



Rants and Randomness with Luvvie Ajayi

Own the Narrative (with Rich Dennis) - Episode 20

Released: February 18, 2020

My peoples! Welcome to a special episode of Rants and Randomness. I'm Luvvie Ajayi, your side-eye sorceress and host. Now this episode is special, because typically I do my feel goods, I do my rants, I spotlight and then I go into my interview. On this episode, I decided to just bring you the interview, because this is the longest interview that I've ever done on this podcast. It's an hour and a half long. Why did it become this long? Well, it's because I'm talking to [Rich Dennis](#), the CEO of [Shea Moisture](#), and also now, owner of [Essence Magazine](#). And he runs the [New Voices](#) Fund.

Rich came into the studio. We had this in-depth conversation about how he started this company from selling butters on the streets of Harlem for a company that is now basically a global freaking conglomerate that is making economic change by how it's hiring people. We talked about some of his biggest mistakes in building this company and what he really wants to do, because it's not just about hair. The interview was too good for me to cut short and I wanted you to get the full thing. So, I decided to just make it its own episode. Take a listen. It's really, really good. And I'm really thankful to Rich for the vulnerability, for being open and for joining me to do this. And I hope you pull out some things that are helpful to you as you listen.

Interview with Rich Dennis

[00:01:33]

Luvvie: So yes, Rants and Randomness fam, I am excited to welcome my friend and powerhouse Rich Dennis, to the show. You might know Rich as the creator of [Shea Moisture](#) or for his recent purchase of [Essence Magazine](#) earlier this year, making it a hundred percent black owned again. Rich, thank you for coming.

Rich: Thank you for having me. Good to be here.

Luvvie: Yo, I got Rich in the studio. Okay. Pinning Rich down is like pinning down a cloud. But I'm going to give people your official bio, so they actually really know what you've been up to. Born in Liberia, [Sundial Brand](#) CEO, Rich Dennis came to the US to attend Babson College for Business School. And when he graduated in '91, he was unable to return to Liberia because of civil war. Damn. You know what? No scrap that piece. I actually don't want to read that piece. I want Rich to tell that story. So anyway, Rich's bio, you know what? I'm not going to give you all his bio. I'm going to just have Rich tell his own story. Rich, what did you want to do when you were growing up?

Rich: I wanted to be a citrus farmer.

Luvvie: Wait, a citrus farmer?

Rich: I wanted to be a citrus farmer. I grew up, as you said, in Liberia, in between Liberia and Sierra Leone. And I would always see the fruits would just sort of grow wild, right? There'll be orange trees on the sidewalk and there'd be mangoes and pineapples and just, it just grew, right? The ground, the soil was very fertile. But it always struck me how wasteful it was, because it would just, it would fall to the ground and just spoil or people will take them home and they would spoil because there was no canneries, right? There was no processing. So it was just the life span of the fruit. And so, you couldn't really turn it into an economic benefit for the people. And so I saw that and I remember, I must have been like 9 or 10 and I was always like, wow, we got so much fruit. We got so much fruit, but then you would never have any juice.

Luvvie: Wow. So all this food around you, you still had no juice.

Rich: You didn't have any juice or it would take forever to squeeze it and then there'd be people selling it by the roadside. And so it was just, that was just what hit me. And I'm still going to become a citrus farmer.

Luvvie: That is still a dream.

Rich: I'm going to do it. I'm definitely going to do it.

Luvvie: So how did you go from wanting to be a citrus farmer to then come into the US to study? Because, you can't study citrus farming in school. What was that like? So when did you pivot and was okay, I'm going to go to the United States?

Rich: Yeah. So, I grew up at a time where we had a lot of civil unrest in both Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: And my mother is from Sierra Leone and my father's from Liberia and I was born and raised in Liberia. But during that period of time, we had coupe d'etat's. We had attempted coup d'etat's, and it was just always something destabilizing happening.

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: And as I got a little bit older and seeing what my mother and my grandmother, by the way, my grandmothers on both sides were entrepreneurs, both on my father's side and my mother's side. And, but I saw the challenges that they had in trying to just compete in a society that didn't, that was structured to keep them from being independent, economically, socially, all of the challenges that we know around sort of independence and freedom.

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: Right. And so I grew up seeing that, but I also saw their determination, right, and their strength that came from not being dependent, right? And so, that was always an inspiration for me. So, I always from jump street, as long as I can remember, because I saw that in my grandmother and

my mother and both grandmothers and my mother that always sort of, I think, fueled entrepreneurship in me and I always wanted to be an entrepreneur. And, as I've gotten older and I look at how black women, right, have just been entrepreneurs for time and memorial, right.

Luvvie: From the get go, yep.

Rich: We may not acknowledge it. We may not recognize it, but to keep families together, to keep food on the table, to keep clothes on our backs, the things that single moms do, every single bit of it is entrepreneur.

Luvvie: Yep, yep.

Rich: Right. They just don't get paid for it, right?

Luvvie: Yes.

Rich: And so, that's part of what we're trying to do now is trying to invest in them and get them to places where they're not just getting paid for it, but they're building scalable businesses. So, anyway, to answer your question, so I got an opportunity to get a scholarship to come here. And I went to Babson College, which is the number one entrepreneurial school in the country. Was then, and still is today. And so, that's where I got my training. That's where I got, how to think about being an entrepreneur. So, that was the other thing that sort of woke me up is like, even though I had this in me, if I went to a different environment, a different learning environment, if I was placed in the wrong environment, I would be doing something different.

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: And so that's the other thing that's important to me is that we try to put ourselves in the environments that enable us to maximize who we are.

Luvvie: Yo. So, when you graduated in '91, you all can't go back because you and your mom couldn't go back because of the civil war and civil unrest in Liberia.

Rich: Yeah, yeah.

Luvvie: And you decided to stay.

Rich: I didn't have much of a choice. I didn't have much of a choice. My mother came to my college graduation on the last plane that left Monrovia before the Charles Taylor rebels invaded the capital city.

Luvvie: Whoa.

Rich: And in that invasion, our home was destroyed.

Luvvie: Oh my Gosh.

Rich: So if my mother wasn't on that plane, my mother probably wouldn't be here with us today.

Luvvie: Wow.

Rich: Right. And that was a real wake up call.

Luvvie: Wow.

Rich: Yeah.

Luvvie: And they call her Miss Mary Dennis.

Rich: Yeah. Miss Mary.

Luvvie: And she's still working for the company.

Rich: Still, she's our treasurer. She signs every check.

Luvvie: Yes.

Rich: She watches every penny-

Luvvie: And, black mamas are not playing-

Rich: Oh, she's not playing at all.

Luvvie: ... about that. Black mamas are not playing. Your money is good and secure.

Rich: Very secure.

Luvvie: That's the best thing ever.

Rich: Very secure.

Luvvie: Shea Moisture started, what the year after, or that year?

Rich: '91. So we started in '91, we were founded in '91 and incorporated in '92.

Luvvie: Okay.

Rich: Yeah.

Luvvie: How'd you start? What made you start making natural hair soaps and all that stuff?

Rich: It was just, it was what we did. My grandmother in Sierra Leone made and sold different hair and skin preps using local ingredients in the village market. And so, that's what we started doing here. We just, we needed to survive, needed to eat and couldn't, like you said, I couldn't go

home. And so started making Shea butter products and African black soap and all the things that were made in our local communities in West Africa. I started making them and started as a street vendor on 125th street selling them off of a table on 125th. Cutting up Shea butter by the ounce and by the pound and black soap by the ounce, by the pound and putting them in Ziploc bags and back then, nobody knew what they were. Right?

Luvvie: Okay.

Rich: So we had to literally stand on the street and explain to people what Shea butter was and explain to them what African black soap was and where it came from and why it was black and why the Shea butter was so good for you, and what was the differences, and all of that.

