

Conjuring Up Courage

#96

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Chaya Milchtein

Shohreh Davoodi: You are listening to episode #96 of Conjuring Up Courage. Today's guest is the incomparable Chaya Milchtein. She is an automotive educator, a queer plus-sized influencer, and the founder of Mechanic Shop Femme. Chaya will teach you how to be an educated car owner without the gate keeping of car bro culture, and she'll do it in serious style. In this episode, Chaya and I talk about how she shows up authentically in her work, myths about car ownership and maintenance, items to keep in your car, and more.

To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/96. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/96.

[Music plays]

This is Conjuring Up Courage, and I'm your host, Shohreh Davoodi. As a self-trust coach, I help people come home to themselves, so they can be more of who they are, and less haunted by who they think they're supposed to be.

I created this podcast to celebrate what's possible when you commit to being brave. You'll hear from diverse guests who are refusing to let fear and self-doubt stop them from building fulfilling lives and creating a better world for everyone. I'll also teach you my favorite tools, strategies, and mindset shifts so you can do the same. Consider this your invitation to stop living according to "shoulds" and to step into your motherfucking magic instead. Stay open, get curious, and let's grow together.

[Music fades]

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Hello Chaya! I think that I first discovered you in a Facebook group and I am just obsessed with how you bring all of yourself to your work, especially in the automotive industry, because I think that can be very unexpected for people. So thank you for making time to chat with me today.

Chaya Milchtein: Thank you. It's so great to be here. Facebook groups are like incredible places to meet really cool people.

Shohreh: There's this piece of me that just wants to remove myself from Facebook forever, but I'm in so many great groups that I can't.

Chaya: Exactly. It's like the one piece of Facebook that's just like this little slice of heaven.

Shohreh: Yes. Alright, well to kick us off, why don't you please tell me a little more about your badass self and what lights you up.

Chaya: Well, when you put it like that [Shohreh laughs lightly], I feel like I have a big responsibility here. Well here's the thing: I'm just a regular queer person. I'm a fat woman, I'm married, I live in the Midwest, and I teach people about their cars. And I've worked in the automotive industry from when I was 18 years old. I'm totaling nearly seven years in both repair shops and collision shops and different types of shops within the repair industry. Nearly four years ago, it's gonna be four years in June, I started Mechanic Shop Femme as a blog, and it's evolved into this automotive education and like empowerment platform.

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It was really important to me from day one to bring all of the different sides of me into my work. So even from how I called it, Mechanic Shop Femme, I wanted to bring that fat femme, my femme, into my work. And I feel like I finally like grasped how to do that [light laughter], thank you TikTok, I appreciate you TikTok.

Shohreh: Honestly.

Chaya: [Laughs lightly] That's really what did it. Like I've always had these two sides, and I've always worked both sides and everything, but until TikTok came along and I started creating for TikTok, I hadn't really figured out how to make it seem very cohesive. Here we are!

Shohreh: I'm curious if you've gotten—maybe not as much now, but especially in the beginning—pushback for the way that you do like represent yourself in this industry.

Chaya: Oh gosh. So I don't get pushback from the industry, mostly because I operate outside of it, for the most part.

Shohreh: Right.

Chaya: I get pushback from regular people who think there's a problem with the way that I do things. So I recently spoke at the Women in Auto Care conference. So my industry welcomes the work that I do. The people that I surround myself support and welcome the work that I do. The people who watch my content are split really drastically into two big groups. You have the people—and this is the vast majority—that love it,

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that think it is fantastic. They think the way that I bring myself and I carry myself and I express myself and I teach is great.

Then there's these very, very small minority of people that's made up of all different kinds of people: people who think that I shouldn't bring my queerness to my work, and specifically say in my comments all the time, you're teaching great stuff, but how come you've got to say your queer? What does your sexuality have anything to do with cars? And then you have the people who have a problem with my size. So they initially follow me for the automotive education content, but they don't realize that I think my fatness is fabulous and I celebrate it on my platforms.

Shohreh: Yeah.

Chaya: So they show up on those posts and they've gotta say something. And then you've got the other people that are like well, my boyfriend or my husband or whatever, they know all about cars so I don't have to know anything. And each little group has their own response. The first group, I tell them, well you know what, and the second group, I'm not going to shrink myself or disappear into the background of my content so that I can provide you with free educational resources that quite simply don't exist. So if you're not happy with the way that I present myself in my work and you think I need to erase myself from it or shrink myself in order to make it palatable to you, then I'm not the right creator for you.

And for the second group of people [laughs lightly], I tell them this, and I made a little TikTok on it and I thought it was funny. You're right. If

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you have people in your family that know things about cars, that fix cars, that work on cars, that's an incredible resource for you; however, I do not teach DIY. I don't teach ya how to fix your own stuff, I teach you the things that every single car owner needs to know. So if you don't wanna learn from me, that's fine, but you're gonna come back to me when you're 60, when you either left your relationship or the person who's been supporting your automotive resources has passed, and now you need that.

