

2020 CREATIVE TRAILBLAZERS

“Fruits of your Labor”

WORDS BY ASHLEY DRAYTON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEXTER “SCRILL” DAVIS

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CREATIVE? Is it having a unique, creative mindset that no one else has? Is it how people put together ideas and turn them into creative works of art? Is it knowing that you aren't made to be ordinary, and you have a gift that needs to be shared with the world? All of these could mean you are a creative, however, your definition could look and sound totally different than someone else's. All in all, if you identify as a creative, you see the world in different colors. You create vibes, and these vibes are unmatched, compared to anything else. You have a creative gift to share with the world that only you can provide, and it is your mission to know exactly what that gift is and to build on it. Some figure out their specific gifts and their passions at an early age; some find it later in life. However, these four creative trailblazers are making moves in their respective industries that deserve to be heard. Their journeys are unique in every way, and are certainly seeing the fruits of their labor come to pass. Of course, they have more goals and dreams to obtain as they continue their purposes. However, it is perfectly okay to celebrate and acknowledge the fruits that have already appeared.

Meet the 2020 NC Magazine '2020 Creative Trailblazers': Lauren Erica-Ashli, Jaye Newton, Dani Lee, and Justin "Chef JRob" Robinson. We asked them what their definition of creativity is, how they learned about their creative gifts, and how they are giving their passions back to the world.





LAUREN ERICA-ASHLI

"PRODUCER AND ACTIVIST"

LAUREN ERICA-ASHLI

creativity, because the concept of the word itself is so complex – but at the same time, I think that’s a definition within itself.

When you figure out what your God-given purpose is during this lifetime, never let it go. Learn it, cherish it, grow in it and provide the service to others. This is how entrepreneur and filmmaker, Lauren Erica-Ashli Thomas, is choosing to live her life and fulfill her career. She knew from a young age that she was meant to entertain and tell stories in a variety of ways.

When did you realize you were supposed to be in a creative field rather than a corporate 9-5 profession?

I think I’ve always known. Ever since the age of six, God has placed me in creative atmospheres that have allowed me to explore the arts of entertainment and the performing arts. I’ve always felt as if it was a part of my purpose to be able to speak to the masses and inspire the masses through art. When I was a dancer, I was inspired by the concept of being able to move people through the expression of dance. Now that I’m in film and TV, I feel that exact same way towards the idea of being able to move people through stories that appear on the screen. So, going back to the question, the power of how the entertainment industry has so much impact on so many people is what made me realize that this is how God wants me to do His work.

For those that may not know who you are, who is Lauren Erica-Ashli?

Lauren Erica-Ashli is a storyteller, producer, social justice advocate, a dancer turned filmmaker, a daughter, a sister, a friend, and a woman of God. I was born and raised in Atlanta Georgia, and thrive off the energy and culture that Atlanta produces. Along with film, I’m a lover of music. Music inspires me, because it controls and contributes to my emotions, and as an artist, my emotions are one of the sources I turn to, in order to create. My passion and purpose is the fuel for everything I do - whether that be working in the industry of TV and film, learning and educating others about black history, mentoring younger girls, or working in the community. But regardless of what I am doing, it is always my intention to remain a servant of God because I never, ever want to stray away from the work He created me to do so.

How do you balance working in entertainment while simultaneously creating a space of your own?

I simply wasn’t satisfied with going to work, then coming back home, then going to work, and going back home. Although I have the incredible opportunity of working in the TV industry full-time, I am not fulfilling the desire I have to contribute to the film industry in the capacity that I would like to. Being able to tell stories that I would like to tell, stories that reflect the experiences of black people, stories that show our humanism and transparencies and vulnerability and versatility, need to be told. I understood that in order for that to happen, I would have to teach myself how to balance a 12-hour workday with the hours it would take to create on my own. My desire to create was stronger than my desire to just make a check and sleep the workload off.

What is your definition of creativity?

Creativity is a form of expression, and it’s individualized with every single person on this planet. The beautiful thing about creativity is that there is no right, or wrong on if your form of creativity is legitimate or not, and the art that gets produced is so diverse because of that. I don’t know if I can identify a single definition for the word

Speaking of 12-hour workdays, how was working on the set of the show, *Black Lightning*?

