



# A Journey through Hollywood and Womanhood

## Robin Givens bares her soul and finds her purpose

Words by Allison Kugeliv • Photo Credit: Courtesy of OWN/Richard Ducree, Courtesy of OWN/Guy D'Alema, Courtesy of OWN/Peggy Sirota

Actress Robin Givens has played many roles in her life; retiring wallflower not being among them. She burst onto the scene as the beautiful and brainy Darlene on *Head of the Class*, a sitcom that aired on ABC from 1986 to 1991. Those same years brought a media explosion as good girl Givens fell in love with, married, and then divorced, boxing's former world heavyweight champion, Mike Tyson. The tumultuous pairing was brief and quickly devolved into a he said, she said of accusations about abuse and domestic violence, allegations which Mike himself later publicly conceded to.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Robin picked up the pieces with a string of film roles, including *A Rage in Harlem* with the late Gregory Hines, *Forest Whitaker* and *Danny Glover*; *Boomerang* opposite Halle Berry and Robin's former flame-turned-colleague, Eddie Murphy; *Blankman* opposite Damon Wayans; and *Head of State* with Chris Rock. Steady work came her way, while sealing her reputation as the beautiful but dangerous femme fatale. The line between Robin's public image and her film work continued to blur. During this time period, she became a mom to two boys and retreated from the spotlight, save for the release of her 2007 memoir, *Grace Will Lead Me*

*Home*, in which she opened up about the issue of domestic violence, which she admits in the book had plagued her family for generations.

This was the birth of Robin Givens, women's advocate and outspoken crusader against domestic violence. Her speaking engagements culminated with one of her numerous appearances on the *Oprah* show in which she outlined her intimate journey with the issue. It is important to note that, according to The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) more than 10 million women and men (at a rate of 20 people per minute) in the U.S. are subjected to domestic violence, making this an issue that does transcend gender (though women are more likely to sustain substantial physical injury at the hands of an intimate partner, at a rate of 1 in 7 women to 1 in 25 men) as well as socio-economic status.

In the 2010s, Robin refocused on acting with roles on long-running daytime soap, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, YouTube Red series, *Step Up: High Water* (based on the film franchise), the CW's *Riverdale* and ABC's *The Fix*. On June 18th, Robin will shine as female lead, Stephanie Carlisle, in OWN's newest drama series, *Ambitions*.



Throughout our conversation, Robin held nothing back and no question was off the table as she offered thoughtful, sometimes emotionally charged, humorous, and reflective insights on her journey through womanhood and Hollywood.

**You took years away from the spotlight to focus on being a mom to your two sons. Now you're back with two television shows, the CW's *Riverdale* and the new OWN series, *Ambitions*. I remember speaking with Elisabeth Shue years ago and she said she went away to just be a mom to her three kids, and when she came back, she felt like the parade passed her by. How did you come back with the thunder?**

**Robin Givens:** I don't know Elisabeth and I don't know her story so well, but for me, it wasn't only taking a break to raise my kids. It was also a break for myself. It's true that you feel like you are going to maintain your place in line; like everything is going to stop and wait for you. I had to realize that it's a process again. You have to enjoy the process and begin again, and I really fell in love with acting again. When I first started acting, it wasn't really like that. Now, I can go in a room and act and do my thing and enjoy the process for what it is. Water seeks its own level. If you're good, you're good, and it all kind of begins again.

**Your new show, *Ambitions* is premiering June 18th on the OWN Network. It seems like *Oprah* has always championed your career. Even when the chips were down, she was a champion for your career. You worked with her as an actress, and you were also on the *Oprah* show quite a bit over the years.**

**RG:** I feel like at one point we were just friends. We did do [the mini-series] *The Women of Brewster Place* [1989] together, which was a huge role for me. She and I developed a genuine friendship, just as women. I don't think it had anything to do with my career, per se. I do think that there is something to it coming full circle and being here with her now, doing this show on her network.