And my proof is I'm featured on AARP, and there's a reason for that [Shohreh laughs lightly]. That's not because suddenly people wanna learn, it's because people have lost those resources to learn the very basics that they should've known. They're in transitional periods of their lives and things change and all of the sudden somebody like me is useful. So ultimately, bottom line is my response is always extremely positive and extremely thoughtful. And most people, when I share with them the reasoning, they get it. And then we proceed and we do good things [laughter].

Shohreh: And the people who don't get it aren't your people, and they can go away.

Chaya: Exactly. Not everybody is my people and as I like to say, I give a lot of myself, as much as I possibly could, but I also cannot fit everything into a 30-second or a 20-second video. You have to understand the nuances of the concepts. And if you want to learn more, I do provide you other methods of learning. My goal is to give you the tools to be the most

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educated and empowered car owner, not necessarily to be your singular resource.

Shohreh:

And as a fellow content creator, this is something I've really noticed too, is you know, there's obviously a big part of our work that is putting out free resources and free materials. But then of course, we also have to get paid, we have to make a living, so we have paid sources. And it is so interesting to me how people can get to this place of like entitlement around our free stuff and like just demanding more and more and more, and it's like you can pay me for these things. I have all kinds of sources and offerings. And I think that's become a really hard thing about this expectation that we put out free things which is great and I think it's so important to have those accessible options, but like some things require a lot of labor and should be paid.

Chaya:

And I think that now nearly four years into this, I've figured out that balance of providing as much free content as I can, but also providing an income for myself. And a lot of that is balancing classes, journalism, paid sponsorships, and all kinds of different arms of my business instead of focusing all of my income in one specific place.

When I started making TikToks, my wife was very worried [Shohreh laughs lightly]. She goes, babe, you're just giving away all of the information for free, and I'm like, but they're only learning little itty-bitty bits. And you're learning how I teach and how I share, and you're learning enough that it does empower you and it does change things. But if you want to learn in one 90-minute lesson or two 90-minute lessons, then come take my classes because ultimately that is the most

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immersive experience for you to learn everything all at one time instead of 30-second clips.

Shohreh: Right, exactly. I had a past business coach who always talked about this, where it's like yeah, of course, someone could piece together all your little bits of content and they could probably learn like a lot of what you teach. But one, nobody is going to do that, nobody has the time or energy to do that. And two, they're not getting you, right? Like there's a reason people hire us to work with us is because they like us as people and they want us to teach them specifically. And so—and from content, you get the content but you're not getting that teacher, and I think that's the difference and the value.

Chaya: Right. And I also—when I teach classes, I answer questions live and I give people an opportunity to not just learn what I have prepared for them to learn but to delve deeper into that content, which you know you only have a certain amount of letters on TikTok or Instagram to answer questions.

Shohreh: Right.

Chaya: And there are only so many comments you can actually answer. So it doesn't really give you the same experience. And I love teaching my classes. I mean it brings me joy and fulfillment and I created them in a way that allows me to make them as accessible as possible to as many people as possible. They're all sliding scale, every single class is sliding scale. They all have free spots built in for low income people of color, low income people with disabilities. On top of that, I give away free

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spots on Instagram, on TikTok on a regular basis and I donate 10% of the revenue of my classes to different organizations depending which class you're taking, which gives me the opportunity to support my community. And not all of these organizations are like the non-profit industrial complex. I like to donate to mutual aid funds, and individuals, and different things that are going to make the most amount of impact because the fact that it's a 501(c)3 doesn't guide whether I make my donation there or not.

Shohreh:

I love that you've brought these pieces into your business as well because again, when we look at—you were saying you bring the queerness and you bring the fatness and these different aspects of yourself to your business. This is an aspect of yourself too. This is the social justice-oriented part of you that cares about your community and wants to give back. And I'm all for showing all of these different parts of ourselves and letting people decide if they want to work with us based on our whole selves instead of this sort of polished, like partial version of ourselves that used to be the business norm of like how you show up.

Chaya:

Right, and I mean there is also a place as an influencer of not giving every single part of your identity for public consumption. And I try to be as transparent as possible and I try to share as much as I feel called to share or as much as people ask. But I also encourage anybody who is a content creator or an influencer business person to remember that it is okay to leave some parts of yourself in the back that doesn't have to be

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public to the internet [Shohreh laughs]. That's like very important to me also.

Shohreh: Yeah, I agree. There is definitely this balance of the authenticity and keeping things for yourself because we're humans, we're not like robot content creators [laughs lightly].

Chaya: Right, and plus not every good thing you do has to be on public display. Sometimes the good that you do, half of the fact that you do it is the fact that it is private, it is just between you and this other person and it doesn't get publicized. And sometimes publicizing it actually seems to take away from the act because all of the sudden it becomes marketing. I mean it does help the person, but it's not in its truest form.

So like I grew up Hasidic, I grew up religious, I'm the oldest of 15 children, and in Judaism there are levels of charity and how you give and what you give actually makes a difference in like, quotes, and I say this in all quotes, okay, how much like "credit" you get with god for that charity. But what stuck with me, 'cause I don't know if I care about the credit that much, but what stuck with me is this giving in private and doing in private in a way that is not public, that does not share of myself but also does not share of the person who is receiving and allows them to keep their privacy. And that's supposedly the highest level of charity, so.