Working on *Black Lightning* has been an incredible experience. For one, I absolutely love the cast and crew. Everyone who works on the show is pretty much like a huge family and that in itself has been a blessing. But working on the show has taught me so much about how the structure of how a production works, in comparison to what goes on, on set. I'm learning a lot about what each department does and how important it is to find a strong team to successfully execute a project. I work in the office of the show, so I get the chance to be around the execs, talk to a lot of important people, and observe the ins and outs of what creating a television show is like. I'm extremely grateful for the opportunity to be among so many talented film professionals.

What has been the biggest lesson of working in the entertainment industry, thus far?

Never get caught up in the idea of working in the entertainment industry because it can swallow you whole. It's important to stay humble because you'll probably meet a lot of cool people and get to do a lot of cool things, and no one likes someone who is conceited or a "know it all" – especially someone who's at the beginning of their career. Staying eager to learn and being honest about your intentions and where you want to go with your career is also super important because you'll meet people who could possibly help you get to where it is you want to be.

Aside from working in the industry, you also have your own passion projects. Tell us more about your company, the BWBM network, and your community service organization, Just[US]?

Just[US] "Do Good. Seek Justice. Correct Oppression." — Just[US], emphasizing what is considered "just" in society, and "US" focusing on inclusion, is a social service and community organization that was founded with the desire to serve, support, educate, and strengthen the black community. Our organization is faith based, and we

rely on the bible verse Isaiah 1:17 (Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression) to keep ourselves aligned with the type of work God wants us to do. Through our work we aim to host initiatives that support the black community, engage with organizations that directly work to support individuals who have been wrongfully convicted of crimes, and partner/collaborate with organizations that work to support injustice towards black people.

BWBM (Black Woman Black Man) was created with the desire of having the freedom to tell important and relevant stories that best reflect the black experience. For me, being able to contribute to the representation of black people in film is super important. We are in a day and age where diversity is a huge topic of discussion, and thankfully we are also in a day and age where we see so many incredible black filmmakers and actors getting roles and creating projects that will forever go into the library of amazing shows and films forever. I want to be a part of that long list of individuals who are making a difference in the industry and I wanted to be able to do so with my friends who have the same passion and fire as I do. The intentions behind what BWBM produces are so specific, because we are all tired of seeing blacks portrayed in stereotypical roles that don't give them any sort of depth. We hope to create conversation through our work, and we hope to create content that people enjoy, but also see themselves in. We can't tell the story of all black people in the world, but what we can do is tell the story of a black person, one project at a time. And as long as people see the realism, honesty, and substance in our projects, then I know we are doing something good.

Also, although we are called the BWBM Network and intentionally focus on inclusivity and black representation, we welcome anyone who supports the vision and idea of unity and diversity - both in front and behind the camera, as well as committing to the honest portrayal of people of color in media and film. In the future, I would love for BWBM to be recognized as a platform that both produces and streams work for and from black creatives and audiences. Think of Netflix or Hulu, then imagine that solely dedicated to the distribution and production of both shows and films for black people. I believe that it's possible, and I believe that through BWBM we can be that for our people.

What inspired you to tap into your multiple talents, instead of just focusing on one?

That's a good question. I think I've just always loved being versatile and I've never known how to stop doing something because a new interest came up, if that makes sense. If I find a love for something, I find ways to try to incorporate that into what I'm already doing. I also believe that God has given me multiple gifts and I just want to make sure I'm using them in some capacity. There's a benefit in being well-versed and multi-talented because you can cater to different things. You can cater to different audiences, and ultimately have multiple streams of income.

Have you ever experienced Imposter Syndrome?

Girl, yes! To this day! I was just talking to a friend about that. As a creative, we're always looking at other people, especially people who are doing what we want to do. Then, there's me, with the same title as them, as a producer, but I haven't accomplished what they have, so I must not be a producer. I think I've experienced it more than I've realized, but I've been telling myself I need to start giving myself more credit for the work I have done. Once I accept the fact that I am doing something right now and I'm actually creating things, then I can call myself a producer. Imposter Syndrome is real and it can affect your self-esteem, your social circle, and networking with people. I don't even like networking too much anymore, because I have to find this courage and strength to say I'm a producer and I've produced a film. That's scary, but I'm still working on it. Improvement of self-confidence is key to being okay with people not agreeing with your art. And as long as I'm standing firm on my 'why' I decided to pursue this career, I shouldn't have a problem with Imposter Syndrome.