Luvvie: Were you selling or were you pitching? Were you the one handling the money or were you the one explaining?

Rich: Well, I was the one explaining.

Luvvie: Okay.

Rich: And my mother, as I said, always was the one that handled the money.

Luvvie: Right.

Rich: But we, whatever I made, we'd take home and she'd keep it. And we lived in this apartment in Queens. There were 12 of us-

Luvvie: 12 of you?

Rich: ... yeah, and you got to remember, it was-

Luvvie: Family.

Rich: ... Not just, it was a family, but it was everybody trying to escape this war. And we were all in a strange place. And, we had to support and take care of each other.

Luvvie: When did it go from street corner soap to Shea Moisture? Like, how did that happen? Because people see all of that now and they don't realize that you started on the streets.

Rich: Yeah, it's, I think it's a very interesting path for young people, right? To sort of study, right?

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: Because, we sort of now live in this world of where everything happens instantly, but that's not how this was built. And it's rare that you get to build anything of value instantly, right?

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: A few have, but it's rare that you get to do that. And so for us, it was a journey. It took us, people don't realize, it took us 16 years before we ever agreed to even go into retail because retailers, at the time, we felt didn't treat black people on the same level as they treated any of the other customers, right?

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: And not just by the experience that you walk in the store and people would follow you around, right?

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: But you'd walk into the store and there was nothing in the store for you. If you were a black woman and you were looking for skincare, your best option was Vaseline in most cases, right?

Luvvie: Yep. Johnson & Johnson.

Rich: Johnson and Johnson, right? Or, if you were looking for hair products, the only products that were available to you were relaxers and products for maintaining relaxed hair. And so, our sort of approach to it was, no, until you... And then the other thing that was also a big challenge or a big problem for us and, it's changing because of the positions that we've taken over the years and because of the work that we've done, but the messaging in the store was disconnected from you, right? The assortment in the store was disconnected from you and from what your needs were. And so we fought with our retail partners. Back then they weren't partners, they were just retailers. We fought with them to correct some of these things. And so, once they started to correct them, is when we agreed to go into retail with them.

Luvvie: Who was the person who saw you selling soap and was like, there's something here, we want to be a part of it?

Rich: It was, the first, so the first major retailer was Macy's.

Luvvie: Oh.

Rich: It was a woman named Debbie Murtha who was running their beauty business at the time. And she was just, and is just an amazing, amazing person and gave us this opportunity.

Luvvie: What year was that?

Rich: This was probably 2006-

Luvvie: Okay.

Rich: ... 2007. Yeah, so it was, we were out there for a while.

Luvvie: Really? That whole time?

Rich: Yeah. Because we started with our own table and then we started selling to other vendors.

Luvvie: Okay.

Rich: Then they started selling to other people. Then we had jobbers come in that were coming from out of the country. Then we have people that were selling at flea markets and at festivals. And then we would just load up the van and drive up the East coast. The way that we built our distribution was, and you guys don't know this today, but we used to have this thing called the yellow pages.

Luvvie: Yes, the yellow pages.

Rich: And payphones.

Luvvie: Yes.

Rich: And so, we just, we'd make the stuff and then we'd load it up in the van and then we'd just drive South. Right? And we'd go to Newark and go to Philly and go to Baltimore and go to DC. And we get into a particular city, pull over, go the phone booth, take out the yellow pages, scroll through the yellow pages to see what kind of stores there were. And if they sounded like the names represented things that we thought would be conducive to what we were doing, that they looked like they served black people and then, looked like they served people that were interested in natural products. So then we'd go in and we'd just go in and randomly walk into a Whole Foods and talk to the people in the Whole Foods, because back then you could literally sell store by store, right, into Whole Foods.

Rich: And so this is how we built this. So we rolled up, we opened up the yellow pages, make calls. Some people would say, get out of here. Some people would say, come, let's see what you got and we'll go. And that's how we did it. That's how we started. So we went from there to then selling, like I said, the flea markets and places. Then we started to sell to the natural health food stores, right?

Luvvie: Okay.

Rich: Because you go in and they were looking for natural products and we talked to them and then we'd go and then we started to figure out, right, that there was such a void in the market for natural product, right? Because, there were two things. One, nobody was building a product to serve the needs of women of color. Nobody was right?

Luvvie: Yep.

Rich: They were just taking the whatever product and however formulation they had, putting it in an ad with a black woman and now saying this product is for you. So the products didn't actually work, right, for what you needed them to work for.

Luvvie: Right.

Rich: So, we really started to realize that. And so then we started going to the beauty supply stores and the health food stores and all these different stores. And that's how we built our grassroots distribution all over the country.

Luvvie: Wow. You all used the yellow pages and cold called people.

Rich: Yeah.

Luvvie: I'm thinking about how we don't have to do that now.

Rich: No.

Luvvie: Because, a lot of us would not do that. That's takes a lot of dedication

Rich: A lot of you all don't even know what the yellow pages is.

Luvvie: Correct. I know, because I'm 33. So I know what the yellow pages are and because we used to have to bring it in and there were 700 pages of everybody's information.

Rich: Yeah, yeah, everybody's number, yeah.

Luvvie: And now we have Google.

Rich: Yeah, exactly.

Luvvie: So your first retailer, was it Macy's?

Rich: Our first retailer, yeah, our first mass retailer was Macy's.

Luvvie: And that was in 2006, 2007?

Rich: Yeah.

Luvvie: How did that go?

Rich: Horribly.

Luvvie: Really?

Rich: It went horribly.

Luvvie: Why?

Rich: It went horribly. If it wasn't for Debbie's guidance and leadership and real investment in seeing us being so successful, we would have never made it. We would have been out of business, because we took and this, and for me, I was real proud of this and I remain proud of this, right?

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: We took a product that was made for us by us.

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: Off of a table on 125th and 5th Avenue and put it in the counter in Macy's.

Luvvie: Right.

Rich: Same product.

Luvvie: Same product?

Rich: Same product.

Luvvie: Okay.

Rich: That is, that's never been done.

Luvvie: Because typically it gets watered down, right?

Rich: Yeah. Or, but just think about it. Typically, they'll alter it, they'll do different things, but just the fact that Macy saw the value in what we were doing and that we had the fortitude to say that we're not changing what we're doing, right?

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: To go from a street corner to the glass shelf in Macy's next to all of these other world-class brands-

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: ... Just goes to show you that what we do is world-class too.

Luvvie: Absolutely.

Rich: Right? We just got to own it and be proud enough of it to not alter it for somebody else's taste or distinction, right, if we're providing a value to our consumer. So, we did that, but I wasn't smart enough to understand that there are additional costs.

Luvvie: To mass produce it.

Rich: To mass producing, there are additional costs to being inside of a national retailer. They have different charges, it's called charge backs. And there's all of these other costs that we didn't know about that we didn't understand. And we went in and we put product on the shelf and it sold.

Rich: The only problem was that the more product we sold, the more money we owed, right? So, that was a very interesting lesson. And it was a lesson in multiple things. It was a lesson, one, in making sure that you understand the distribution channel that you're going into. Make sure you understand how the economics work, right? Make sure you understand where people make money along that channel, right? Because, it's not just what you sell, it's what it costs you to sell it, it's what it costs somebody else to sell it. It's the leverage that you can have. It's the leverage that somebody else can have. So making sure that you understand all of those before you go into it, we didn't know that. I didn't know that. But it also takes a fortitude to be able to say, you know what, we going to figure this out.

Luvvie: Right.

Rich: Because we got no other choice, right? Where else were we going to go? What else were we going to do? And so Macy's was a great partner in helping us figure it out once they realized that we didn't know what we were doing.

Luvvie: You sink or swim. You figured it out along the way.

Rich: Yeah. Yeah.

Luvvie: So Macy's, did you lose money on that?

Rich: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Luvvie: Wow.

Rich: Hell yeah.

Luvvie: Wow.