Shohreh: [Laughs lightly] I had never heard of that before, that's so interesting. And I think yeah, that's a really good point. And it's almost like two arms, where it's like there's the public things and there are some very

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important things that we publically want to make statements on and want to be clear that our values are known. And then yeah, if we're not also showing up in private, if we're not also standing up for racial justice and these other things in private, then it's just a performance at that point. So we have to do both.

Chaya: Yep. It's just the hashtag. It's just the single post that disappears into the abyss after 24-hours.

Shohreh: Well one thing that you do very much publically show up as is with your amazing fashion and your fire outfits, which I have to assume is like one of the things that makes people be like, I need to watch this video because there is person just like unapologetically wearing a glittery dress and working on a car. Like what is happening here?

Chaya: So yes, the fashion is the thing. But I want to clarify that most of the time I'm not working on cars when I'm wearing five-inch heels and fancy dresses and stuff. I spend most of the time behind the computer, behind the camera, educating people; however, I don't think that the work that I do do on cars is stuff that people do when they're prepared to do it.

For example, you add washer fluid to your car when you need washer fluid, not when you've put on overalls and sneakers and now you're going to go put washer fluid into your car. You're not going to put air in your tires in the time when you are perfectly prepared for this; you're going to do it when you're in an emergency.

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I always wear fabulous outfits [Shohreh laughs lightly]; I adore wearing fabulous outfits. The heels, though, those are just for pictures [laughs].

Shohreh: Same. Same.

Chaya: Yep, just for pictures, except in the winter, I like boots with heels. But I used to say the fashion walks into the room in front of you, like what you're wearing walks into the room first. Now I sort of peel back the layers of that. I think my size walks into the room first, after that, my fashion, and then whatever I do to add to the space. But the way that you clothe yourself is so important to the way that people see you. But it's just as important to the way that you see yourself.

So look at the last year. So many people transitioned from wearing clothing that made them feel confident and beautiful to wearing clothing that was comfortable to lounge in. Even all the fashion companies pulled away so much of that exciting, beautiful clothes and replaced it with [laughs lightly] joggers and sweatpants.

Shohreh: Right.

Chaya: And those things have a place. When I get up in the morning—and I work between 80 and 110 hours a week, on average. When I get up in the morning, I get dressed. I don't put on makeup, but I get dressed. I put on a dress, I put on an outfit, I put on something that's going to make me feel good so that I can approach the rest of the day and my work in that spirit and with that attitude. Hopefully that's a little bit of what made my business so incredible the last year, but I'm sure it's not just that [laughs lightly]. It's something.

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Shohreh: And I think too, the fact that you show up with this very clear like femme identity and it's—again, it's even in the name with Mechanic Shop Femme. I think that there's something really special about that because I'm sure this idea that people have is one, that cars are a "men's domain," this is of course in quotes. And that also if there are women in the industry, right, they must be really butch and certainly they can't have a femme identity.

Chaya: I've gotta tell you, when I started connecting with other women in the automotive industry, which I only did in the last couple of years. So it took me a long time from when I started working to when I realized that there were quite a few women in the industry. When I started connecting with other women in the industry, I had that conception too. Like they're all just butch women!

No. No! No! Most of them are straight, okay [laughter]. And they're not butch by any stretch of the imagination. We have conversations in like the Female Mechanics' Alliance about males and what pants are gonna fit and how people are gonna work pregnant and how people look when they don't work. Sure, while you're working on cars you're going to get dirty and there's only so much you're gonna do, but people like to have jeans that actually properly fit them.

Shohreh: Yeah.

Chaya: As opposed to just wearing men's fitted clothing when they're working. And there are a lot of women that bring this femininity to their work.

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It's almost like automotive in drag. [Shohreh laughs]. I sort of take that idea and turn it on its head and explode it in all kinds of ways.

Shohreh:

You do, and I'm glad that you mentioned that this isn't just you; there are plenty of other women in the industry. And I think that's why it's so important that there is spotlight on you. And showing people that there's all kinds of people in this industry and you don't have to look a certain way, you don't need to be a certain gender. Like if you are interested in cars, like this can be for you too. Because I know growing up, that's certainly not the messaging I got, you know? All of the messaging around cars was like, oh that's a male domain, and like the only thing I knew was that I should be worried if I go into a shop that I'm gonna get ripped off because I'm a woman.

Chaya:

Yes, oh my gosh. So the whole thing is very interesting. So I wrote an article a little while back for Rewire.org, it's a Twin Cities PBS publication. And I wrote it about all the different jobs people can get in the automotive industry. I believe I wrote it before the pandemic but it published after the pandemic, which was a great time. The automotive industry has a huge gap in jobs. There are way more jobs than there are people to fill them but most people think that they have to have mechanical or automotive knowledge in order to work in the industry.