With everything that you do, how do you take time out for yourself?

I actually sucked at that these past few years, but I'm trying to get better. Growing up in dance, I was always used to going straight to practice right after school. I wouldn't get out of dance practice until 9:30 at night, and when I got home, I still had homework. I wouldn't

go to bed until 1 or 2 a.m., and would have to wake up for school at 6 a.m. So, there was the cycle of doing this Monday through Friday, as I am so used to grinding and working towards what it is I'm supposed to do. The whole relaxation mindset has never really clicked with me, but as I've gotten older, I realize how important it is. Mental health is so incredibly important. I've experienced depression and anxiety. I've experienced what it feels like to be burnt out. When I get worked up mentally, it affects my body and I start to not feel good. [This year], I want to start making time for myself, and telling myself it's okay to say "No," and not plan a workday on the weekend. If the busiest people in the world can take time for themselves, I know for a fact that I can, as well.

What type of remembrance do you want people to take from you as a young, black woman in entertainment, production, TV, and film?

I want people to remember me as someone who cared about others, but also chased after her passion. Whether it's passion-driven, or purpose-driven, I'm always trying to do something related to either one of those. I want people to remember me as a person who stayed true to both of those things because ultimately, they're both given to us from God and are used to serve others. Our gifts and talents weren't given to us for selfish reasons, so take advantage of the opportunities you're given.



JAYE NEWTON

We all have a story to tell with our purpose in life. For Jaye Newton, he hopes to become a standout figure in the music industry and a positive light for his community. As he continues to grow his faith through his career and music, he stays close to his roots and shines a light on his life experiences for people to learn from and relate to.

How would you describe Jaye Newton?

JN: Jaye Newton is a creative from Atlanta. I was born and raised in Ellenwood, Georgia. I'm composed of making music, but I'm also a filmmaker. I display my artistry through music and film.

What is your definition of creativity?

It's being able to have self-expression through whatever medium that may be. I think creativity is subjective, so whatever you express is how you actually feel.

When did you realize you were supposed to be in a creative field rather than a corporate 9-5 profession?

I've been creating my entire life, however, I didn't know I would be doing music full time. Growing up, I used to draw, paint, and play instruments. It wasn't until I was in fourth grade, when I performed for the first time, that I actually fell in love with performing. Fast forward to seventh grade, I made a diss song about my teacher and that's what made me fall in love with music. So, I've been creating ever since I can remember.

What inspires you to get up every day and want to create the music that you do?

I feel like I have so much to offer the world, I feel like there's so much I haven't said yet. I don't think I've written my best song or have made my best body of work yet. So, that's always a motivating factor inside my life that I can do better and push the boundaries on my own artistry.

What do you think the purpose of your music is?

I think my purpose is to have my story be put out on a silver platter for people to relate to. The majority of my music is relatable content. There's nothing inside of my music that is fabricated. Everything that I talk about comes from experiences that I've had with people. I feel like I'm a poster child for someone else, so they can have a sense of hope when they listen to my music.

How do you define your sound of music? What type of person listens to your music?

It varies for each project. We go into each project trying to push the boundary on our sound and our music so it doesn't sound like the last project. It's hard for me to really define that because I'm always going to be looking for what's next for us. Currently, our sound is live instrumentation. It's very eclectic, with roots of southernness, and a twang of Cali music. I'm one of the few artists, in my opinion, that can make music for anyone. I could have a concert today and someone from my old neighborhood could enjoy the concert, and my grandma could enjoy the same concert. You don't hear a lot of cursing, it's pretty clean, and it's a very versatile body of work that

we have. So I really pride myself that I can relate to any demographic and any age group.

What is your creative process when making new music? Do you produce, as well?

I have an in-house producer, but I slightly produce. The process is hands-on. We've been making music together for 10 years. We're pretty much the same person, to where we can put out ideas knowing the other person is going to gravitate towards it then we'll just do it. He'll possibly make a beat or a skeleton for a beat, then I'll start writing immediately, as he's making the beat. I'll have the basics of a hook or a verse. I'll lay it down, then, I'll tell him I want to add this or take away that. We'll pretty much tailor-make each song to whatever is going on. As far as the content, it stems from whatever feeling the beat brings out of me; and that's how I get inspired to write whatever I hear.

What type of film do you do? Did you go to school for it?

