

# Learning Russian Got Me Out Of The Hood

**Versiti Podcast:** Season 2 - Episode 2 - Part 1

**Host:** Edgar Daggett

**Guest:** Erin Patton

## INTRO CLIP

**ERIN:** When we launched the brand, I had a tribe called quest modeling, the apparel in the sneakers. I had Dr. Dre and Ed Lover from Yo! MTV Raps as the, as the emcees. The book covers all of what we did relative to the Jordan brand and how I came into the role and crafting the original business plan, being the first employee of the Jordan business, the relationship that Michael and I had developed, and the ways that we implemented grassroots marketing campaigns, like seeding all of the barbers in the inner city with the new Jordans.

## BUMPER

**EDGAR:** Welcome everybody to a new podcast — the Stand Out from The Inside podcast presented by Versiti. I'm your host Edgar Daggett. Welcome to this week's podcast. We are super excited bringing you a brand new guest, a brand new way to stand out from the inside in your community. I want to start off the podcast by saying hope you guys are having a good week. I hope all your dreams are getting inspired. But not only that, to give some motivation out there within this time. And I want it to say it's never too late to start. I wanted to start off with something motivational. I like this for you all. 'Cause I've been hearing tons of stories. I have different dreams, different aspirations. And when do I start? I'm 40, I'm 30, I'm 50. It's never, never too late to start. If it's something that you're passionate about, something that you want to do that you see long-term or short-term, go out there and just get it done. Start small, start big; some people go all in. Others go step by step a little bit. It takes a little bit longer time because of external factors. But go out there and get it done. All of us here, we're trying to impact our communities. We're trying to get a mission out there and we're trying to unify or get us all together, bring us all together. And starting this podcast, we just went out and did it, us, teams, Foureva Media. We went out and we're getting it done today. And that's what you all should go do the same thing. Go strive, be yourself and get it done. All right. But to point out, to start out the podcast, we have an amazing guest. For some of you that are within the sports world, maybe some of you have heard it, some of you have not, but most of you have heard it. The Jordan brand, Nike, something big

iconic brands out there, especially tied into the sports world and also some other communities as well. We have a special guest who not only worked for those organizations. But started the whole Jordan brand initiative; started from creating those, those sneakers: who they are, what they do — has had personal ties with Michael Jordan, some of the CEOs, and some of the executives at Nike to bring you to the podcast. This is Erin Patton. He is our guest this evening for the Stand Out from the Inside podcast.

**ERIN:** Thank you. Thank you, Edgar. It's a privilege to be with you brother and, salute the fine work that you're doing. So, it's a pleasure to have this conversation.

**EDGAR:** I appreciate you for joining. This is super cool.

We've been talking about it. We were getting people excited and people love to hear these stories. Jordan, first of all, let's start with that. It's everywhere. You're seeing it, not only here in the United States, but everywhere across the globe, whether you like basketball or not, you hear Jordan is the greatest of all time. And to have somebody who's had a direct impact with that on the show, but it's also led other initiatives within the community... That is what we do. That is who we shine a light on. And that is how we make an impact by connecting all of us together. So, thank you for being here.

**ERIN:** You're welcome.

**EDGAR:** There we go. So, I wanted to get the, get the conversation started with a little bit about yourself. Who is Erin Patton? Some people do know you, some people don't. Where was the beginning? Let's start from the beginning, like where the roots come from and how'd you get started within marketing.

**ERIN:** Yeah. Well, thank you. So, my story began in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and I'm the youngest of three boys raised by a single parent in the inner-city section known as Homewood Brushton in Pittsburgh. And Pittsburgh is a very dynamic set of circumstances for all of us who are natives of the city and made it out of the city and have been able to parlay the DNA of what it means to have grown up in Pittsburgh into success, which has poised us, I believe for the types of transformative experiences that so many of have had. Aaron Donald, for example, who just became the highest-paid NFL player, non-quarterback, I believe in history. We used to play football with his father, Archie Boomer, Donald they're from Pittsburgh. Antoine Fuqua, the great filmmaker in Hollywood, for example, grew up right around the corner from us. Of course, August Wilson; most of his plays are set against the backdrop of Pittsburgh.