But there's actually quite a few jobs—I mean I started with zero, zero knowledge about cars. I got my driver's license to work in the automotive industry [Shohreh laughs lightly], not the other way around. I didn't know anything! And I'm still not an automotive enthusiast. I am not the person that's gonna sit with you on the couch and talk to you

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about the different powers of different engines because that doesn't matter to me. I like to relate on an everyday level with regular people. So there's so much space and so much room to figure out who you are and what part of the industry you want to be in. And I'm sure that's the case with many male-dominated industries.

And then I want to touch on your scam. So there has been studies done on whether women are actually charged more than men. And what studies have found is when women are educated—and by educated I just mean simple, basic understanding—they actually get charged exactly the same amount as men. So in my experience, seven years working in the auto industry, I've actually found that most women know more about the services that they're gonna do and ask more questions than men do. And I often find that if men think that something is their idea, they're much more likely to do it, even though it's completely inaccurate and completely incorrect and absolutely will not benefit their vehicle at all, just because they think they know better.

So I would like to sort of dispel this myth that women are getting scammed. And I would encourage people to build relationships with independent mechanics and to grow those relationships and to ask a lot of questions. I just did a TikTok video today on three things you should ask a mechanic when they suggest repairs, and that's one of them: build those relationships; ask those questions. Get a good understanding of what's happening with your car because that's gonna help you build a trusting relationship with them.

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In addition, I think that people think that scamming somebody out of \$100 or \$200 or even \$500 is going to make this mechanic more money, but that's actually the furthest thing from accurate. Think about any small business for a second. If somebody has a bad experience with that small business, they're going to share with everybody the terrible experience that they've had and they will no longer shop there. Repair shops it's exactly the same way. If somebody goes into a repair shop and they have a bad experience or they get scammed for something, not only are they going to tell everybody, but this mechanic lost the opportunity to build a relationship with them and make way more money overall over the life of their car and multiple other cars and everything they recommend to them.

So, are there scammers? And are there people who are trying to get money out of people? Sure. But the vast majority of quality, independent mechanics, there's no benefit to them.

Shohreh:

That's so interesting, I hadn't thought about that but it makes perfect sense, especially—maybe this was more common before, and I'm sure it was in the past. And I think now with the internet and everything, like you said, someone's gonna go on Yelp and slap up a review, you know, if they're treated poorly or if they think sexism was being used against them or something like that. There's definitely no benefit. Especially like you said for these smaller, independent shops, like those kinds of things can really hurt a small shop where reputation is like the thing that they have. I mean, I think all of us small business owners know that reputation is like the most important thing that you want to protect.

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And so I think that makes a ton of sense and I hadn't even thought about that before.

Chaya: And it's actually those corporately-owned shops and dealerships that are driving this misconception of the automotive industry because those are the places where you're not usually building a relationship with somebody.

Shohreh: Right.

Chaya: So the person that's serving you, for most people their goal is to help you, but bottom line, they may not be there the next time you come, okay? Their goal is to increase their paycheck and to get you to do whatever services that are going to meet whatever metrics because they don't have to worry about ever seeing you again. And they don't care about the reputation of the store, of the shop, the business, the dealership, because ultimately it doesn't matter.

When you're going to an independent shop, the relationship is everything. I mean, it's the gold standard. But people look at it the other way. People are like, ah, independent mechanics, they're the ones that are gonna cheat me. I'm gonna go to the corporately-owned shop. And y'all, I have worked at the corporately owned shops, okay? I know that there are good people that work in these places and there are good repair shops. But as a rule, you're working on people who are going through an ever-revolving door because they're not getting paid enough, the work conditions aren't good enough, so they have no reason to build that relationship with you.

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Shohreh: For sure. Well, and you mentioned that this is a myth to be dispelled, and that made me think, are there any other big myths in automotive industry or maintenance that you want to take this opportunity to dispel?

Chaya: So many [laughter].

Shohreh: Of course.

Chaya: You don't have to maintain your air conditioning. If your air conditioning is working, don't touch it. You actually do have to do your oil change on time if you wanna extend the life of your car. You should read your owner's manual, at least the part where it tells you what maintenance to do. There's a book that's gonna tell you how to take care of your car so your car lasts the longest. If you do not follow the information in this book and then you complain that your car is not actually lasting and it's having all kinds of problems, is the problem you or the car? [Shohreh laughs lightly]

And, don't be afraid to ask questions. Folks think that people don't want to answer questions—and yes, there is, there is the aspect of sometimes mechanics aren't the best communicators and um, not in the way that they can't talk, but that they can't explain complicated concepts in language that regular people can understand. But there's also the other side where people don't necessarily ask questions, or they come in with the mindset that they're going to get scammed immediately when they walk in the door. So if you come in and you believe everybody's gonna scam you and they don't have the words to

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explain to you the service in a way that you can understand and hopefully dispel that mindset that you have, you're never gonna find a shop that you're gonna like.

Shohreh: Mm, yeah, that's right because you won't actually be on the same page from the beginning.