Yes, I went to college for Film and Communications. I love to direct and edit. I like drama-based films and things that have intricate storylines. I'm also a fan of horror films. I think there's a certain beauty in horror films, when you're able to keep people anticipating and on the edge of their seats the entire movie. As I continue to progress as a filmmaker, those would be my favorite genres I would want to dive into. I definitely see myself putting out movies - very soon, actually. With our music videos, we try to have a movie aspect to them, where you don't see us just performing in front of a car and have women around. I want to have a storyline from top to bottom, where you're engaged the entire time. You have to watch it again and again to understand the message.

How have you changed as an artist, from your graduation single to now, with your Just Pray For Me project?

I've changed so much. I've grown, I've developed, and I've

actually experienced life. During my earlier adolescence, I wasn't able to really convey something, because I didn't go through it. I wasn't able to express myself in depth. So going through college and being able to meet different people, date different people, experience different hardships, go without different things - it really opened up my perspective. You definitely hear my evolution, as far as my content. I'm growing as an artist when it comes to how I'm able to express and convey what I'm thinking about now.

Has your family always been supportive of you being an artist?

They've always been supportive, but you know when you start anything, it's like "We support you, but we don't know if it's going to go anywhere," type of thing. It took me having shows, being booked all of the time, and showing that I'm actually getting paid from performing for them to see this is something I'm living off of. There was never a time where they thought I would never be an artist. It was just how you support kids when they bring any type of dream to you. They wholeheartedly believe that I'm able to be where I am and greater.

With your father being a preacher, has it been difficult balancing religion and your music? What were the struggles you may have endured?

Not necessarily, because I was never really wilding out inside my music, as far as talking about anything super derogatory or Anti-Christianity. As I've grown and developed to where I am now, with dropping "Just Pray For Me", you'll see that I'm understanding and studying the Word more. The depression and the lows in my life led me to my faith and being able to talk to my dad. I can talk to him about my faith and different books in the Bible. I don't know how it will affect my music going forward, but I do see myself growing inside my faith more than I have in the past. My dad is also not very traditional, as a pastor. He was a youth pastor and was able to talk to inner-city youth and teens his entire life. So, I was really spoiled in my own faith, because I was able to have someone who could relate at my disposal. I never felt like he didn't understand or shut out whatever I had to say, he was able to walk me through my own faith.



**Where do you see your music going in this new decade?
Any big dreams, people you want to collaborate with?**

Man, I have super dreams. I do see myself as one of the standout figures, not only in Atlanta, but inside of the music industry, going forward. I think what makes me different is I can relate to anyone, but I'm also one of the most positive artists who doesn't come off as corny. I see myself being a huge figure inside music, where I'm able to push people in a positive light. Whether that's pushing people towards God, pushing people towards positive outcomes, teaching people about financial literacy, or teaching people about love, from my hardships and scars. I think that my life experiences groomed me in order to be a beacon of hope in this decade.

As far as collaborations, I know he said he's not making music anymore, but I would love to make music with Andre 3000. Of course J. Cole, Smino, Young Thug, Fred Hammond, 6lack. So, it's a couple of people I think I would blend very well with.

Being one of the leading underground artists in Atlanta, how do you foster a community of artists like yourself?

That's where I am currently - trying to build up the community. We're all close inside of Atlanta. I feel like a lot of us support each other, but I'm trying to get everyone together, where we can monetize our music and be able to establish that community. Going forward, I want to start curating events and shows, where I can give artists the accessibility to have concerts that they never would have experienced at just a showcase. I see myself pouring into them, whether that's talking to them on a day-to-day basis, or curating shows.

How do you maintain a strong mental foundation in the music industry?

Man, it's tough. This was one of the reasons why I was so low, because as an artist, you're always wanting more. You always want to have more hits, more people that

support you, more clout, more streams, more money. For me to save my own sanity, I had to be content with myself and get to a point where I wasn't looking for a number to validate me. I wasn't looking for a number of people to cosign me and validate me by saying I'm important. I had to switch my confidence and my consciousness on what mattered. Once I was able to see that my team mattered, the people who currently support me mattered, and my family mattered, was reassurance for me that I'm still going to be able to be better than I was before. I'm still going up, because no matter what, people feel genuineness and support that as much as possible, when you're authentically you.

What type of artist do you hope to be remembered as?

