Corey Andrew P...: 00:02 I'm joined today by creative content strategist and fashion purveyor, Cieja Springer. Cieja has over 16 years of experience having launched integrated campaigns for L'Oreal USA, Paris, Maserati, Proctor and Gamble. Coca-Cola Estee Lauder, Unilever, Kraft Nordstrom, and so many more. C Cieja, welcome to Motivational Mondays.

Cieja Springer: 00:23 Thank you so much for having me. That was an amazing intro. I feel so good.

Corey Andrew P...: 00:28 I mean, like, girl, you know, save some work for the rest of us!

Cieja Springer: 00:33 We're trying to figure out how to retire by tomorrow. So I'm gonna give it to y'all —all.

Corey Andrew P...: 00:37 Oh, well look, I think you might be close if you keep up with that schedule. So that's an impressive list. So I commend you on all that you're doing, that's really awesome.

Cieja Springer: 00:45 Thank you. Thank you so much

Corey Andrew P...: 00:46 To begin with though. You are, as I mentioned, a fashion purveyor, and we will get into that too, but to start with, I wanna just, you know, for a moment, speak about how we've had pretty, I would say few examples of prominent black corporate figures, and there are some that stand out, Andre Leon Talley of course is one of the more prominent ones who I loved. We just lost him. I think of Susan Taylor of Essence magazine?

Cieja Springer: 01:13 Oh Yes.

Corey Andrew P...: 01:13 Or Mickey Taylor, the Beauty Director at Essence for a while. Lloyd Boston, who I love. You know, but they're just like a handful. I was wondering, like, who were some of the role models for you? Be it black fashion stylists or otherwise, just whoever it was, who were some of the inspirations for you that made you wanna work in fashion?

Cieja Springer: 01:33 Yeah. So first I would say before we even got to all of the dignitaries, my first point of inspiration was my mom. And she is that fashion girl. I'm from Harlem, born and raised. My parents are both from Harlem, born and raised. And Harlem already has a certain level of cache and panache when it comes to style. So Harlem was my first inspiration, to my mom, you know, she's at the top. And then Harlem would come underneath that. And, and my, my dad is in there as well, cuz he also had, he was also very stylish, but because of my mom, the type of exposure that I received to some of these dignitaries, as I call them in the space, you know, Andre Leon Talley was someone that I had looked to for inspiration and so many different ways, I wanted to actually go into the business as a journalist, but that's a whole other conversation.

Cieja Springer: 02:30 My dad was like, I'm not paying for you to be a starving artist. I'm not wasting my money with you going to undergrad to, you know, major in print. So you have to figure something else out. But he was one of those first people that I definitely looked to and saw and understood. You know, there was also Misa Hilton and Eric Archibald and you know, Hype Williams and while he's not necessarily a person that specifically works in fashion, he's fashion adjacent because he has a vision, you know, he's creative. And that's how I see myself. Like I don't, I haven't ever, you know, for full transparency's sake, worked specifically with a brand. So like I haven't ever worked at Nike or at Gucci or at Louis Vuitton, but I've always been adjacent to these brands in some way with the work I do in marketing. And so I had to also figure out a different angle in a different way because of some of the nuances when it comes to being a woman, number one,and then being a woman of color, number two. So trying to break into those areas, sometimes it is very challenging and it's not that you go the other way because of your discouragement. You go the other way, because there's another way to go.

Corey Andrew P...: 03:46 Yeah.

Cieja Springer: 03:47 And so that is, you know, how I ended up being, I would say fashion adjacent when it comes to my work. And those were my, you know, points of inspiration that got me there.

Corey Andrew P...: 03:57 And I have read other interviews with you where you make a point of mentioning, not necessarily finding the space that you wanted to be in. So you made the space you wanted to be in, you know. You sort of created your own opportunity. So talk a little bit about how you did that.