Chaya: Never! There's a lot of myths [Shohreh laughs lightly]. I wrote an article, also for Rewire actually, dispelling the top winter car care myths, so if anybody wants to read that you can go find it on Rewire.org.

Shohreh: Anything we've talked about in this episode I will link to in the show notes, whether it's a TikTok or it's an article. So it will all be very easy for people to find.

You make such a good point about the manual. I got a new car last fall and I remember just like sitting in the car like reading it because I was like, I don't know how anything works in this new car, it's different from my old one. I was like, I never did this with my other car, you know? Like you would only pull it out when you were desperate and like a light pops up and you're like, crap, what does this mean? But there's actually a ton of information in there I learned. So I think that's a good tip for everyone.

Chaya: There's so much more information than people think. But also, here's a good trick: if you don't want to look through the tiny print that's in your manual, you can actually find your manual usually online in digital format. Simply type in the year, make, and model of your car and the word "owner's manual," and the first resource that usually pops up is

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actually the manufacturer's website. So if you look for an '09 Toyota Camry owner's manual, you're going to find it right on Toyota's website. And then you're able to download it and Ctrl+F. [Shohreh laughs lightly]. Search. Search for what you're lookin' for so you don't have to read the whole thing.

Shohreh: I am here for this tip for the generation that doesn't like to flip to the back to find the page that the word is on [laughs lightly].

Chaya: But honestly, there's just a lot of information. When I bought my Subaru, I liked that they had several different owner's manuals. So they had like the regular one, then they had the warranty, then they had the maintenance all in separate books so that you don't have this enormous thick volume to try to find things in.

Shohreh: No, that makes sense because one thing I did notice when I was going through it is that sometimes you'll like look something up and then you start to read it and it'll be like, and for this specific thing, now go to this page. And so you're like bouncing back and forth in the manual and I'm like where's this information?

Chaya: Yeah. That's why I like the digital one. If you're buying a newer one, your manufacturer might have an app that will have maintenance information. It will even have little videos of how to do things, like put washer fluid in or put wiper blades on or whatever, which is cool. And it will remind you when it's time to do certain maintenance and allow you to keep track of it. So, like Subaru, first of all they will input all maintenance that you do at the dealership, but you can manually input

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all maintenance that you do outside the dealership and it's a good way to easily keep track of what's going on.

Shohreh: Nice. Yeah, I know Honda has an app now. I'm not sure if you can put in your own maintenance that you're doing, but I should look into that, 'cause that's actually really cool.

Chaya: It would seem counterintuitive to not have that option, considering most people after their vehicle is out of their initial warranty are leaving the dealer and going off to other repair shops.

Shohreh: Mhm. Alright, so regardless of what car a person has, I want to know what are some of the top things that you think everyone should have in their vehicle.

Chaya: So you should have a basic emergency kit in your car; however, most emergency kits that you'll find are not very good quality. So you can actually build your own emergency kit based on the different things that you need. So you obviously want like first aid stuff. You want to have a bottle of coolant and a bottle of oil and it's always good to have a bottle of washer fluid on hand, although the washer fluid is less like emergency and more convenience. Then, most people have jumper cables; however, there are other options that are not jumper cables that you can have that will work better.

Shohreh: I just saw your TikTok on this and my mind was blown.

Chaya: [Laughs] I love it. Okay, so there have been like jumpstarter boxes many years, okay? And my favorite one was made by Diehard, which used to

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be made by Sears, which is where I first started working in the automotive industry. But these jumpers, which used to be like, very big, have gotten very, very small. And there are all kinds of different options. Make sure to note whether this fits your engine size. So if you have a small car, almost any of them will work if you get a reputable brand. If you have a large SUV or a truck, you're going to want to make sure to get one that has enough power in it to jumpstart your car.

I like the one from Weego. I purchased this, this is not an ad [Shohreh laughs lightly]. Not only is it not an ad, but they have ignored me on all social media channels [Shohreh laughs lightly]. Over 350,000 followers and you would think they would at least acknowledge that I have shared their product no less than three times on each channel. But anyhow.

Shohreh: Rude. You've got to get that corporate sponsorship, come on.

Chaya: They're not even a big corporate company, they're a fairly small company, so I'm like, what's going on? Anyhow, so [light laughter] I like the Weego jump starter. They have a very, very small one; it's about the size of a cell phone, it fits into your glovebox, it keeps its charge for a long time, unlike some of them that you have to recharge every single month. So that's a great option. You can buy them direct from their site or you can buy them on Amazon, or a few other places I'm sure. So there's that. And I will provide you with a link to my recommendations that will have all the links.

Shohreh: Yeah. So the thing for people to note on that box is that you don't require another vehicle; you can jump yourself.

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Chaya: Yes, you do not need to talk to a stranger. You do not need to wait for another car. You do not need to figure out how to get your car out of a tight spot where you cannot fit another vehicle. And this is very funny, but the day after I got it, so I got it, I did a video, the next day, I was sitting at a gas station waiting for my wife, went to get lottery tickets, and the person next to me couldn't start their car. And they can up to window and they said, can I use your car to jump start my car? And I was like, no, but [Shohreh laughs lightly]. I said no and his face just dropped down. I'm like but, I have something else that would help you. So I pulled it out and then you know, this is a dude, so I didn't want to end up in this really uncomfortable situation—

Shohreh: Right.