I just want to be remembered as someone who was well-respected, very authentic, and someone who always wanted to pour. Whether you listen to my interviews, read them, or see me in person, I just want to be an inspiration. I want people to look at me how they look at Kanye, Pac, Drake, or whomever, and they see the circumstances of where I came from, and where I was able to get to. Not just in music, but as an individual. I'm not limited to just my music. I'm the same person who I am on wax, as I am in passing. I want to be remembered as one of the most positive, influential people, as far as inspiration.



DANI
LEE

"BOUTIQUE OWNER AND FINANCE EXPERT"

DANI LEE

For Dani Lee, she knew her passion had to be free of the corporate life and free of doing the same routine the world wants us to stick to every day. In order for this to work in her favor, she had to align with what God wanted her to do during her spiritual journey. Now, she is able to pass this same feeling to other women who want to look and feel good.

Tell us about Dani Lee, and who she is, from your perspective?

DL: I guess I'm still trying to figure that out myself. I'm brand new to this fashion realm (business-wise), but I've always been interested in fashion. Ever since I was a little girl, I always had a daily planner to plan out my outfits for the entire month. I loved making a clean-cut statement, no matter where I was going. However, I actually have a Master's Degree in Finance. I worked in the finance realm for quite a while, which is very, very different. One subject is the left side of the brain, and the other is the right side of the brain. I was working in a heavily, male-dominated environment, where there were a lot of egos. So now, it feels nice to find a way to mix both worlds of polar opposites together. I'm able to evolve within my loving and feminine side now. It's been a really cool journey.

Since obtaining your Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Finance, how has the experience been for you to bring finance and fashion together?

It's been different, I really enjoyed the mix. I just hired a CFO and it has been nice having conversations with them, because I'm able to relate to them past the basics. There's no need for them to try and explain to me what assets are, what's a balance sheet, what's a financial statement. I do what you do. So, it's been cool to understand the business side of it. I've also realized I am really creative. I like the ideas I come up with and how I put things together. It's been really fun to mix the two.

What is your definition of creativity?

I think it's just an expression of your heart. What you have going on inside is so beautiful, it's different for everybody.

Tell us about your experience of leaving your safety net of being financially secure with a corporate job, to the unknown of entrepreneurship?

I actually celebrated my five-month anniversary this past March [2020], so it's still fresh and new, and we've already had a lot of success, so far. When you're in alignment with what you're supposed to be doing, you don't realize how quickly the universe will respond to you. I'm 26 years old right now, so I would say around, probably, 24, I dove into my spiritual journey and started to figure out who I am. I realized I couldn't do the pre-conditioned life of 'You're supposed to get this job, get paid six figures, work your way up the corporate ladder, and do it exactly like this.' It wasn't an expression of my soul or who I am, and I couldn't live like that anymore. So, I left the corporate world and a six-figure job. It was hard to leave and take that leap, but I did it and it's been going well ever since.

What type of styles will a customer see when shopping with your brand?

That's a good question. I'm still trying to define the overall style. Right now, I will say it's refined women's wear. I believe we have unique pieces that you can't really find just anywhere. I like to mix cute and sexy in my own personal style, but also in a refined and classy manner. Nowadays, it's either clubwear, or this is what I wear to church; I like to find ways to mix it all together. With Shop D. Lee Style, we're starting by season. Every quarter, we're going to have a theme — summer will be Moroccan-themed, fall will be collegiate. When you look at us, you'll be able to tell what theme we're doing for the season.

Who is your inspiration in fashion right now?

I would say the first person that comes to mind is Nichole Lynel out of L.A. I have to give a lot of credit to her. I definitely am inspired by what she has going on. Like me, she's a single woman running it - it's not backed by big business. She's found a lot of creative ways to be unique.

Is there a certain creative process you have when designing or brainstorming?

Yeah, I really try to picture exactly who D. Lee is as a woman. I like to picture her as a future version of myself. I see a sophisticated woman, kind of playing on Michelle Obama's "Becoming" theme. I adore her and the "Becoming" theme. So, I ask the woman that goes to meetings, brunches, and holds herself in a sophisticated and confident manner - what would she be wearing? That's what I try to think about when designing and brainstorming.

What is a typical day for you? What are some of your daily goals?