Cieja Springer: 04:13 Yeah. So I really created that space with my brand. From the bottom up, it's currently a podcast. It started out as a digital platform. And, you know, I actually went out into the world at the same time that The Coverter and Shoes of New York were going out. We were all kind of out there at the same time covering fashion, but through the lens of footwear. The Coverter was doing more of a closet thing. And so theirs was a lot more holistic, but I knew that I wanted to touch fashion in a different way and I wanted to actually touch it. And what did that mean? And how did that look for me? So I have always had an affinity for footwear. I'm a tomboy. So I've always, you know, I had all the Jordans and all the Air Max and all of that every week, my dad was taking me to buy something on her 25th street. Part of it was that, you know, I've always been a thicker girl. So as I got older, there was a point where high fat fashion and not Coutour, but high fashion, ready to wear —you couldn't get anything past a size 10.

Cieja Springer: 05:29 And when you're a black girl with body, that doesn't work. So even if you're, you know, even if you're a 10 and a waist, that doesn't mean your hips are a 10 or your thighs are a 10 or your derriere is a 10, you know, you might have to get a 12 and get it tailored. Or get a 14, so you could pull it up. And the one thing that was always true to size, so to speak, was your feet. You know, like your feet don't fail you. And that was where my love for footwear really, really grew as I got older and I matured. And listen, honey, when you mature as a woman, especially a woman of color, that body starts spreading, child. Even if you don't want it to. Right? So all kinds of things start coming up. You may have never had a booty your whole life.

Cieja Springer: 06:14 And then all of a sudden you hit 25 and now you got all the ass on the planet. So, it's just what happens. But for the most part, your feet, you know, after you hit about, you know, 16, 17 as a woman, your feet probably won't change, you probably have that same size. And so I started to just get really into designer footwear, not sneakers anymore, but now like, you know, the feminine aspect of it, just shoes and heels and flats and boots. And that was what became the impetus for From the bottom up. And I would go and shoot, you know, my subject, so to speak or, or the talent and shoot their shoe collections. And then we would have a conversation about it. And the conversation was always rooted in, you know, how you feel out about the first pair of shoes you purchased with your own money, or, you know, what was the first pair of shoes that caught your eye? Why do you love footwear specifically? And that was the angle of fashion that has always had my heart. And that was how I started leaning into it in my own way and creating that space for myself and then innovated it into a podcast which has been out now for three years. So it's, you know, just something that I love and I always will figure out a way to have it be incorporated in my life.

Corey Andrew P...: 07:33 Well, I think that's a great example of something we always stress here in different conversations because we do have, of course, a college aged audience and some are nontraditional students who may have graduated as well. But for the most part, you know, it's young college age and they're, they're looking at like what their next career move is or what their first career move I should say. Yeah. And I think your story is an example of what we always stress, which is, you know, find something you love, if you can, and turn that into a career. And it sounds cliche', I think when you're young, but when you get older, like you and me a little bit older, you know, we appreciate the fact that we're not stuck in a career that maybe we don't love.

Cieja Springer: 08:11 Right.

Corey Andrew P...: 08:12 You know, it's so important. Yeah. So, you know, when it comes to the specific thing of being a purveyor of style, or fashion, or just a purveyor of a craft in general, because I could say you are a purveyor of marketing and you happen to work adjacently with fashion. But so as a purveyor of whatever industry, what does that encompass? Does that mean that you are just, you know, you are like the omnipotent all knowing of that field, or what would you say for you as a marketer makes you a purveyor of that craft?

Cieja Springer: 08:41 It's time. You know, being able to be a purveyor of anything means that you put in work. In respect to me being, you know, a marketer by trade, I've been doing since I set foot on Howard University's campus, you know, I always like to make it a point to be very clear that and everyone doesn't have this level of, you know, some people just don't know yet. So let me say that some people just don't know yet and that's okay. But I was very clear on, you know, what I wanted and how I wanted that to be, even when my father challenged me to find something else that wasn't just print, but I knew that I still wanted to be able to write in some way. And what was that? So as a purveyor of marketing, I majored in advertising. So I was very clear on getting the tools that I needed to be able to do the things that I wanted to do.

Cieja Springer: 09:38 And that's one of the things he always taught me, which was you have to do what you have to do to do what you wanna do. And what I had to do was get a skill. And what I wanted to do was take what I knew and work, where I wanted to work or how I wanted to work. But I couldn't do all that without the skill. Yeah. And being a purveyor means that you have a skill and you take that skill and you hone in and you massage it and you do all the things that are gonna make you better. It's just like, you know, a sculptor where they will fine tune and fine tune until you get the David or you fine tune, fine tune until you get those ice sculptures that you see at, you know, weddings and wherever else, the case may be, or a person who works out a lot, you fine tune and fine tune until you have that six pack.