Chaya: —where he's like trying to direct me on what to do. So I was just like do you know how to use it? [laughs lightly] You can use it. And he goes, I don't know how to use it. And I was like okay, I'll do it then. It turns out, it had nothing to do with the battery, he was drunk and he had an—

Shohreh: Oh no.

Chaya: —alcohol meter in his car which I didn't figure out until after I saw him try to start the car blowing into the monitor, and the car's not starting. But point being, this is not just helpful for you, it's also helpful for people around you, and there's way less of a chance for failure.

So for example, if you use jumper cables, if you mix up the cables you can create major problems. With the jump starter, at the least the one that I'm talking about, the directions are very clearly printed on it, and

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there's also notices if the cables are reversed and it will not work. It will turn on a light that says "reverse" and it will not work. So it's so easy to use because you can't screw it up.

Shohreh: I love it. I love foolproof things. I have never had to jump a vehicle before, so I want something that's easy to use if I'm going to get into a situation where I need to do that.

Chaya: Yes.

Shohreh: I know one of the other things that I've seen you mention to have in your car as well is the electronic tire gauge. And I still have one of the old ones that like shoots out the little measurement stick [laughs lightly].

Chaya: Okay so this is where some of the nuance gets lost on TikTok. You should check your tire pressure and you can use whatever tire pressure gauge suits your fancy; however, I only had less than 30 seconds to talk about this in the video. And I personally recommended the digital tire pressure gauge because I think it is way easier for people to use.

Shohreh: Oh yeah.

Chaya: And it's super straight forward. It's, again, foolproof, and you're not trying to read the little tiny marks on the pencil gauge that shoots forward. It's also not a whole lot more expensive; it's only like maybe \$7 to \$10 for a digital tire pressure gauge. That's what I have, that's what I use, um, and most people, when they see me talk about that, they're like duh, I should totally get that.

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But if you have a gauge that's working for you, you do not need to go get another one, okay? If you love the gauge that you have, you do not need to go get another one. It's just something that may be more of a convenience, a little bit more accessible for you.

It also has a little light at the end that will light up the valve stem if you're checking your tire pressure, you should be checking them when they're cold, so usually first thing in the morning. In half the country, first thing in the morning when you're going to work, it's dark. This lights it up and makes it a lot easier.

Shohreh:

Ah, see, I didn't know that you're supposed to be checking it in the morning. Also, I didn't realize that you're supposed to be checking it regularly until I saw you talk about it. I was like, oh, you check it when the light comes on, right? That's the only time you need to check your tires.

Chaya:

Yeah, and I think that there's debate about whether you should check your tire pressure regularly if you have a tire pressure monitor. And I am of the opinion that you should still check your tire pressure regularly for a whole host of different reasons. But most importantly is these tire pressure monitors go bad, and most people never replace them because they're expensive and they do nothing except for ensure that your tire pressure is in the correct level. So, I say to check your tire pressure.

In addition, when you're checking your tire pressure—this is a video I have not made yet [laughs lightly]—you should check your tire and the

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way that your tire condition is, and that is recommended by the National Highway Safety something that has too many words in it for you to remember what it is. That one.

Shohreh: [Laughs] Excellent, very good to know. So tire pressure, this is something we can do ourselves. You mentioned the wiper fluid is something that we can do ourselves.

Chaya: Absolutely.

Shohreh: Other things that you're like, yes, you can totally do this yourself?

Chaya: For most cars, you can change the lightbulbs yourself if you don't have LED lights and if you don't have to take your whole bumper off to get to the light. Most cars you can do your air filter yourself; it's actually super-duper easy. I think my video on how to replace your air filter got like 1.5 million views with people being like, I cannot believe I was being charged this much! Well, let me say, first of all, they should be charging you that much because it's their job. However, you could do it yourself should you choose to and save that money. That doesn't mean they were overcharging you, that means you should do it yourself if you want.

Shohreh: Right.

Chaya: So this is why the automotive industry loves me 'cause I'm not here to bash repair shops, and I'm not here to tell you that you should go and try to skimp every penny on car repair. In fact, the opposite. Most people are not doing nearly enough maintenance that they should be

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doing, which will help prevent those expensive repairs that people end up complaining about.

Shohreh: Yeah. Well and like you said earlier, you know, you're not telling people oh, do your own car repairs. It's just that there's a few things that you can do, might as well do them on your own, knowing that for everything else, you are gonna want to take it into a shop and like have a professional look at it.

Chaya: And you're not going into a repair shop to get your tire pressure checked every month, okay? And you're not going into your repair shop to get your washer fluid filled up every six months. These are things that you should be able to do on your own.

Shohreh: For sure. Alright, well, I love this, I love all of the car, automotive education that's happening even just in this episode. Before we end, I do want to talk about your wedding briefly because it is just delightful and I'm definitely gonna put the blog into the show notes so everyone can go see the photos and read about it. But tell me about that experience.