Curtis Martin, another NFL athlete, and the list goes on. But as I like to say we're God tested and battle proven in the Steel City and, and what that gave me by way of both experience as well as tangible skills relative to leadership is as I like to say: we weren't born to win, so we taught ourselves how not to lose. And we did that by... out working, blue collar town, out hustling and outsmarting the competition. And so, for us and being raised by a single parent, what that meant was when we got a huge snowdrift, snow storm that hit Pittsburgh. My brothers and I grabbed our shovels, and we went out to start shoveling snow. When we shoveled snow in our hood, though, we found that we knock on the door when we were finished and they'd give us five bucks and tell us we missed a spot. So, we were like, hold on. So, we got our shovels and we didn't have gloves. We put tube socks on our hands for gloves. We got on public transportation and we took buses out to places like Highland Park and Mount Lebanon and suburban enclaves. And so we were then shoveling snow on huge properties. And we were bringing in 20 bucks. Sometimes we get 50 bucks instead. And on occasion, the owner of the home would look outside and a sweet lady would say, you boys want some hot cocoa? And so we say, yes, ma'am. And we run in the house and they'd invite us to their kitchen table. And not only did I have some hot cocoa with my whipped cream, and she used to joke. "You want some hot cocoa with your whipped cream?" But we also got a taste of intercultural social location. And it gave me an opportunity to begin to visualize a future for myself that, for them was very normal, but to see a mom, a dad and children together around the holiday, around the table, was a foreign concept for me. But it started to become more familiar. The more I was able to interact, I came to realize that it really wasn't the color of my skin, but it was the content of my character. When I greeted the man of the house with a firm handshake. So these were some of the experiences that I really believe were spirit led that were God led that enabled me much like Moses to be, have been born Hebrew, but raised Egyptian and being able to navigate both worlds effectively and being able to relate to individuals outside of my culture, outside of my neighborhood, outside of my community. And that was something that became very important to my mom as well in terms of our education. And I was really taught that we weren't products of our imagination or a product of our environment, but we were products of our imagination and education was really the gateway for us to see beyond our environment. And I'll give you just a very quick example of that. During my high school years, or as I was entering high school, the school immediately in my neighborhood was not the best school in the city. And, so there were issues, from truancy to gangs, to you name it. And, so my mom didn't want me to attend that school. And so there was a new school that opened Peabody High School; where I would graduate. It's now the Barack Obama School. So, they had just opened. Not too far, it was still in the district, but it was still in the city, but it was a public school, but it was outside of my district. And so somehow my mom devised a plan for me to take Russian because

apparently the new school, it was brand new, ton of resources and they offered Russian. And so my mom went up to the school and said, I want my son to take Russian — to the school in my hood. I don't have to tell you they didn't offer Russian. And so they bused me. So, I would take my morning classes at Westinghouse, which was the school in my neighborhood. And then I would get on the bus or walk about three and a half miles to Peabody for my afternoon classes, eating my lunch along the way and about halfway through or right before Christmas break, the principal called me to the office and he said, Erin, I'd like to talk to you. And I was like, hold on. I said I wasn't really rolling with those cats. I was just hanging with the bad crowd, so they didn't like, jump on me. He said, no, no, no, there's nothing you did. He said, obviously your mom wants something more for you than we can offer. So, we're going to send you to Peabody; to the new school, full-time. And so, I went there, I did take Russian, so I could've said (SPEAKS RUSSIAN) to start the conversation. But not only did I take Russian, but I also took journalism. And that led to becoming editor of the school newspaper. And that led me to apply to the Northwestern University School of Journalism, the Medill School, where I ultimately went to college. And so I share that to say that there are just fundamental shifts and all of our story. There are fundamental moments that we look back on and there was just a force, there was a power that was operating that was greater than us. So as much as I stand here, not just on the shoulders of those before me and a mother who worked two and three jobs to make sure that she was able to take care of three boys by herself and got us the education, all those good things. It really was a power greater than me that was operating in my life, in all of our lives, that brings us to this type of conversation.

**EDGAR:** Oh, wow. So, can you still, can you speak Russian?

**ERIN:** Yeah, (SPEAKS RUSSIAN), you know. I took it two or three years and I took it my freshman year at Northwestern. And that's when it got, it is a tough language to learn. A couple of weeks ago I hopped in an Uber and it was a Russian driver and we had a good conversation and he was like, you're the first brother I've ever met to speak Russian. So, I'm okay with that distinction.