Rich: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, and that's the thing is like, as you said earlier, it's important that people get to know the history of how these businesses are built, the challenges that we go through. So then when they see it, one, hopefully hearing this, somebody else will learn from it and take some of it, take some of that advice and prevent the same thing from happening. But the other thing is just so that people know that it can happen.

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: That you can take something off of the table and put it in a Macy's. It can happen.

Luvvie: With, because I think a lot of times with black businesses too, we think about black businesses as mom and pop shops. How was it, the transition between when Shea Moisture was more grassroots and when Shea Moisture became basically a Macy's brand and just allowed in the mainstream area? What was that shift like for you?

Rich: Yeah. Well, I mean, I think there wasn't a shift for us, right? Because, we didn't stop selling on the street. You can still go buy a product on the street. You can still go buy a product in the

health food store. You can still go buy our product in the, there's still jobbers that sell our products. You can still buy our product in the flea market. You can still buy our products, right? So that didn't-

You can still buy our products. The idea for us was never to leave anything. It was always to build upon what we did. And that's what we've always done. So we go in, you start somewhere. That doesn't mean you have to leave where you started in order to move forward. So we just continuously built. And we still have that foundation today. It's not like okay, now I got to leave here to go there. At least that's not how we do and that's not how we think about it. But then as you elevate, there are different pressures that come along. The constraints that you have are different. So people think you're moving all this volume and you're doing all of that so things must be great. Well, the reality of it is that what you were doing when you were small had a magnitude and a scale of pain. Now that you're bigger, there's a different magnitude of scale and pain. That's just the way that we've always looked at it. So we just continue to figure out ways to scale and grow.

Luvvie: So growing pains, let's talk about growing pains, because Lord knows there's a lot of that. Those of us who built our businesses and who basically look at ourselves as part of the community that we are building, we ended up having a lot of growing pains, especially in the black community. Last year, huge thing happened with Shea moisture, with Adgate. It was like last year was like the year of brands having Adgate, where Shea Moisture's ads was not well received, because it was like a white woman in an ad about curly hair. I remember I talked to you around that time. One, what is your-

Rich: And by the way, thank you for that. When you're going through it, even in your business and what you're doing, you're doing something that nobody else has done for you before. Nobody's done it in front of you to say, "Hey, here's the roadmap. Here's what you do. Here's what you don't do." Because of that, we're going to make mistakes. And even if we had the roadmap, we're going to make mistakes. When we mess up, to have your community just basically want to devour you, not your whole... But elements of it, and negate all that you've done for one mistake is very very confusing and challenging. So I appreciate the time that you spent just talking to me. That was much appreciated.

Luvvie: Honestly. I'm glad. Because I just went through it. It's painful to have your people kind of be like, "You're the enemy." How did you deal with that whole situation? What did you come out of it feeling like?

Rich: So I'll be honest with you. I don't know how this is going to come off, but I don't feel any different. I don't feel any different, because I've always been about my community. I've always loved my community. I can tell you that I love my community more than I love me. The only thing that that would have done differently would have made me crawl up into a ball and go into a shell and be like, "You know what, I'm not going to put myself out there. I'm not going to do this." That would have been the only change that could have happened. But what it reconfirmed for me was just how much work we have to do, how many more businesses have to be able to come up and grow and scale and not abandon our community for our community to appreciate what we go through and how we go through it and for us to show our appreciation back.

Which is why I just doubled down. I was like, "I'm going to keep going." We've got to grow this business. We've got to expand the base. We've got to sell to other people. But that doesn't mean that we have to abandon our core, abandoned our people, abandoned the people that got us here. We just have to explain to them what we're doing. We have to be more thoughtful in how we go about it. We have to slow down and be more patient because they haven't seen this. The things that we've done as a business, we haven't seen in our community. I haven't seen it either. So I'm figuring it out too. There's no roadmap. So you're going to make wrong terms and you just have to have the conviction in what you're doing, and you have to have the belief in what you're doing, and that belief needs to be grounded around a foundation of love for your community, a foundation of love for your people, but also understanding that if your business isn't around, you can't help your people.

So you've got to make decisions that allow the business to grow in scale but that also impact your people, and I think we're starting to show what that model looks like. We've made mistakes along the way, but we've also had some incredible triumphs along the way. We're not going to all of a sudden become a different company, become different people, simply because we make a mistake.

Luvvie: It's just the learning and the growing. And what do you say when people say things like, "Oh, the Shea Moisture products has changed"? How did you deal with that, and what is the actual truth?

Rich: The reality of it is that when you scale up... I try to explain it this way, the simplest way that I can think of it, is when you're cooking dinner at home for say just you and your spouse, and then when you're cooking it for when you now have a family. So you've gone from yourself, you're cooking for yourself, then you're cooking for two people, then you're cooking for a family of three or four or five. There's always a learning curve as you produce more, as you make more. Then you go from serving your family to Thanksgiving dinner, and you've got your extended family. Then you go to now running a catering business because everybody loves your food, so now you're cooking for 200 people. It scales. When you're making natural products, there's going to be changes as you scale. You can't make a recipe the same way when you're making it for two people than when you making it for 80 people, or a hundred people. That's the basic way to look at it.

The second thing to understand is that regulations have changed. Regulations have changed over the past two decades or so that we've been doing this, almost three decades now. We've never put harmful chemicals in our products, and we've always used natural ingredients in our products. But when we started doing this to where we are now, the science around natural ingredients, it wasn't where it is. It was in its infancy. So I'll give you an example. There's an ingredient that we used to use called japonica. It was a preservative. It was made from honeysuckle. Completely natural ingredient. But over time it reacts to behave more like a paraben. So if you're true in your beliefs, even if it's not a paraben but it's going to behave like a paraben, you're going to take it out. So when you take it out, that changes your entire ingredient deck.

So now if you put in more of something else to compensate for that preservative so it doesn't go bad, or you put in less of it, or you put in three or four other things to compensate for what that was doing, then that changes your ingredient labels. And then people say, "Oh, you've changed the formula." So whether it's learning more about the science and knowing more about how

natural ingredients interact with our bodies, whether it's rule changes that happen in... So now we want to sell to Europe. We have black people that live in Europe too, and the regulations in Europe are different than the regulations here, and we were making products for here. So now we're making product that can serve the black people in Europe as well as the black people here. So now we have to make a product that's standard for those, because we can't afford to make two different products, because otherwise we'd be out of business, and then the brand that you love so much wouldn't be there period because we couldn't afford to do it.

So there are these things that we haven't experienced in our communities, that we haven't seen in our communities, and that hasn't been explained to us. That's why I'm so open about what we do and how we do it, because I think that within itself is a value add to our community. If there's another company that can come behind us from the black community, that can do what we do and do it at the scale that we do it, because we paved the way, not just they saw us do it, but we explained to them how we did it, what the wins were, what the losses were, how we recovered from them, how we rode the wins, how we recovered from the losses, then we've done a great service. That's the whole reason behind the [New Voices Fund](#). We should take the revenues, the profits, the benefits that we've gotten from doing business in our community and invest it back in our community so that there will be more Shea Moistures out there.

We don't just want one Shea Moisture. One Shea Moisture doesn't do it for us. We need hundreds. And that's how we will change the plight in our community. That's how we will have the economic independence that we need. That's how women in our communities will be able to make the decisions for themselves that they need to make not being influenced by others. So that's what this is about.

Luvvie: This is actually right on point, because we hear so many stories of black people failing that those of us who are considered successful, we have to be transparent about the journey, about the pain, about the grind, about how we finally cut through it, because if we're so used to seeing failing, we need to also get used to seeing success and knowing what comes behind it, because I think what ends up happening is people build narratives that they think they know and they run with that, and they're like, "This is what happened." So I always love people like you who are transparent about the journey, why I'm insistent on being transparent about my journey, is people see the success, forget about all the struggles, and don't know how they can also get to the success. So that's really important.