Chaya: [Laughs lightly] The pandemic wedding of the year. The wedding was good. It was a lot. Okay, [Shohreh laughs lightly] so my wife and I got engaged in August of 2019 and we sort of hadn't quite figured out what we were doing because we had very different ideas of what we wanted. We had one thing straight: we wanted to go to Europe for our honeymoon.

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And then the pandemic started and we started being like, oh, maybe we should get married right now. We don't know what's going to happen, the health, the hospitals, all these things, we're queer, etcetera. I tried to get a marriage license and my county was not issuing them [light laughter]. My county was not issuing the marriage license. I went so far as to call the next county, which is very conservative, that still had all their stuff open and find out if I could get a marriage license from them. And they went to the state to find out if they could issue a marriage license for us and they couldn't.

The whole thing was really silly [Shohreh laughs lightly], but anyhow, almost immediately after that I got laid off, and my wife got laid off, and all the things happened, and the wedding sort of became less of a priority, but still something we were thinking of. And I knew for sure that we were not going to have one of these massive weddings that were going to turn into like the biggest pandemic spreading story. So that was like not on the list. So the question was, what were we gonna do? Were we going to wait until it was over? Were we just gonna elope? And there was that lull in the summer, and we said, you know what? We're going to get married [laughs lightly]. We're going to get married in four-and-a-half weeks.

Shohreh: [Laughs] Ambitious.

Chaya: We planned the whole wedding, from A to Z, in four-and-a-half weeks. We got married in the backyard of an Airbnb in Indianapolis. I collaborated with the entire team, with the entire "creative team." The officiant, the photographer, the makeup artist—everything was a

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collaboration. There were no guests, it was just us. And we decided to livestream the wedding.

We hadn't quite worked out the details before I posted it and said, hey, you know, if anybody is looking for something nice to do, a nice change of pace, you could, like, attend our virtual wedding. And then I had 10,000 people coming to the wedding, and then the New York Times wanted to send their photographer to the wedding, and the journalist was going to be watching, and all these publications started reaching out and featuring our wedding.

So I ended up hiring a team to livestream the wedding because whatever my idea of how I was going to livestream it just went completely out the window.

Shohreh: Oh my gosh.

Chaya: The wedding turned out amazing. It turned out absolutely incredible. It was like a dream. And, you know what? At the end of the day, I said in my vows, this wedding is like the perfect compromise between the two of us because we got the big public wedding and we got the tiny private wedding all in one little thing. And it went really well and I wouldn't do it any other way.

Like by the time the ceremony and the cake and everything was done, we just like plopped down on the couch in these enormous dresses like totally exhausted. I was like, can you imagine now we would have to have a reception and go talk to people [Shohreh laughs lightly] and

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drag around these huge dresses while talking to 50 or 100 people? No. It ended up being well.

Shohreh: It was so beautiful. I loved seeing all the different articles that came out about it afterwards. And I just was sending some of your stuff to someone the other day who was like oh yeah, I have a plus-size client and she doesn't know what to do about wedding dresses and she wants to see examples of like plus-size people in wedding dresses. And I was like, I've got you! Let me send you Chaya's thing about her wedding. Let me send you Chaya's thing where you had the whole different plus-size dresses that you did that blog article.

Chaya: My bridal look book! I hope to update it. So if you are a plus-sized wedding designer or plus-sized wedding dress company, reach out to me because my goal is to update it and add more styles. Because it's not really being able to buy that exact dress, it's being able to see different styles on different types of bodies that are ultimately going to help you make some decisions when it comes to dresses. And I mean, if you look at my work, it's all about accessibility, not just accessibility to automotive education, but accessibility to bright, colorful, fun fashion; accessibility to bridal that's going to fit your body, be able to see it on the body.

And that's sort of the perfect segue to my project or my study that I'm working on, which is creating accessibility cars for larger bodies.

Shohreh: Yes, please tell us about the study, because [sing-song voice] y'all are going to get to participate potentially.

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Chaya: So, almost a year ago, after I got laid off, I was looking for things to do [light laughter]. I was like, I'm going to take my little business full-time. We're going to make it happen. And you know, in that first month, there wasn't enough full-time things to do [Shohreh laughs lightly]. It was a lot of just like scrolling through Facebook and finding, what's this new interesting thing I can add? And I kept seeing people talking about cars and whether the cars were going to fit them. And I had known this was a problem; I mean, it was a problem for me, but it never really clicked, the magnitude of it.

So I said, I can do this. I will write a blog post on the top ten cars for bigger bodies. So I made a survey on Google Forms and I sent it out and 237 people followed up. And I was like, oh my god, that's a lot of people. That's a lot of people! Wow. And then I realized that a lot more work had to go into this. This was not just going to be one blog post. Like this had to be like a whole directory and a whole project in order for it to encompass the magnitude that it had to be in order to make the biggest impact.