Cieja Springer: 10:27 But there's work that has to happen in the midst of all of that. And when it comes to fashion, for me, that work started as a young girl, about five years old with my mom, skipping down fifth avenue, going to all the stores and watching her do her thing, watching her dress herself, watching her manipulate and touch fabrics, you know, asking questions to the sales representatives and challenging things, you know, in various ways, taken it to the tailor. You know, my grandmother and my aunt were both tailors. My uncles owned a cleaners. So there is always fashion around me in some way. And so I took what I was seeing and I read a lot. I minored in fashion merchandising at Howard as well. So I have my advertising as my major, but I have my fashion as my minor because I've gotta hone that skill. I need to understand it from all aspects. I took fashion illustration and I'm not, you know, an artist. I can draw a little bit, but I wouldn't put myself up against anyone who does that. You know what I mean? But I did all those things in order to get, you know, rooted in a foundation that was gonna allow me to be able to stand in what I know, but also open me up to a world that I didn't know in a specific way, but learned that.

Corey Andrew P...: 11:48 We did talk a little earlier regarding people of color in the industry on the executive level. Do you think now that there's more and it's getting better or do you still think it's a big struggle to find people of color in the executive positions when you're working with these brands?

Cieja Springer: 12:03 Yeah, I would say the answer is still, no. I mean, there are some brands who are trying very hard to make it a part of their now core DNA. And so oftentimes and um this is no plug to my brand. It, but it is a double entendre. You, you do have to do things from the bottom up. You can't, you can't start at the pinnacle of a thing. Right. unless you're there to completely and utterly tear it down, that's you, there's no way because you still gotta get foundation. And so in some respect, I think some of the brands that are trying, they are. But they're doing things that aren't necessarily seen to the naked eye. You know, they have to start behind the curtain. They have to start at the lower rungs. So that one, the foundation is set. And, you know, when it comes to just people, you bring people in at the ground floor so they can learn and then work their way up.

Cieja Springer: 12:56 The higher up positions are always the most coveted and always the hardest to obtain. So they don't wanna let those go just yet. Right. Like that would mean that they need to move on to their next best thing. And most of the time they don't have one. That best thing is currently where they are. Which is also something I, say, always have a next best thing. Don't get stuck in that one thing. Or don't think that you're limited to just that. I think that overall to get back to your question, it's getting a little better, you know, you see more black faces, you see the dapper Dans of the world who are now being lauded and as they should. I think that's what, for example, just happened. In my opinion, with Andre, it's sad because as a person of color who was at the top of his game, he should have had so much more. And him being so excellent should have given cause to these brands to bring more of us in.

Corey Andrew P...: 13:55 All this time. He's been this example, yes of that greatness. And it's like, so how is there not more of an influx of, we need more of that in our brand to be that thing that Talley brings. And he had so many of them under his wing. I mean, he could make a phone call, they new young creatives that he could have put in that place. So that's really fascinating.

Cieja Springer: 14:17 Yeah. It's just, these things should be happening now without pause. We should no longer be in a place where we need to explain or overextend ourselves. And I do find that in some instances that still is happening. I mean, before I started, where I currently am working, I mean, it was like pulling teeth, trying to just get phone calls with some of these companies. And of course, most of that happened prior to the racial reckoning that took place over the summer of 2020. But we still aren't at a place where I believe there is only dialogue around your experience and not you feeling like they're not gonna call me back because I'm black.

Corey Andrew P...: 15:05 Yeah.

Cieja Springer: 15:06 Yeah. You know, that feeling hasn't really gone away. I don't know that I can't say that it won't happen. I just don't know when it's gonna happen. Like, I don't think anybody does. And it's not that you ever would with anything in particular, but you want this to kind of have an end date. You know?

Cieja Springer: 15:25 Cause it's just like, you know, it's, it's been long enough. And again, I think that a lot of the brands that Andre has worked with, you know, quite, quite frankly, they should be ashamed. You know, they should be ashamed of what still occurs at their companies. They should be ashamed of how they, in my opinion, treated him as if he should be happy to have been in the room. Quite frankly, they should have been ecstatic to be around him. And I wish that was something that he knew really, I read 'The Chiffon Trenches' over the summer and it was great. It was such a fun read. It really felt like you were having a conversation with him, but there was a sadness to it as well. And I was having a conversation with my fiance while I was reading. And I was like, I wish that he didn't want them to accept him so bad.