Long! My typical day is so long. I wake up every day at 4:30 a.m. There's such a serenity about being awake when the sun's coming up, before anyone else is up. I sit down with my Bible and do my devotionals for probably 30 minutes, and then I write out my prayers, my intentions for the day, very specific goals for the day. I meditate on those for about 20 minutes. Then, I go to the gym. I start every single day in the gym because my workout is super hard; my trainer kills me. But if I can get my mind to get through (the workout), I can certainly tackle whatever I have going on today. It's just a really great way to release endorphins and stress, so, I always start with a workout. After that, I go to my workspace area to work on packages. I also do a lot of academic work behind the scenes. I really like to understand how every gear is working, and how to keep getting better at this every day. After the academic part, I go home, I cook, usually take out a glass of wine, and that's when I get into the creative mode. I usually put on Lauryn Hill, or old R&B, and really get into my creative zone, to think of ideas of what I want each new month to look like.

How do you take time for yourself when it's time to give yourself a break?

I've really learned to be good about that. What's the point in doing all of this, if I'm just going to repeat that same corporate life I already had, burning the midnight oil? The whole point of this was freedom. So, I would say I'm very good at making sure I take my time for myself. I read a ton; I'm obsessed with self-help books. I go to yoga, have weekly massages, get facials — I make sure that I have my time.

What is your favorite part of being a business owner?

The freedom. It's so nice, and it's just fun. You can take it one, or two ways. You can say, 'I'm super stressed out because it's all on me', or, you can say, 'I'm super excited because this is all on me'. I've proved to myself, time and time again, that I've crushed the sh*t I set out to do. That's how I choose to wake up. Some days I'll be a little stressed out, but I remind myself God's got me and my faith is very strong. So that's my favorite part - being able to wake up, do what I want to do, and drive this ship the best way I can.

What has been the biggest lesson you've learned, so far?

The biggest lesson I've learned is to figure things out for yourself. It's easy to just throw money at a problem and outsource people. I've come to find that these people are great, but they don't understand the vision the way that I do, and a lot of people just don't work like I do. Once I've honed in on the exact vision that I want, then I can bring in someone, but let them know this is how we're doing it.

What is something you see lacking in women's fashion that you would like to change, with D. Lee Style?

I really feel like we're just buying clothes to take pictures wearing them, especially in fast fashion - just to wear that outfit once and look cute, and never wear it again. In my first few months, I was really into that and that's probably what you can see still on my site. But now, I'm really trying to hone in on mind, body, style. So, it's going to be "D. Lee Mindset", "D. Lee Style", and "D. Lee Fitness". It's not just

about putting a quick garment on, just for a quick picture at brunch with your friends. It's about this is my go-to garment when it's date night, when I want to feel sexy, or even to wear around the house. I want to make clothing that brings out whatever women have going on, on the inside. I also want to set up steps within D. Lee that helps you really get to know who you are on the inside. We're actually starting a blog, because I probably get like over 30 messages a day from women who are going through this tough time, who are inspired by seeing me getting through my rough time and growing patches. I'm really excited to get that glow going inside for women, and also give them garments to express that on the outside.

What advice would you give other young women who want to leave the corporate job and the 9-5, to start their own business?

The first thing that pops in my head is just do it, but I know I'm very sporadic and I'll just go for something. However, I know that doesn't necessarily work for everybody. Advice that I would give would be you can't make any external decisions until you have an internal journey with yourself, and know what you like. I don't even know what I like yet, and I'm 26. If you're not in alignment, things will start to feel so bad and you'll be forced to change it. I was going into work and things would feel so gray, because I was doing that spiritual walk. Get your inside right, get your mind right, find what's really going on in your heart, and then from there, the external will fall into place. It just unfolds for you.



PHOTOGRAPHY DEXTER "SCRILL" DAVIS



JUSTIN "CHEF JROB" ROBINSON

PHOTOGRAPHY DEXTER "SCRILL" DAVIS

JUSTIN “CHEF JROB” ROBINSON

If you have been missing out on the food Chef JRob has been creating, you should do yourself a favor and try it for yourself. An experience like no other, with uniquely designed food, he has turned his passion into a lifestyle that caters to your health goals and taste buds.

Who is Justin Robinson?

JR: Justin Robinson is a Mobile, Alabama native, residing in Atlanta, Georgia, as a chef. I go by the name Chef JRob, and I call myself 'Atlanta's Greatest Chef', because that's my mentality — I strive to be the best in what I do. I graduated from Auburn University and received my Bachelor's in Biomedical Sciences, and I also graduated from Mercer University with a Master's in Public Health. So I'm kind of trying to merge my degrees with my passion, which is cooking, and hopefully, it comes into fruition later on in the year. But right now, I'm full-time with my brand, The Chef JRob Experience LLC, and I also am your life long tax repairer, so I do taxes, as well, during tax season.