**EDGAR:** That's awesome.

That's a language that I personally, myself, I think I know maybe two people that speak the language and they are not part of the Black and Brown community. I wanted to go back. Because you were like, you said, It's not about the color of your skin. It's about your character. It's about like how you portray yourself, you know, you shake the person's hand when you open the door. A lot of individuals, especially the Black and Brown communities, they let that

impact their lives a lot. "Because I was born at this level of income, you know, through the family or because this is the color of my skin. It stops them from chasing their dreams. I've met tons and tons of individuals that are saying, oh, I can't do that because the white group has these jobs; that's only for them. I'm like, no, it's about if you want it, go after it, chase it. And you'll be surprised what you can do. When you put all your emotion, all your time into it. And some people have seen the benefit of that, where they're like, I want this job. I'm gonna go for it. I'mma study hard and they get it. Then they're shocked because they got it. And it's not because of who you are, how you look, it's because you worked for it. The best person will get that job. To make sure that again, chasing your dream and saying, go for it. And no matter where you come from you can, you can be whatever you want. Yeah.

**ERIN:** Yeah. I'm like, as I like to say... that's, that's a great point Edgar, is as I like to say, success and failure are both premeditated, right? Success and failure are both premeditated in the sense that what we believe is deeply held at the subconscious level where you really get to what we believe. People do what they believe. People react to what they believe. People make decisions based on what they believe. And the key is that the subconscious mind doesn't distinguish between the true or the false narrative and the cases as you just indicated. So if I'm believing a false narrative about who I am. Whose I am. And more importantly, my unique contribution to the world, to the team, to the community, to a project, to a campaign. No matter what it is, it's ultimately what I believe at the subconscious level that impacts not just my thought life — and as the philosopher said, I think therefore I am, which means what I think ultimately will become my reality. So, if I'm operating from a position of lack, or I believe that I'm somehow discounted from an opportunity or a dream because of the color of my skin, because of my background, because of the trauma in my background, because of how I look; any of the things and the false narratives that we ultimately believe, then that becomes the sort of subconscious patterns. And the manufacturing of our thoughts. Like if we see our thought life as an assembly line, we got a bunch of defectives that are rolling down the line. And instead of pulling those off, we're actually buying it and selling it and we're buying it ourselves. Right? In terms of what we believe. And so I agree with you a hundred percent that it really begins with a fundamental reassessment of our belief system and what we're affirming about ourselves. And as a therapist and a counselor, one of the things that I believe deeply in is the power of narrative therapy and narrative therapy does just that: it takes the internalized conversations, even the language that we're speaking about ourselves. And we sort of deconstruct that. And then we give the individual the power to then say, I'm going to re-story myself. I'm going to take control of the terms of who I am, what my destiny is, and what dreams I'm able to pursue. I'm going to give myself the authority as opposed to what someone else may say about it because

we know that there are dream killers, there are dream stealers. And, and if we base our life and our expectations around, those that others are placing upon us or their ability to believe, even in our dreams, then we'll always fall short. But if I measure me by me, then I always measure up.

**EDGAR:** Completely agree. And you have to be strong. This is strong people... because how you just said those dream killers. There's always going to be people around you within your community or wherever you go. That going to be like, no, you can't do this. No, you gotta be strong. You gotta be like, I want this. I'm going to go get it. Be a go-getter. You can do it and apply yourself. So, it's a great point because you know, we see it every day and we see it through whether it starts within our families, our friends, and it is an important message that everybody should hear.

**ERIN:** Couldn't agree more.

**EDGAR:** So, switching to you, so you went to journalism. You were editor-in-chief in your high school newspaper. Did you want to go in that route of being a journalist? Working for those newspaper organizations, Fox News? Any news place? Is that the world that you were seeing?

