. That's their love language.

GINA That is the love language. Every time I call my mum, "Have you eaten? What are you eating? Have you eaten?" "Mum, I'm a grown woman! I'm coming to 50 years old, mum, come on!"

LUVVIE Love language. It's a forever love language.

GINA Yes.

LUVVIE This is so good. This is so good. Thank you so much for joining me on this show.

Woooooow! A British, Nigerian, Lesbian - Talk about it! I adore that she's visible, I am SUCH a fan and I am living for the way she finessed a 2-year "I-can-work" visa and used it as a launching pad for her American comedy career and is now cashing checks on top of checks!

Gina's story is proof positive that doing your own work, when no one wants to give you opportunities, and GRINDING until you reach your breakthrough still works. You can't cheat the process.

She embodies what it means to be courageous. I mean, literally oozing out of her pores. The way Gina navigates the spaces she occupies could be the rubric to how to reach back and bring your community with you when you get glow up opportunities. She's literally spoken my names in rooms I've never been in, recommending and hyping me up. THAT'S how you put people on.

Thank you for being you, Gina. You embody what it means to be a Professional Troublemaker.

Be sure to check out Gina's book, *Cack-Handed: A Memoir*. It's available everywhere you buy books, and you can follow Gina on Instagram and Twitter at @ginayashere. And check out Bob Hearts Abishola on CBS.

Thank you for tuning in to another episode of the Professional Troublemaker podcast. If you loved what you heard, make sure you're subscribed to Professional Troublemaker in your podcast platform of choice. And share it with people. Let them know it is dope.

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