Rich: I think that's one piece that's important. I think the other piece that's important is we see the success and it's almost like we're waiting for it to fail.

Luvvie: Yes. Yes. We're waiting for the shoe to drop.

Rich: Right. We're waiting for the shoe to drop. And I shouldn't say we, because that's unfair. There are those. It's not everybody, because if it was everybody, none of us would be here. But there are those who I wouldn't say root to see failure, but are quick to want to destroy when something isn't working the way that they want it to work. Look, every consumer has a choice. That's what this is about. They can choose to listen to what you have to say or not. They can choose to download your podcast or not. But to actively try to destroy your podcasts, it's a whole different energy. One of the things that I think that gets missing in that whole cancel

movement that we're quick to have, the thing that gets missing is what does that say to the next entrepreneur behind me? How much more terrified are they to try to drive and grow?

Luvvie: They've seen the arrows pointing at you.

Rich: They've seen it, and they see the hits that you take. And then it's like, "Do I really want to take that?" Or the other thing that you see as a result of is that people just sort of like, "You know what, I'm going to build this, make some money, I'm going to be out." And nothing goes back to the community. I just think that look, there's plenty of reasons to cancel brands and businesses. Just understand why you're doing it, and understand who you're hurting by doing it, understand what the value is, as opposed to reacting to something. And even as mad as you can be, as upset you can be, and as deservant as somebody can be or a brand or business can be of backlash, it's also important to understand what that says to our community and about our community and how much more damage that could cause.

Luvvie: Yeah. I remember the vitriol against Shea Moisture. I was like, wow. I hadn't thought about the idea of how does it terrify other people who are trying to do the same thing. And in conversations that I've had with other entrepreneurs who are black, people are constantly afraid of cancel culture, and now it's a part of their work. They're thinking about it whenever they're like, "Oh my God, we want to do this thing and tell this story, but we're afraid of what Twitter is going to say." How do you make sure you don't have that in your psyche when you're running this business and when you are showing up as the face of the business too, because you're not the only person who runs Shea Moisture. You are the of course CEO, but you're one person.

Rich: I'm one person. It's also, when you stop to think about it, the environment that that creates inhibits our growth as a community. That's not what we're here for. We're here to grow our communities. But in order to do that, we got to be able to take risks.

Luvvie: So one risk that you did was decide to sell [Sundial](#) to [Unilever](#). I feel like I almost saw the inception of it, but I didn't realize I was seeing it last year, 2017. I feel like I was looking at it, but I didn't realize what I was looking at. Because I randomly ran into you in Miami at BET Leading Women Defined, and I was like, "Rich, what are you doing here? This is a conference full of women." Were you there to have a conversation with AC?

Rich: No, AC wasn't at Unilever at the time. No. No, no, no, no, no. AC wasn't at Unilever at the time. No.

Luvvie: So what made you decide to sell... How did this whole thing happen? Because you making the decision to go under the Unilever umbrella in this way is huge, and it took your business from like an actual family business in the core way to now a brand in the way people think about like a global business, yeah.

Rich: A global business that's family run.

Luvvie: Come on and say that.

Rich: But that's also part of the learning and the growing and the teaching in our community. That deal is powerful on so many levels. And I don't know that we've taken the time to really, and we should do that, to really explain the nuances of the power that's behind that.

Luvvie: Let's talk about it.

Rich: Yeah. Let's do that.

Luvvie: Because I don't think anybody has really understood. Let's talk about it.

Rich: Let's do talk about it. So the first thing is as an independent brand and as an independent business, the capital that's required to scale and to continue to grow and to compete... If you step back and look at... So we went into retail 2007, let's call it 2007. Just 11 years ago. When you walked into the aisle, there was virtually no product for black women. Virtually none. There was a four foot section in the store that everything that a black woman needed should have been on that. That's the only space they gave her. So therefore there was very little on the shelf for her. We came into that and said, "No, that's not right. That's not fair. This is not how you serve us, and if you don't serve us properly, we're not going to sell to you." And we worked over these years. Now you go in the aisle and there's like...

Luvvie: There's [inaudible 00:39:53] handmade, there's [Creme of Nature](#). Yeah.

Rich: And what people don't realize is that when we went into Target, we brought other brands with us. We didn't just go in and say, "Hey, this is ours." We're like, no, this isn't going to work if it's just our brand. We need other brands that service black women. We need other black businesses that service the black community to be on the shelf with us. If you think about it just from those very beginnings what we changed, we changed the shopping experience for black women in this country period. You walk in now, there's options for you. The major corporations don't sit around and say, "Oh, that's cute. You guys came in here and you took all our shelf space." They're "Oh, great. You guys are doing community commerce. You're giving back to the black community. We love what you're doing. This is great." That's not what happens.

What happens is they say, "Wow, we're losing share to this company? We've got all these resources over here. Now we're going to go pour all of these resources in to compete against you." So if you look at what happens to the black brands that come into the market, they can grow but so far, because the major brands with the major budgets and the major dollars and the major infrastructure are all going after that consumer. We in our community want to buy black, say we're going to buy black, in most cases do buy black, but many of us also don't. Many of us buy brands from other companies and they have choice and they can spend the dollars where they want. They can do that. Next time we come in, I want to talk about the cost of buying black and how we're not always willing to pay the cost. We talk about it, but we're not willing to pay the cost that it takes to do it, and thereby what it costs us in our community over time, because we don't build sustainable businesses in our community.

So you'll go to the store and there'll be a black owned store here and there'll be say a Korean owned store here, and the umbrella here in the black store is \$5 an umbrella, in the Korean store is \$2.50. Yes, there's a big price difference there, so you go and you buy the umbrella for

\$2.50 cents. It's got nothing to do in my opinion necessarily just with the fact that they're Korean. That's almost irrelevant. But what it does have to do with is that in little Korea, there are 10 Korean banks that they can go to and get the financing to buy that umbrella. How many we got in our community?

Luvvie: I can't name one right now. Not one black bank.

Rich: If I can't finance my inventory, then how am I going to pay for it? That is the problem. So I'm paying from the dollars I can scrape up from here, I can scrape from there, I can scrape up from there to buy it, and then I got to sell it at more of a price. Then I haven't had the opportunity to watch two or three generations build the business. How do I provide customer service? How do I finance my inventory? How do I do all of these things? The Korean store next door, you've got two, three generations running that store. They understand those things. And I'm not saying that their customer service is greater than ours, but at least they understand the concept of what happens there. Not that we don't understand the concept, but they've had time to practice.

Luvvie: They've had practice and they've seen examples.

Rich: They've seen examples and they know how to do and how not to do. So we walk in the store and we say, "Oh, the stink attitude that we get in this store, in the black owned store..."

Rich: We're going to go... Now to be clear, I'm not saying that this is everybody and everywhere. I'm just saying that this is an example, and this is a reality. You start to add up those challenges, and it makes it very difficult for us to actually build these businesses. This is a long way about answering your question. It makes it difficult for us to build these businesses, for us to sustain these businesses, and for us to scale these businesses.

Luvvie: You can only grow so far. So why was Unilever... One, why was it the right time? Two, why was this the right partner?

Rich: If you take the things that I've just said into context, now we're in a place of where we've come into a market that nobody was serving, we start serving that market. The marketplace starts to see the value of serving that market. They start to invest dollars behind it and infrastructure behind it that we don't have, and dollars that we don't have. Then you look at the history of what's happened when that's happened. So you go back and you look at the brands that came before us. The [SoftSheens](#), the Pro Lines, the Johnson, the Johnson products. You look at those businesses, and those businesses were either sold, or they have shrunk dramatically. Because they just don't have the resources to compete. So I look at it and I'm like, what we've done here is something incredibly special for black women. Not just from the product perspective and the haircare and the skincare and all the beautiful products that we produce specifically for her and for her needs, but also for all of the black women in the supply chain in Africa, all those 20,000 women that are in that supply chain.