What is your definition of creativity?

I would say it's something that's unique and purposefully your own. A lot of people can call themselves creatives, or they think they have a creative mind, but it's all about making something your own and making it uniquely you.

How did your passion for cooking start?

It basically started while I was in college. I was just trying to cook to eat, at my dorm. As I went through college and started to develop more sense for food, I started seeing how it was bringing people together in my dorm, and even after moving into my apartment and having people over to eat the food that I would cook. I started having a lot more people tell me, "Man, your food is amazing. You're really good at cooking." When I moved to Atlanta for grad school, I made a business out of it. My grind, mentality, and mindset took over in a big space like Atlanta, coming from a small space like Mobile. I feel like I was really able to attack, if you will, and get my name out there. I wanted people to know who Chef JRob was and what his food is about, and I feel like I'm moving in the right direction for that.

So, I know you said with your degrees you plan to combine them later in the year, but has the process already started in any way?

Yeah, so I actually wrote a grant in grad school that's been approved and we've been trying to get funding for it. I've been partnering with the dean of my college. She's been overseeing it with me, since I didn't know the right people to contact to get the funding. It's a half million-dollar grant, primarily catering to geriatrics with type-2 diabetes in the counties in Georgia. We're planning to really attack diabetes in the state of Georgia, and if the program goes well, we can get national funding to go around the entire United States. So, test cooking, nutrition testing, and different implementations around the counties, should be taking place this fall.

What is your favorite part about being a chef?

I would say my favorite part of being a chef would be just seeing people's reactions taking their first bite - especially complete strangers that don't know me, or just follow me on Instagram. I love capturing people on my phone while they're taking their first bite and they're like 'Damn! This dude really puts his foot in the food!' That brings joy to me. I like to say I'm not just a chef, I really care about people's nutrition and dietary intake. Whether it's a celebrity client,

athlete, or your 9-to-5 worker that I'm meal prepping for, helping someone get their weight loss through the food that I cook makes me feel special about what I'm doing.

Describe the Chef JRob Experience?

So, from the moment you walk through the door, the Chef JRob experience is supposed to be this whole atmosphere of something that you can't get at a restaurant. From the appetizer, to the entree, to the dessert, to the cocktails, and now the wine pairing that I'm doing with my girlfriend, the things that we provide are supposed to be a fulfilling experience. It includes great conversation and great food, and you walk away full. Typically, with all of my clients and customers, we end up becoming friends, because I believe food is a universal language. No matter the ethnicity, or your culture, you make great friends through the food you make.

What is your favorite dish to make?

Oooh, I get asked that a lot. I would say my favorite dish would be lamb. That's always my go-to, a nice rack of lamb. Probably serve it with some fingerling potatoes, with a nice lemon pesto sauce, have a nice cocktail to go with it and call it a day.

When did you know it was time to take your brand full-time rather than being at a 9-to-5?

It wasn't until I was graduating. Around the beginning of May, I was just praying more and more about it. At that time, you're also getting the pressure from your parents, trying to figure out what you're doing with your life and your financial security. You also want to make what you feel you're worth financially, and ensure you can take care of bills, student loans, and your life. I just kept on praying and asking God to use me as a vessel. What is my purpose, how does He want me to impact others, how does He want me to move in life? At the time, I'm praying that, 'I'm all ears to hear whatever You want me to do, but I also just put in an application to the CDC, so can we please make something shake, because that's an \$80,000 job.' I had to really focus on not what I wanted, but what God wants for my life. I become more spiritually intact. The more you move in what God has for you, the happier you'll be in life. It won't be an easy, straight shot, and you won't always make the money you want, which I have learned, but I'm always willing to accept

the circumstances that I'm in. When it was time for me to tell my parents that I'm running Chef JRob full-time, it was like an overcoming sense of fulfillment of God telling me, 'I got you'. That's what I kept hearing every time I prayed about what was my next step, because that was a big leap. But, becoming spiritually intact with God, and making sure I stayed prayed up during that time, really helped me through that process.

How do you come up with creative dishes that no one else would think to make?