**ERIN:** Yeah, that's where I saw myself. And that's where I started. Literally, I was part of the Inroads program, which some may be familiar with, many years ago, which was a career readiness college preparatory program for minority students to develop the skills, to transition into corporate America. And so that meant an internship in your field or area of choice. And so for me, that started at the Pittsburgh Press, which is now the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette; they were two papers, they merged. And so I started in the newsroom and started writing stories. And I did believe that my future was in media. I knew communications was a part of it. The only difference for me was I wasn't quite so jaded; no knock against any of my journalist friends, but you know, there's a movement afoot now for more constructive journalism, which I think is a very fantastic thing, which is sort of a by-product of positive psychology and recognizing that the information that we disseminate and how we disseminate it, that becomes a part of the information domain. And the more negative information that we're putting into the domain, that affects cognition and that affects how people are reconciling the things that are happening in the world or in their world. And sometimes, the truth is somewhere in between absolute truth and false. And so that was one of the initial challenges that I had in working in media was that a large part of what was valued was shock value. And for me, coming from an environment where there was trauma, right. And real PTSD, a lot of times that conflicted with my own lived reality about those environments and the empathy

that I had as opposed to being able to manipulate that for ratings, for example. So, there were just some fundamental, I guess, philosophical differences that I had at that time. What it did do was it opened up the door in a pathway through public relations. And so I started my career in PR after graduating from Northwestern and worked for Burrell advertising, which was the largest Black-owned advertising agency at that time. And they had a PR division. So, I started working in what they call it at the time segment marketing, multicultural marketing, as it was evolving into target market. Because I was a product of the hip-hop generation, I was able to start to bridge that world into corporate America. For example, Sprite was one of the clients for Burrell. At the time the "obey your thirst" campaign was very prevalent and it was a predominant tagline for the company. And our charge was to figure out how to translate both the brand positioning and those brand preferences into the multicultural community. And so, for us, that meant, okay, obey your thirst. What does that look like? That looks like in terms of the individual in self-expression within urban culture and what the hip hop community, what that looks like is a cipher. Right? You may recall the early commercials that were set in the basement. And so, you had a bunch of rappers taking their turn expressing themselves. And so for example, and that was obeying your thirst, that was being true to who you are and who you were. And so I was able to forge early success by bridging those two worlds and being authentic in the hip-hop experience. And at the same time, being able to come into a conference room and not just sit there and say, Sprite, y'all need to do this cause it's hot. But to be able to say, okay, here's the, here are the core brand values. Here's the positioning and here's how we communicate that against this particular audience. And so that's where I really was able to utilize, not just my communications and writing capabilities and writing press releases and copy and all of those things to make sure that it reflected the proper nuance. But I was also able to combine that with my passion for community and events and being grassroots oriented. And that also opened up and paved the way for me to, to do some groundbreaking work in terms of the pharmaceutical industry and certain illnesses and conditions that were plaguing underserved communities like tap pharmaceuticals and prostate cancer, et cetera, et cetera. And, and at the same time, being able to tap into those cultural and lifestyle nuances as well.

**EDGAR:** Yeah. Wow. So, for all of you that don't know, Erin has also written a book, so it's called "Under the Influence." You can get on Amazon. But it's kind of tracing the hip-hop generations and impacting the brand, sports, and pop culture. So that experience with Sprite, did that impact the book?

**ERIN:** Absolutely. Absolutely. And the book is really written from my front-row perspective, navigating corporate America as a product of hip hop culture and a hip hop marketer. And specifically, even beyond the early stage of my