**Do these vixen roles find you or do you seek them out? How do you always wind up playing *that* women? I don't know how else to put it (laughs).**

**RG:** [Laughs] You're right. There was a time when I was having these roles come to me and I remember saying to my agent, "I don't want to do *that* women. I just did *that* woman." I ended up turning something down because of it. I'm nothing like these women that I play, which is unusual and interesting for me. I always jokingly say, "I want to grow up and be them." Where I am now in my life, emotionally, it's like, "Okay, you want me to do that? Then I'm going to do it to death," and then wait for the opportunity where I can do something completely different.

**Before I do an interview, I'll ask people if they have any burning questions for the person I'm about to interview, and sometimes I'll take people's questions into consideration. I found out that a lot of men out there think you *are* that woman. Do you know that?**

**RG:** I think women think that too; I don't think it's only men. Whenever I'm in hair and makeup, they're always like, "My God, you are nothing like that person!" Me, Robin, I have a whole different rhythm.

**Your energy is completely different from your media image. But your name is still synonymous with Mike Tyson, the divorce heard 'round the world and those infamous interviews.**

**RG:** I have a better understanding of it now than I would have if you talked to me about it fifteen years ago or even ten years ago. As a grown up, I just understand it better. I also didn't give people anything else to talk about for a while, and so my image got stuck there. I ran into Jay-Z at a party years ago, when I was doing *Chicago* on Broadway, and even he was fixated on it, because it was just so big.

**People love to talk about your past relationships, not just with Mike Tyson, but with Brad Pitt and Eddie Murphy. Do you play on that image for a role like your character, Stephanie Carlisle, on *Ambitions*?**

**RG:** You're making my life sound way more exciting than it is, but no, I don't. I know we are in this world where we want things to be tantalizing, but I am a big believer in truths. The one thing I agree with when it comes to our current state of politics is that there has been plenty of fake news. I feel like I was the original fake news. I would be a crazy person if, given what I went through in my past, I didn't believe in the truth. I would never approach working on a character with any sense of that... *thing*, or that time period that wasn't even true. I lived through a time of absolute bullshit at a very young age. I now have a son who is 25, who I see as a baby. I was younger than that when all that craziness was happening. Certainly, I hope it made me the person that I am, but I don't think I would have been able to say that before.

**And you probably didn't have the tools at that time to get the facts out there the way you wanted to.**

**RG:** I was speaking with Wendy Williams recently and she said to me, "Thank God social media wasn't going on at that time in your life." And I said, "You know, actually, it would have been easier." Now, you can literally get on Twitter and say "Hey, that's not true!"

**I was a bit taken aback when in speaking with some people before our interview, the general consensus was, "She did Mike Tyson dirty years ago."**

**RG:** The only thing I did dirty was that I said, "I don't want to be in a relationship where you tell me you are going to kill me." I didn't take one cent from my ex-husband. I left my panties there; I left my favorite teddy bear there. I left everything I had in that house. The rest is fake news. I said, "I want out of this relationship because I think you are going to do what you said, which is kill me." When I see what happened to Nicole [Brown] Simpson and other women that I talk to, that is a very real thing. I am here, walking, living, and breathing.

**And it was thirty years ago, people. You've had so much going on since then. You have your two boys, a thriving acting career, your advocacy work for women. I'm proud of you.**

**RG:** Thank you. It is a really interesting conversation to have, because my ex-husband used to say to me, "I'm a hero to the guys. Women love me and guys love me. I'm a star to the stars." It's hard to go up against all of that. I left with my life, and I left





so sorry that I put my family in such a horrific situation. The reality is, the guy I lived with was the same guy that bit up [Evander] Holyfield's ear in the ring. That's the guy I was dealing with on a daily basis; the same guy that went to jail for rape [Robin is speaking of Tyson's 1992 rape conviction]. I was dealing with that guy the best way I could at 22 years old.