Luvvie: Tell us about that. So that's a thing you don't talk about often, not often enough because people don't realize that you're employing women on the ground in West Africa. Tell us more.

Rich: I told you about how we started in the products, black soap and shea butter and coconut oil, all of these indigenous ingredients. These indigenous ingredients are harvested by women in these villages and in these communities. Traditionally, they have been at the very bottom of the pyramid. So basically what they have only had the opportunity to do was the most dangerous part of the job, which was go out into the wild and pick the nuts. They get bitten by snakes that get stepped on, and gather. And then in shea, the shea season is really three months in the year. They didn't have warehousing to store them, they didn't have equipment to process them. Basically they can only work and earn income for three months. And then the traders come in to buy the nuts from them. So because there's only a three month window, the traders will just wait until the last month.

Luvvie: And try to get everything for cheap.

Rich: For cheap. So these women are going through all of this and then not even making enough to cover the time that they're out there away from their children, away from their families trying to make a living. Perpetuates the cycle of poverty. I grew up seeing that. And I was like, no, we can do this differently. So what if we not just bought, instead of going through the traders in the middleman, we're going to go buy it directly from the women, but we're going to pay them above what the local wage rates are, above what the men make, because there's two different wage rates now. And that's the other thing, the same challenges there are here, where women are making so much less than the men are. It's the same thing there, for doing the same work.

So what we went in and said was "Okay, we will buy directly from you. We will pay you above what the going rate is, and then the products that we make from this, we'll put them in our community commerce products, those community commerce products, we'll take 10% from the sales of that when we bring it here and we sell it to you, we will take 10% of that and we invest it back in you. We invest it in your infrastructure so you have warehousing, so you don't have to only work for three months. You can work year round. You can store and you can sell year round. So if you want to sell to a trader, you can sell them at market rates six months after the season is over because you have storage."

"You want to create a more finished product, here's processing equipment. We train you. So now you can process, so instead of selling just the raw material, you're now selling finished or semi-finished goods at a higher price, creating value in the supply chain." And then we take that processed product and we buy that. We bring that here, we put it in a product, we sell the product, and we give them 10 cents back on the dollar.

Luvvie: That's incredible. That is amazing.

Rich: But that's what I needed to do more of. So you asked me why. That's what I needed to do to more of. We've been in business almost 30 years. We only got 20,000 women in that supply chain. There's millions... So when you hear it, it's "Oh 20,000, you guys are doing great." But the problem that we're trying to solve for, which is economic equality, we're not going to get there with 20,000. On my own, I could probably double this thing over the next 10 years, and we'll probably get... Okay, so we get 40,000 women. There's millions and millions and millions of women that we haven't impacted. So what I needed to do was to find a way to scale this so that I could go from 20,000 to 100,000 to 200 to 300,000. And to do that, I needed a partner with a global reach, because I couldn't build it in the time.

First of all, I don't have the capital to do it. I don't have the time to do it. These companies have been around for hundreds of years when we weren't even allowed to own... When we didn't even own ourselves.

Luvvie: When we were property.

Rich: So we've got to find different ways to grow and scale and impact our communities. So that's the way that we're doing it. So that was the first thing, is now we can scale these communities. We can bring real leverage in the supply chain. We can bring real change to many, many, many more women. So that was the first reason. The second reason was after we had the ad and we had all of the backlash, what we didn't do was run away from it. What we did do was step right into it and said, "This is what we were trying to do. This wasn't executed the way that we should have executed it. It was done in error. But it wasn't our intent. It wasn't our intent to abandon you as a consumer. It wasn't our intent to be insensitive. It wasn't our intent to do any of those things. But we understand that we hurt you," and we apologized right for doing that. But what were also clear to say is that but we still have to grow this business. We still have to scale this business so that we can continue to invest back in our community.

So what we did was we went out, and in fact I talked to you about it, we went out and we did a series of, and they continued to this day, we did town halls and listening sessions. And we talked to hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of black women all over this country. Sat down, listened, heard what the pain was, explained-

Luvvie: What was the pain?

Rich: The pain was [inaudible 00:52:03]. One was-

Luvvie: We all got pain.

Rich: We got pain. and that was the last thing that we ever wanted to do, was to create pain, or to trigger pain. Which was probably more accurate. We sat and we listened and we heard about brands that come in and use our community and then leave us. It became... I don't even know how to say that. Analogous. I think that's how you say it. Became analogous to-

Luvvie: Put that on your chair. Just on your chair is fine.

Rich: It became analogous to relationships in our community. It became analogous to relationships not just within our community, but outside of our community. Our political system, our social justice system, our economic... And the thing that we heard the most was the economic pain. I was like we're doing all of this stuff in Africa, and yeah we have these education programs and these scholarships that we do and that's great. But how do we really have impact at scale here? How do we really, really change the lives of these women that have invested in us? And the way that you do that is by investing back in them. But you need capital to do that. You need money to do that. So I was like, what's the asset that we have? What can we do? What can we do?

Luvvie: Talk about taking a pain point and turn it into like a blessing point. So from the listening sessions is what made you look at [Essence](#), like can we own Essence?

Rich: The first thing that it did was it made me think about we've created a lot of value in Shea Moisture. If we can create more value by giving ourselves an infrastructure and a platform and a global partner to grow our community commerce so we can grow those corporatives, And then we can take the capital that we get out of the sale of it and invest it back in the black community. Then we can really do things at scale. So, what we did was we partnered with Unilever. My family still runs the business. We now have a platform upon which we can take these 20,000 women and move them into the two, three, four, 500,000 numbers simply by growing Shea Moisture. If black women go out and buy Shea Moisture, there will be 20 to 50 to 80 to a hundred thousand women, 250, 300,000 women in Africa that will come above the poverty line just like we've moved these 20. All it takes is buying Shea Moisture shampoo. Then we take additional proceeds and we put them in [New Voices](#). And we say-

Luvvie: I actually want to walk there. So what made you-

Rich: Before we get to Essence, because we got to get there too.

Luvvie: Before you got to Essence, you went into... So wait, which came first, New Voices, the idea for New Voices, or was it the Essence buy?

Rich: No, New Voices first.

Luvvie: Let's talk about that, because I thought it was Essence first and then New Voices.

Rich: No, no, it was New Voices first.

Luvvie: So you talked to Unilever and you're like, "Cool, I'll partner with you, but I need this." Talk about that.

Rich: Yeah. I'll partner with you, but I need this. I need to grow my supply chain, I need to grow my community commerce model globally, and I need to take a hundred million dollars and I need to invest it in black women entrepreneurs.

Luvvie: And you said that in the meeting.

Rich: I said that in the very first meeting.

Luvvie: What did they say?

Rich: They said yes. They said that's-

Luvvie: Immediately?

Rich: Yeah. They said, "That's why we want to partner with you because you see the world differently and you're doing things differently and you're doing them for your community, and we can learn from this and do it in other communities."

Luvvie: Before that meeting, and you were like, "I'm about to ask for a hundred million dollars just for black women," did you have to practice that number in the mirror? Because that's a big number.

Rich: No, but I knew what I needed. I knew what it was going to take.

Luvvie: You didn't think it was too crazy?

Rich: No. In fact, I think it was too small. If you think about it in the overall scheme of things, it is too small.

Luvvie: Absolutely. People just when talking about numbers for their own everyday lives, for when they're negotiating salaries, people freak out the idea of even asking for a hundred thousand dollars and you walked in the room and asked for a hundred million dollars. Wow. And they said yes immediately.

Rich: Yeah. Because that's the type of organization it is. That's the type of people that we're dealing with. They also understand the challenges that we have in our communities. They just haven't had a vehicle through which they could be helpful, because they don't come from here. They're helpful in their own communities, and they have all the intent.