career at Burrell, a huge portion of it is devoted to the work that I did at Nike and coming into the Jordan brand role and how we were able to intersect which was a little more of a delicate balance in terms of intersecting hip hop culture with the Jordan brand at that time, it probably sounds fairly elementary at this point. But back in the nineties, even to say urban consumer or to say urban market, that was like, hold on, Michael's not urban, but the brand itself has a unique position within urban culture. And so, for example, when we launched the brand, I had a tribe called quest modeling, the apparel and the sneakers. I had Dr. Dre and Ed Lover from Yo! MTV Raps as the emcees. The book covers all of what we did relative to the Jordan brand and how I came into the role and crafting the original business plan, being the first employee of the Jordan business, the relationship that Michael and I had developed, and the ways that we implemented grassroots marketing campaigns, like seeding all of the barbers in the inner city with the new Jordans. You know again today probably seems like an afterthought in terms of product seeding or influencers, but at that point it was, it was fairly revolutionary to the extent that the Wall Street Journal put us on the front page now for those types of initiatives than others like Reebok would also follow with the Iverson shoe. And so, we were setting the pace and we were doing it with a true and authentic understanding of the culture. And so the book really captures my journey from a micro standpoint, within the overall macro aspect of how hip hop was transforming industries. From consumer products, to fashion, to technology, into automotive and what was happening in terms of the intersection of urban culture and technology, and Jay Z doing the Denali Blue, Doug Magazine back in the day, everything that was happening there; the spirits industry, looking at how brands like Belvedere and Hypnotiq, for example, became household names in the urban community by attaching to the lifestyle. In the book I talk about specifically the brand Hypnotiq and in New York at that time, and being part of that sports, entertainment, lifestyle, and connecting brands... we were doing industry nights at Justin's, which was Puffy's restaurant, which was the center of gravity in New York for influences at that time. And so, we have brands like Motorola integrating with the two-way page there, we have Hypnotiq involved. And so, this is an example of, in the book I talk about the hip hop innovator's dilemma and because of the value that our culture creates for brands and for products that comes by word of mouth and it's bringing established brands into foreign territory to a certain extent. There's a dilemma associated with it where there's sometimes a hesitation for a brand to jump on how their experience, how the consumer is experiencing their brands across cultures. And one of the ways that we bridged it, for example, with Hypnotiq, they came in and so they were sampling the Hypnotiq drink. And so, none of the guys were drinking it cause it was like this fruity blue drink. Right? So, it was kind of like you didn't really feel too masculine.

**EDGAR:** Yeah.



**ERIN:** What happened is the bartender noticed it. And so, he mixed Hennessy with Hypnotiq. And so... because I don't need to say anything else about Hennessy with influencers, right? Even at that time. He mixed them and it turned the drink green. And so, someone came up to him and they said, what's that? And he said it's the Incredible Hulk. And just that quickly, the Incredible Hulk not only became the official drink at Justin's for Industry Night. But then when you would go out to Miami at the Delano, or you'd go to the Mondrian out on the west coast or any of these sort of locations where you had all these very mobile urban lifestyle connoisseurs who were engaged in business and sports and entertainment and corporate in general. And so that became like a drink. And so, the question is, and, in teaching in the MBA program, I asked my business school students, I said, how much was that R and D? And the answer is like zero R and D to create that drink. Whereas meanwhile, over in Switzerland, there was probably some well-paid individual in the lab, who's making these drinks and he came up with the blue one and said, this is it! Right? But meanwhile, within the context of the urban culture and community and influencers, you get something like that, that happens in real-time. And so, the book really examines just that whole trajectory. And then finally how the culture transcended race and became transcultural. So, it was more of a psychographic than a demographic as it moved not only into the suburbs but into other areas and regions like Tokyo. And so, I have a segmentation framework in there that looks at the different ciphers of segments within urban culture, because what we were fighting at that time was the fact that it wasn't this monolithic thing. Even when you said urban, it wasn't just, okay, 50 Cent is urban, just as one example that the corporate America would tend to kind of get hung up on. Later, they would embrace it. But we were able to demonstrate that it was a much broader psychographic that was transcultural and, and that's really what the book deals with in terms of impact.

**EDGAR:** It's almost like building relationships within products or services like between each other. 'Cause you said you're... okay, you're bringing Hypnotiq into a brand new community. How can you tie? And you didn't put it together, but you found Hennessy and then somehow someone was mixing it; you tie them together. And they're like, okay, now we can drink it. 'Cause now, now it fits us, you know? And now it's green. Now it's a different color. Now it makes us... It's all, it's like building relationships within products and services.

**ERIN:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

**EDGAR:** I feel like, within my position here at Versiti, we're trying to build those relationships. We're trying to say, okay, what's going to be that bridge? What's going to cover that gap between us? Between individuals in specific

communities; donating versus what we're doing? What's going to bring us together? What's going to create that impact? And sports, you know, hip hop, all of that are different ways; but how do we make that connection? And if you haven't read the book, I definitely recommend it. It's given me a couple of good ideas already, spinning in my head as we're talking right now. But it's definitely a good read. So, I definitely recommend it.