Corey Andrew P...: 16:17 Yeah. That's, you know, it's amazing you say that because that's been something that I've been reading for the, like, I haven't read 'Chiffon Trenches', but I covered when Anna went, wrote that apology letter to Conde Nast. And it was like right around the time when he was sort of doing his book tour. So he was sort of blasting Anna for not doing more to help that along, for people of color and positions at Conde Nast. Yeah. I found it to be sad in a way, whereas he seemed to continue to want to get an invite to the party so badly from these people. And I'm like, honey, you are the party. You've been the party.

Cieja Springer: 16:53 You've been the party. Listen, when Andre stopped writing for Vogue, I stopped reading. And it wasn't just his words. It was his presence. And you felt it in the pages. I can't recall the last time I've picked up a Vogue and I mean, I am a collector of magazines. I have, I don't even know how far back some of the issues go that I have. And you know, there was a point obviously where Vogue was thee 'it' publication in fashion and you needed to go there to know what was happening, but it wasn't just because it was Vogue it's because of who was at Vogue.

Corey Andrew P...: 17:30 Right. Right.

Cieja Springer: 17:32 And, and what he was going to demand. And those pages in conjunction with Anna in partnership with her, you know. She, listen, he was approving her, looks, it wasn't the other way around. And if he had just leaned into that, I wish a little bit more. And also I feel like people took advantage of the fact that he wasn't going to do that. And so they knew that and they should have given him more because of that.

Corey Andrew P...: 17:58 Well, there is a term that many people may not be aware of that African Americans are aware of and it's called play along to get along. Yeah. And you know, it's a phenomenon in which, you know, you brought up the point of, he almost felt like he was just being, there was enough that, you know, it was just enough just to be there versus not only did he deserve to be there, but he deserved to actually be celebrated for being in that space. But many times African Americans just through whatever the syndrome is, that system we're a part of, we tend to sort of like, okay, well, that's, you know, that's enough, I'll take that. That's fine versus demanding what you think you should have. I will say that. I think one good thing he did try to do, which is important is when we have the opportunity to empower other African Americans to have creative opportunities, I would say, we should try to do that. And I know that luckily with Andre, he did do that with a lot of people. The stories are out there now this week where yeah. [Inaudible] he had a chance. He did it for me years ago. Which was like, you know, still blows my mind when I met him. So I think what's really important is that we also know that we should be conscious to help make opportunities for each other too, as African Americans.

Cieja Springer: 19:13 That said, you know, it still is a part of the initial question and circling back to it is, is there enough of us in the room? No, we need to continue to break down those barriers and break down those doors. But also at the same time, it, you know, it's quite okay for us to build our own things. We just have to support each other in that. We can't always say that. And then not match that in action and still have this desire to gain with them, whoever "them" could be cuz it doesn't always have to just be about black and white. "Them" Could be a lot of different things and a lot of different people, but we have to take that same energy that we place on wanting to be in these rooms and place that on creating our own rooms and building our own tables and establishing our own ways. Because that's what these people did. They became who they were because they decided that's what they were going to be.

Corey Andrew P...: 20:18 Yeah. I think Tyler Perry is a great example of that. Oh yeah. And in fact, you know, you used a table analogy and that's his big famous quote. Whereas, you know, he said, eventually I just built my own table.

Cieja Springer: 20:29 Yes. Exactly.

Corey Andrew P...: 20:30 Like the whole 'seat at the table' thing was just not working for me. So I built my own, you know?

Cieja Springer: 20:36 Yes but we've gotta, we just gotta support each other. And in every aspect, whether it's helping each other to bust down those doors and pull each other up and bring each other into these spaces, or it's supporting one another as we create our own and build our own tables and our own chairs and our own doors, we still just have to show up.

Corey Andrew P...: 20:56 Thank you for listening to Motivational Mondays presented by the National Society of Leadership and Success and available wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts. I'm Corey Andrew Powell. And I'll see you again here next week.