Luvvie: [Doug](#) does a lot of like women's empowerment work. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Rich: They're the first ones to get out and do that. But they're not there. They don't know. So that was the first piece.

Luvvie: So that was the first meeting.

Rich: The first meeting.

Luvvie: [New Voices Fund](#). You already set a hundred million dollars just to invest in black women entrepreneurs and build in black businesses. Okay. So second meeting.

Rich: Second meeting then we wrote out the manifesto, and we said, this is how this company will run, this is how Sundial will run, this is how the family would run it.

Luvvie: What are the important pieces of the manifesto that you made sure went in?

Rich: Well, one that our community commerce model continues. Two was New Voices. And then we started to get into the real details of what the brand needs.

Luvvie: You're like, my mom is going to stay treasurer. My brother does, because your brother is also a huge part... What is he?

Rich: He's head of sales.

Luvvie: He's head of sales. Okay. So you did that. When did Essence come into the story?

Rich: While we were doing that, I read an article in Wall Street Journal that Time Inc was selling some of its assets, and Essence was one of the assets. Not having anything to lose, I called. I called. I read in this article that Essence is for sale. Because for me, I've always understood that... There's an African proverb, and it says "Until the lion learns how to write, the hunter will always be the hero." So for me, it's like we need to own our narrative. It doesn't matter what it costs. You can't put a price tag on our narrative, on our culture, on our freedom, on our ability to express ourselves, on our ability to own the distribution of our expression. You can't. So I was like, "I think that you guys should sell it to me." But here's why. And they had already been in a bidding process. So there were 40 other bidders for Essence.

Luvvie: And you were probably the only black one, or probably few.

Rich: There were very few.

Luvvie: There were very few black ones, because not a lot of us have the capital to be able to even walk up to somebody and say, "I want to buy Essence Magazine." How did you went out? What did you bring to the table that was so different from everybody else?

Rich: I think for one, I was willing to pay the price that they wanted, and to me, I thought that was a cheap price for our voice. To me, there wasn't a price that I wasn't going to pay, because I thought it was a cheap price to free our voice, to have that voice.

Luvvie: For this culture shaper, this culture shaping publication, because we don't have many anymore that are still in print. I think Essence is probably the only one I can think of off the top of my head. We've lost the Vibes and we've lost the Honeys and the Suedes and Ebony only puts out one like every year. So that's how you got Essence. You also made the choice to give executives some stake in it.

Rich: Yeah. Those are the things that, like I said, when you're doing something that you haven't done before, you're going to learn. And there isn't a roadmap to do this. But it's important that the people that are building these businesses feel connected economically to the business, not just emotionally. Because all too often, we don't have that opportunity. So what we wanted to do was to set up a business where executives could have an equity... The people that are truly at the top leading the business could. That's what we continue to work towards and to work on. We just added some new executive leadership to the team. Michelle is, my goodness, an amazing, incredible business leader. [Michelle Ebanks](#), shout out to Michelle. I've learned so much from her, and I continue to learn every day and just her steadfastness and her strength and her emotional intelligence and her grit and her passion and her love for black women and what she's doing over then, how she's running that business, how she's transforming that business. I couldn't be more proud.

Luvvie: What's your vision for Essence? What do you want to come out of Essence Magazine? Because I see you see the value in it. In your dream world, what do you think Essence stands for?

Rich: What we've communicated is what Essence should have stood for under Time Inc and what Michelle and the team fought to make happen, and now have the absolute opportunity to do that, and that is to serve black women deeply. That is what Essence was developed for, that is

what it was made for, that is what our community has expected, that is what they've rallied around, and that's what we're doing, is we're figuring out every single way to serve black women deeply so that they get... When I saw Essence, I didn't see just a magazine. I saw a community. I saw a community that was ignored, a community that was underserved, and you can say, "What do you mean by ignored? There's all these other publications." The reality of it is that as you said, many of them are no longer at least are not around, or at least not functioning at the levels that they were.

So what that has given rise to is general market publications. I love to see this. They'll one month a year or two months a year, they'll put a black woman on the cover and then we'll all celebrate. They don't give a shit about us. They just care that we're going to buy that book because we're excited that they're recognizing us. I want a place where we're recognized every day, and a place where we go and spend our money with every day so that we can continue that recognition every day. When we don't do that, we're seeing what happens. Socially in this country we're seeing it right. Politically we're seeing it, economically we're seeing it. We've got to get to a place of where our community can have the places that they can invest their money and spend their money and get value for what they're spending. So we talked a little bit earlier about the cost of buying black.

One of the things that we're looking to try to do and to continue is not just help bring other companies along, but in the companies that we work with, when you engage with that company, you should feel like, "Wow, that's the best product I've ever had. That's the best experience I ever had. They get me, they know me, they're here for me." And so that's what we're going to try to do with it.

Luvvie: So back to the [New Voices Fund](#). First of all, this portfolio is getting ridiculous. Which is amazing, because we've never seen anything like this, this very intentional push of money. Because people will be like, "Oh, I love black businesses." Money is what they need. The first grantees are the [The Lip Bar](#), [Mented](#), and the [McBride Sister's Wine](#) among others. There's a lot of noir pixie dust in this list. So, you've dedicated \$30 million to that first round of eight companies. Wow. Okay. Tell us about how dope it is to invest in this newest cohort of bosses. I already know why you know it's important. What made you pick the companies that you picked in this first round?

Rich: Yeah. First of all, I'm proud to say that those companies picked us.

Rich: So I'm proud to say that those companies picked us. Right? I'm really, really proud to say that.

Luvvie: I love me some Lip Bar and Mented.

Rich: Aren't they just-

Luvvie: Whenever when I'm on the stage, I like to wear Lip Bar's Bawse Lady color.

Rich: Aha, yeah.

Luvvie: Because why not?

Rich: Yeah. Why not?

Luvvie: You know?

Rich: Because that's what you are.

Luvvie: Come on! That's what I'm saying.

Rich: That's what you are.

Luvvie: Yeah. So it's like, "What made you pick them?" And just the other cohorts?

Rich: No, they picked us. They came, they reached out and said, "Hey, we hear you're doing this, and this is what we're doing and we want to be a partner." We said, "Okay, here's what we're doing. Here's how we think about it." Because of, again, this learning of building a business that in a space and in a way that no one else has done before and we didn't have a roadmap, we made a lot of mistakes. Right?

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: And we learn from those mistakes. So we don't just want to be a funding source, right? We want to also help you avoid those mistakes. We want to help you think through the challenges upfront, right? And say, "Hey, you don't have to do what I say, but here's how I've thought about it when I've been faced with this. Here's what I've done. Here's what worked. Here's what didn't work." Or, "You know what? I haven't been faced with this, but because of my travels all these years, I know these 10 people that do different things, and that at least one of them could've, let's go talk to them." Right?

So what we want to do with it is we call it the ACE Model, right? So it's Access, it's Capital and it's Expertise. So we want to bring you expertise. We want to bring, not just our knowledge base, but our entire network and have you have access to that entire network and not, "Hey, pick up the phone and call so-and-so." We are doing it in a very structured, organized way and in a way that breeds accountability. So that when you go have these conversations and there are action items that you go and you take these actions, and you report back that you've... because that's the way that you help to avoid a lot of the pitfalls. Right?

Luvvie: Right.

Rich: The other one is access. We've built a lot of relationships with retailers and with media buyers and with all these different spaces that we're in, so partnering with those people, those companies to provide access. So if we're going to put in the capital and we're going to provide the expertise, we're going to do training. We're going to provide support. We're going to help with supply chain. We're going to help with all of these things that it takes to make a business in those environments successful. Then we want retail partners that are also going to do that, right?

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: And there you're going to get shelf space because they make money in this community too. Right? So they should invest back in this community, and we should provide them a vehicle through which they can invest back. A lot of times we go and say, "Oh, you guys don't put anything in the community. What are you doing?" It's not that they don't want to, is that they don't know how to.