I feel like my creative inspiration comes from a Netflix show called 'The Chef's Table', and watching that stimulates my mind for me to think outside of the box. A lot of the dishes that I do now are a play on flavors that I feel like go together. A lot of people don't know that 7 times out of 10, the dish I made for them was the first time I made it. I like to keep things interesting, I don't want to make the same things throughout the year, or cook things over and over again. If I'm cooking salmon for dinner, I try to figure out five or six different ways I can prepare it out of the ordinary.

How do you prepare for the private dinners, meal preps, or the cooking class?

The day before is the biggest day for preparation, because typically, something always goes wrong the day of [the event]. Meal prep not so much, but for big bookings and festivals, I'm grocery shopping, washing off all of my produce, chopping, and seasoning overnight in the refrigerator on the day before. When it's time to cook everything the day of [the event], life can get so hectic. Sometimes, I'm so anxious to make sure everything will go as smoothly as possible, that more than likely, I don't sleep. I have a couch in the kitchen to sleep on, if I do decide to take a quick nap, or sit down for a second. Typically, for super big events, I don't sleep because I just want to see it through and I have that comfort, once it's all set and done. Once everything is clean, the client is happy, and the event is successful, then, I can go home and go to sleep. That's just how I operate right now, until it comes to a point in time when I'm able to get that rest and still take care of everything. Right now, I'm trying to make sure I don't have any flaws when it comes to building my brand, because it only takes one bad booking to tarnish your reputation.

What has been your favorite Chef JRob experience, so far?

I would say just the people I've come in contact with, so far. I can't say one booking was better than another. Coming from a small place like Mobile to Atlanta for grad school, you never would think about getting a random opportunity to be Monica Brown's personal chef for three months, and moving forward from that to coming in contact with NFL clients. I've always thought Atlanta was a cool place to visit just for a weekend and see the superstars on TV out in the city, but to do business with them is crazy. Recently, I landed the job of being Steve Harvey's personal chef when he's in Atlanta. I feel like I'm supposed to be where I am. I don't feel nervous, or overwhelmed about anything. So, I'm just grateful for the opportunities the city has opened to me.

Going off of that, what has been a challenge for you as an entrepreneur?

The biggest challenge, so far, is expanding. Whether you have a clothing brand, photography business, cosmetics, whatever the case may be, you always want to expand to the world. You always want to have more money in your pockets and to do that you have to have a team. Building the 'perfect team' is a challenge. You have to have the right people that you can rely on to still hold your brand high in the same hierarchy that you feel is in your life. However, at the end of the day, no one is going to go as hard as you are for your own brand. You'll have people who are at a 90%, when you're already at 110%, and that's all you can ask for. But, it's really instilling that trust in your people to help you out and build the brand in your best interest, at all times.

What do you do when you feel yourself getting overwhelmed and need a break?

That's a great question. There's been a couple of instances where I've been like, 'This is a lot! I have no clue how I'm going to get through the day. I just need to chill out.' However, I'll say to myself, 'Tomorrow is going to be a better day'. Even if it's a week-long thing, you just know at the end of Friday, it's all over and you have a new week to refresh and replenish. That week might be really overbearing and you might be carrying a lot of your workload, but as long as you can lift it, you can push through. I use this terminology, 'Max out'. You max out when you lift weights at the max amount you're allowed to do. You can either get it, or you can't, but you usually have someone there to lift it off of you. I think it's really imperative to have a good support system to help you, or 'spot you', to get you through that workout, or workweek.

Who in the culinary industry inspires you?

Honestly, I really don't have a 'role model' that I look up to. I have a lot of different influencing factors that I can reach out to, for insight and cooking techniques. I learned a lot from Gordon Ramsey and his masterclasses that he has. From a business aspect, one person I do look up to is my girlfriend's dad. He is a chef, as well, and owns a couple of restaurants. We always talk on the phone to pitch business ideas and go over financials and logistics of how I'm operating things. I feel like being able to have someone like that in your life to influence what you're doing and give you that guidance does make a difference. However, I try to keep my mind and my creative space pretty clear, so I don't take on the work of another chef.

Where do you see the Chef JRob Experience going in the future?

I want to be a big, branded empire. I want to have these amazing restaurants open up all over in different cities, all over the country, and it's like the go-to place, where people feel like they get this world-class experience that they can't get anywhere else.