And the other thing I realized as a queer person and as a journalist, I tend to ask open-ended questions and let people share about themselves, which is exactly what this survey did. But when you go to analyze the data, that is incredibly impractical, okay?

Shohreh: Yeah.

Chaya: So I had to take that survey and work with people who are experts in data collection and statisticians and whatever to create a data-driven

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study on cars for bigger bodies. So if you own a car that's made in the last ten years, you own or regularly drive, and you are above the size of "women's 24" or "men's 46," then you should take this study and participate in it. My goal is to have a minimum of 5,000 people complete it, and as of this recording, we are halfway there.

Shohreh: Yay!

Chaya: Which is incredible, absolutely amazing. But the goal is the more data I have, the more precise the information is gonna be. And I am creating a database on the site, which is not live yet, carsforbiggerbodies.com, and I'm hoping to have it live by like late summer. But like everything with this project, we're going to see, because this is just a lot of work. And I have sunk so much time and so much money and so much energy into this. I am so excited that the plus-sized community and the community at large has really embraced the idea of this project.

This has never been done before. If you go and you search Google for "cars for bigger bodies," you're not going to find very good resources. First of all, you're going to find cars for tall people, and then you're going to find a few cars for obese people. So they're going to use humiliating language and they're not up to date. And they're not using information based on actual plus-sized people; they're just using information they thought—seat width or vehicle width—that doesn't actually tell you, is the steering wheel going to touch your belly? Is your seatbelt going to fit? How are the wings on the seat? How are all of these different components that work into fit going to work?

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So that's my little project. If you haven't taken the survey and you fit within the demographic, please do it, and if you don't fit within the demographic, your job is to share this. Share the crap out of it. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, wherever you can put it, share it. The more people that take it, the better the data is going to be, ultimately.

Shohreh:

Awesome. Such an important project. I will link all of that in the show notes. When I talk about the episode, I'm definitely gonna talk about this so I can make sure that more people are filling that out. And I also just want to point out for thin folks who are listening, like just think about the fact that you've never had to think about this before, of whether a car would fit you. That if you were getting married, you've never had to think about like oh, will I be able to see images of people who look like me in a dress? And this is something that plus-sized folks deal with every single day, of not knowing if something is gonna be accessible for them. So I just want to throw that out there for those that have thin privilege, and just remember like it's different, and our society has built itself around your body.

Chaya:

And having a wedding in four-and-a-half weeks, we only had one store to go to to find wedding dresses. Just one store! Because we could not order it online because we wouldn't have enough time. And my wife needed to have the dress made shorter because she is significantly shorter than me, which meant we couldn't simply order online. And squarely in the middle of the plus-sized spectrum, and I wore the largest sized dress available from David's Bridal and the dress was a little small. Anybody who is just the slightest bit larger than me will not

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be able to find a dress by simply walking into a store and finding something that fits them. Even plus-sized retailers that sell wedding dresses, like Torrid, that have physical locations, do not sell their wedding dresses in-store.

Shohreh: I mean, wedding dress shopping in general I feel like is such a to-do, and then yeah, adding the fact that if you don't fit in straight sizes, like your options are severely limited and finding them is difficult. And if you're above a certain size, you're probably just gonna have to order custom from abroad because there is nothing. I mean, it's something that really needs to change and I'm glad that that's something that you are shining a light on with your blog post and your work around this as well, that it's not easy to find.

Chaya: Yeah, I agree.

Shohreh: Awesome! Well, thank you so much, Chaya. I'm so glad that you came on, we got to talk about all these different things. For those who are listening, how can they best find you and support your work?

Chaya: So I'm almost on all social media on the world wide web. I'm under @MechanicShopFemme. The exception to which is Twitter, because they do not allow that many characters in their username, we should start a petition of course [light laughter]. So I'm just @MechanicFemme on Twitter. So yeah, come follow me and learn. I mean, maybe you'll learn something new, maybe you won't.

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Shohreh: I bet people will learn a lot of new things. I bet people have learned new things just from listening to this show. And you do have a Patreon as well, is that right?

Chaya: I do have a Patreon. My Patreon is sliding scale and it doesn't provide you with any additional benefits, aside from what you're going to find on my general social media and my website. But yeah, Patreon is also Mechanic Shop Femme. And any funds that go into that Patreon are going to help support these projects that I do, like my look books and my database that are extremely time and money intensive and that aren't really monetized at this point.

Shohreh: Right, so it's just a nice way to support all the free things that you are putting out there, which as a fellow content creator, takes a lot of time and a lot of work, so I'm glad that people have a way to do that.

Chaya: Thank you so much for having me, and for everybody listening, thank you for keepin' an open mind and being willin' to learn something.

Shohreh: Yes, thank you.

[Music plays]

And that's our show for today. If you're enjoying Conjuring Up Courage, don't forget to subscribe through your podcast provider of choice so you never miss an episode. Additionally, if you haven't left a rating and review in the Apple Podcasts app yet, you can do so from any Apple device to help more people find and benefit from the show. I also love hearing from listeners, so feel free to take a screenshot from

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[Music fades]