Luvvie: They don't know how to.

Rich: Right?

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: Sometimes they want to, sometimes they don't. The ones that want to write may not know how to, and the ones that don't want to, when they see success will want to.

Luvvie: Correct.

Rich: So, in either case, we've got to provide them the conduits through which they can help in our communities the way that we want them to, and not necessarily in these ways that are oftentimes well-meaning but not necessarily effective.

Luvvie: So what is the one thing that you want every small business owner or somebody who wants to be one to keep in mind as they're about to build a business or whatever, go after their dreams?

Rich: Don't accept the nos.

Luvvie: Don't accept the nos.

Rich: Don't accept the nos, and that's a common one, right? A lot of people say that and share that. But I think it's a critical one because when you're starting, there's going to be plenty of people that are going to say no. And those nos are going to stop you from doing things that you want to do. Right?

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: So don't accept them if you know that what you're doing is the right thing. Now, let me be clear. Just because I'm saying don't accept them, doesn't mean I'm saying don't listen.

Luvvie: Ah, yes.

Rich: Right? Understand why they're saying no. Don't just dismiss it. "Oh, this person doesn't like me. They don't like black" And sometimes that may be the case, but listen and understand to prove for yourself that, that is truly the case. Listen with an open mind that says, "Well, if I were in his shoes, would I do this?"

Luvvie: Would I say yes to me?

Rich: "If I were in his shoes, would I say yes to me?"

Luvvie: Yep.

Rich: Right? And why would I say yes to me? And what is it that I need to do that makes it imperative that they say yes to me?"

Luvvie: And what is it that I need to do that makes it so hard for them to say no, where they-

Rich: Exactly.

Luvvie: ... make it so hard for them to say no that they're yes just makes all the sense in the world?

Rich: Exactly. Exactly. So it's not just saying no and then, you know.

Luvvie: And be like, "Aay."

Rich: Yeah. Yeah. Exactly.

Luvvie: Adjust and come back.

Rich: Exactly.

Luvvie: So, let me tell y'all. I've been trying to get Rich on the podcast for ages just because me and Rich's schedule together is nuts, but mostly Rich's. He's been the busiest dude on the face of the earth. I'm sure 18 million people are clamoring for you right now, and he's made space to come on Rants & Random. Rich, thank you so much.

Rich: Oh, thank you.

Luvvie: Rich, like as all of this madness has gone around you, as you're now adding more businesses to portfolio, as you're doing Essence, does your family miss you? That is what I wonder.

Rich: Yeah. And I think that's the other thing that's pretty necessary in our community, right?

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: ... is for our families to be a part of us building, not just one go off in a corner and do it. Right? And I know people say, "Family businesses are hard." You know what? The reality of it is they are hard. But it's like we talked earlier about the cost of buying black, that's the price that we must pay for stability in our community. Right? That's the price that we must pay so that our children can grow up and see what it is and understand the challenges and learn how to deal with conflict and learn how to deal with selfishness and learn how to deal with all of these things that make it hard to be in a family business.

Now, having said that, if you have a family member in your business that can't perform, you have to take them out. If you have a family business, a member in the business that can't scale,

you have to bring people above them. You have to have the fortitude to make the hard decisions. Just because you're a part of a family that's in a business doesn't entitle you to be in that business.

Luvvie: Facts.

Rich: Right?

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: That's it. So you have to carry your weight in that business.

Luvvie: How do you create the line? At Thanksgiving, how are you making sure you and your mom and your brother are not talking Shea Moisture business?

Rich: We are.

Luvvie: You are.

Rich: Why shouldn't we? That's what put the Turkey on the table.

Luvvie: There's no like, "No, you guys, we're about to cut the Turkey. Stop talking about business. We'll talk about that in three minutes." No?

Rich: No, no, no, no. That's the thing. It's the commitment to it. That's what put the turkey on the table. If it wasn't for that, we won't be able to cut the turkey.

Luvvie: But how do you deal with the conflict? If your mom, let's say, for example, forgets to sign a check. How you like, "Mom, I'm your boss. You just messed that up a little bit."

Rich: Well, the first thing is she's my boss.

Luvvie: She's your boss-

Rich: She's my boss.

Luvvie: Is that because she's money? Yep.

Rich: Right. And she's my mom.

Luvvie: And she's your mom.

Rich: Right. So that's the first thing, but the second thing is you've got to, when you start it, you've got to start it from a culture of accountability and ownership. It's hard to add it in later, right? So one of the things that we've always done is every two years, we'll put our jobs up for review because we always want the best people in the job.

Luvvie: And if it's not you, you step away.

Rich: You step away. You step out. You step down. You move up.

Luvvie: Wow!

Rich: We all have moved into different roles in the business over the years. As the businesses have grown and as they've changed and as they've needed different skillsets, we've needed to bring in people that have more expertise and more experience and things that we don't have experience in. So, if you were in that role and now we have somebody that can do that role at the level that we need it for, then you need to step out of that role. Hopefully, you've developed skills in other areas that you can move up or you can move-

Luvvie: Sideways.

Rich: ... sideways, or you can move down or you can move out. And we've done it all, and we're going to continue to do it all because that's how you build a sustainable business.

Luvvie: Have you ever had to fire a family member?

Rich: Hell, yeah.

Luvvie: Really?

Rich: Yeah.

Luvvie: And then did you see them at the holidays? Was it awkward?

Rich: Of course.

Luvvie: How was it?

Rich: I mean, different people react to things differently.

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: But it's not doing it out of malice or out of some power trip or out of some... It's doing it out of, hey... This is our livelihood. If you're not contributing to it, you're hurting it, and so why should the entire family and all the people that are associated in the business that would suffer because one person isn't willing to or is incapable of or doesn't see the need to grow? Right? Now, I'm not trying to say that it's perfect and that we're all these stellar performers and all of that. But what I am saying is that there is an understanding that you're expected to grow and scale with the business-

Luvvie: And also show up with excellence.

Rich: ... and show up with excellence. Yes.

Luvvie: Like, "I might be your brother, but that does not mean."

Rich: That does not mean, exactly.

Luvvie: Got it.

Rich: Exactly.

Luvvie: I think a lot of people do family businesses and things fall apart because there's no, the fact that there's no line is a problem for a lot.

Rich: Yeah.

Luvvie: But you guys hold each other accountable.

Rich: But it also takes leadership.

Luvvie: Okay.

Rich: It takes selflessness because the person that usually has to make those decisions doesn't necessarily want to make those decisions.

Luvvie: Right.

Rich: It's not like, "Hey, I want to go fire so-and-so" or "I want to move so-and-so to this other role, and they want to be in this role." But it is that you have the best interests of everybody in mind, as opposed to just your best interests or the one individual's best interest. Right?

Luvvie: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rich: And the way to do that is to really allow everybody to have a voice and allow everybody to be able to express it, or I should say create the opportunity for everybody to have a voice and to express themselves. Now, that can be another one because we can talk about the pitfalls of that as well because sometimes you don't get anything done because you spent three weeks debating something that should've been-

Luvvie: Trying to get consensus.

Rich: Exactly.

Luvvie: Are there ever times when you're like, "You know what, I'm going-

Rich: Oh, yeah.

Luvvie: I got this decision.

Rich: Yeah.

Luvvie: I heard you, but I'm make the ultimate call."

Rich: Yep. And I think that's what's been so beautiful about my family in running this business and why I'm so proud of us, my mother and my sister and all of my family members in this business, is that we take great pride in excelling, just collectively, and that has permeated the organization. So we take great pride in excelling. And when you do that, a lot of the distracting elements that take away from that become less and less visible or distracting.

Luvvie: Gotcha. So I'm always like Rich. I see Rich at random conferences and always on the go. One point, me and Rich actually had a meeting in a stairwell because we've been trying to track each other down. And he was like, "Wait, 25 minutes, right now. Let's go into the stairwell." And we had a meeting in the middle of [Essence Fest](#).

Rich: We had a meeting. Yeah, we did.

Luvvie: And it was productive.

Rich: We did. We sure did. We sure did.

Luvvie: We did. It was a very productive meeting. I'm always like, "How is Rich taking care of himself with all of this crazy that's around?" I ask all my guests on Rants, what is your self-care thing? What do you do to recharge?

Rich: Yeah. We're starting to learn and hear a lot about self-care.

Luvvie: Yeah.

Rich: And we're starting to really get religion around self-care.

Luvvie: Religion is a good way to put it.

Rich: Yeah. That's what we're starting to get.

Luvvie: We're devoted. Yeah.

Rich: We're getting devoted to it. I haven't caught that religion yet.

Luvvie: Really?

Rich: There are things that I've always done that I continue to do, which is I try to eat well.

Luvvie: Okay. Vegetarian or no?

Rich: No, no, no. Not vegetarian.

Luvvie: Okay.

Rich: I said I try.

Luvvie: Try. Look, I enjoy chicken and fish.

Rich: Yeah. So diet is very important to me.

Luvvie: Okay.

Rich: Sleep is very important to me.

Luvvie: Really?

Rich: Yeah. Sleep is very important to me.

Luvvie: Eight hours a night?

Rich: I try to get 10.

Luvvie: 10?

Rich: Try to get 10.

Luvvie: Hours a night?

Rich: Well, I shouldn't say 10 hours of sleep, but I try to get 10 hours of quiet time.

Luvvie: A day.

Rich: Right, a day. No, at night. I like to get in bed early, read, wind down, and then I like to wake up early and read and wind up. Right? So I don't like to just get up and go, but I also don't just like to get to the place where I'm...

Luvvie: What do you read? Any genres or are you talking...

Rich: What I'm reading right now is a book by Ben Horowitz, who is one of the founders of-

Luvvie: I know Ben and Felicia.

Rich: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. [The Hard Things About Hard Things](#).

Luvvie: Let me put that down.

Rich: Or [The Hard Thing About Hard Things](#).

Luvvie: The Hard Thing About Hard Things. Okay.

Rich: Yeah. It's really about some of the things we just talked about, the decisions that you have to make and what makes them harder and what makes them more acceptable and what makes them less painful. So I'm really enjoying that. Yeah, so that's where I'm reading right now.

Luvvie: Do you read typically business books? Are you reading novels sometimes also?

Rich: I don't think I've read a novel in maybe 10 years, but I probably read, I used to probably read a book a month maybe. But now that's stretched out a little bit more. It takes me longer to get through them.

Luvvie: Because you're busy.

Rich: ... simply because there's a million other things going on.

Luvvie: So 10 hours of quiet time.

Rich: Yeah. I like my quiet time. I like my quiet time.

Luvvie: Okay.

Rich: I like my alone time.

Luvvie: Introvert or no?

Rich: You would think that I'm an extrovert, but I'm really an introvert.

Luvvie: No, I wouldn't. I would've guessed introvert.

Rich: Yeah. Yeah.

Luvvie: People guess I'm an extrovert. I'm an introvert.

Rich: Yeah. Yeah. I'm definitely an introvert.

Luvvie: So, food, quiet.

Rich: Yeah. Food and rest.

Luvvie: That's it?

Rich: Yeah. The other thing that I do, and that's coming up now is every year I go to an executive ed program, every year, every year. That's my vacation staff.

Luvvie: Stop.

Rich: That's my vacation. I go stimulate my mind. I go learn something different. I go learn something new about how to, whether it's about strategy, whether it's about finance, whether it's about

organization, whatever it may be, because I find that that keeps me sharp. That keeps my mind shop. That gives me other things to think about. It puts me in an environment with other people that are seeing things that I'm seeing, but thinking differently about it and getting an opportunity to learn from them.

Luvvie: One of those, like one-week strong courses?

Rich: Some of them are one week. Right now, I'm in a three-week one. I'm in a three weeks a year for three years. So I'm getting ready to finish my last set of three weeks now.

Luvvie: So you're a constant student.

Rich: Yeah. We all are constant students. It's just what we're choosing to study. Every one of us is a constant student. It's just are we choosing to study something that's challenging us or are we just choosing to learn more about the things that we already master?

Luvvie: Well, the interesting thing about the self-care question is people think about the very trendy aspect of it. But a lot of people who are building businesses think there's no room for sleep, think there's no room for like, "I'll pick up whatever." So you've basically built in the core, the basic foundation of what self-care is, which is the rest and what you're taking in.

Rich: Exactly. And the reality of it is that the problem's going to be there tomorrow morning when you wake up.

Luvvie: Oh, you can't solve it at 3:00 in the morning.

Rich: No.

Luvvie: Just go to sleep.

Rich: Go get your rest, so that you're sharp. You're sharp and you're able to solve it and then probably nothing but an opportunity to find a solution anyway.

Luvvie: Come on.

Rich: Just go get your rest, come back at it fresh and sometimes that's what it takes.

Luvvie: It's just a nap.

Rich: Yeah.

Luvvie: Get some good sleep.

Rich: Yeah.

Luvvie: Yo, Rich, this has been dope. I'm going to have to make this like a two-parter. I don't know. I feel like people need to absorb some of it and come back and then listen to the rest of it. This has

been so illuminating, and I am so excited to see the work that you continue to do with the [New Voices Fund](#) with [Essence](#).

Rich: Thank you, and then we got to catch up on that offline because I got some serious updates for you.

Luvvie: Yo, see. See, this is how me and Rich get things done, literally on the go. We know how we operate. But I, honestly, I am such a fan of what you're building, what you are affirming because as a black man who's standing in this gap, and you're like, "You know what, black women? Y'all do your thing. I'm just be here and give you some cash." That right there is so important, and you took the time to come on the podcast. So, much appreciated, sir.

Rich: Well, thank you. This has been fun. Always great to talk to you.

Luvvie: Yo, you are brilliant. So I'm looking forward to more. Honestly, don't even follow Rich on social. He don't even be on social media because he's too busy running around the world. So follow Essence, okay. Keep supporting [Essence](#).

Rich: Exactly.

Luvvie: Keep supporting [Shea Moisture](#).

Rich: Exactly.

Luvvie: And let's keep supporting black businesses. Let's give each other grace to grow, make mistakes. And, honestly, let's just really start putting some skills behind these businesses that we want to grow, so more to come.

Rich: Invest the time.

Luvvie: Invest the time.

Rich: Invest the time.

Luvvie: All right. Rich, much props.

Rich: Thank you.

Luvvie: Yes, indeed.

Rich: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Yeah! Yo, shout out to Rich Dennis for joining me for that dope interview. That was so in-depth and that was the longest interview I've ever done. Rich is brilliant. He's barely ever on social media though, so I wouldn't really say for you to follow him. Follow the platforms that are now part of his work. Of course, there's Shea Moisture, which is [@SheaMoisture](#) on social. There's the New Voices Fund, which is a hundred-million-dollar fund that is investing in businesses run and founded by black women,

[@newvoicesfund](#). And there's Essence, of course. So you already know, it's [@essence](#) everywhere. These platforms all do different things, and you'll find out what they're up to by just keeping track of their social media.

Much love to Chicago Recording Company for partnering with me on this podcast. As always, subscribe to Rants & Randomness on Apple Podcast, Spotify, SoundCloud, wherever you prefer you get your podcasts fix, and please rate it. If you leave a comment, you just might be featured on this show. Follow the podcast on social media. Twitter is [@RantsRandomness](#), no "and." Instagram is [@RantsAndRandomness](#). Feel free to send me any love, questions, feedback, whatever, loveyourants@gmail.com. And, as always, you can catch me on social media. I'm @Luvvie everywhere. See you on the next episode.