**I interviewed Mike, about seven years ago, and I liked him during our interview. Of course, it was so many years later. I don't want to take away from his ability to change and grow as a person. But what you experienced is valid and real, and your feelings about it are valid and very real. Your voice also continues to be valuable regarding domestic violence.**

**RG:** I've done a lot of work with women, and it's not only happening with celebrities, obviously. It's the guy at the golf club in Connecticut that everybody loves. It's the mayor of a small town who's sweet and charming in public. I don't want to make this [issue] all about me. With everything that is going on with the #MeToo movement, we're kind of forcing a lot of men to get that certain things are unacceptable. Certain things now, thirty years later, must be unacceptable. We have to do better now.

**You began speaking up about violence against women years before the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements took root.**

**RG:** I didn't plan on speaking on behalf of women, but it really did become a part of my healing. My ex-husband had been on *Oprah*

and he had talked about hitting me in a cavalier way, like, "Oh, yeah, I hit her," and everybody [in the audience] laughed. I was somewhere doing a speaking engagement, and someone said to me, "Robin, you can't take this!" I realized it was far bigger than me and I was told I had to do something, if not for me, then for all other women. One of the things I always say is, "My story is *your* story, and your story is *my* story."

**That was when you had that sit-down with Oprah to air your grievances about Mike Tyson's appearance on her show...**

**RG:** I sat down with Oprah to discuss her interview with my ex-husband, which was the last thing I wanted to do. She apologized to me. After the show, she came into my dressing room and she said, "Robin, as it was happening, I knew it was wrong, but I didn't know what to do." I think that sums up a lot. Not to put the weight of the world on Oprah. Certainly, she is an amazing, amazing woman. But if Oprah Winfrey doesn't know what to do in these situations, the discomfort of it, then a lot of us don't know how to respond to that. It's much easier to put people in a box and say, "She must have wanted his money," than to believe that somebody could punch a 105-pound woman. We saw it happen with [ex-NFL player] Ray Rice. Now you can't pretend it away or give an excuse for it. Now, we have a responsibility to not let certain things slide. We're better than that and we've come too far.

**What are the biggest misconceptions about you and famous men, in general?**





**RG:** I met Eddie Murphy when I was in my sophomore year at Sarah Lawrence College. He had just gotten *Saturday Night Live*. He wasn't the "Eddie Murphy" that the world now knows, at that time. He was an actor that was happy to get a job. It was the same thing with Brad Pitt. When I dated Brad, Brad couldn't get a job. I was paying for all our meals and he was a struggling actor. We talked a lot about acting because we were in acting class together, and we loved acting together. When we dated, he literally couldn't pay for dinner. At the time, I had already gotten the role on *Head of the Class*. It was a different dynamic, where I was the big deal. You know what I mean? I lived it all at a young age, thank God, and I get to have a good perspective on reality and how it can be changed.

**There was a pivotal moment in your life, when I believe you were studying at Harvard with the intention to become a doctor, before you decided to pivot and pursue acting. In retrospect, was this the right path?**

**RG:** I was at Harvard Graduate School and I knew I was going to be a doctor, or so I thought at the time. By the time I got to Harvard, I was really wanting to pursue acting. If you asked me ten years ago, I would have said I should have become a doctor. As a mom, I just came from visiting my son and saying to him, "Get a law degree! Get a law degree!" My mom was raised in the south at a time when, as a woman, she couldn't go in the front door of a movie theater. She could buy clothes at Woolworth, but she couldn't try them on, and she couldn't sit at the counter and eat. I think I grew up with the sense of, what she believed, which is that education is a great

equalizing factor in America. I have a parent who, literally, just stopped leaving me medical school applications any time she'd come to visit. Up until recently, I knew there was an application to some medical school lurking somewhere in the house [laughs].

**Do you pray? If so, who or what do you pray to?**

**RG:** I have a great relationship with God. For me, that has been a very important relationship. He's the only father I've ever known. I would often sit down with God and say, "I don't want to have to go through this." But it's all gotten me to where I am, both as a person and as a mom with these two kids. I grew up Catholic with a sense of the ritual of Catholicism. Certainly, I have some questions about all of that now, and some misgivings. But it is something I still do [observe]. And I always say that my ex-husband [Mike Tyson] taught me, and gave me, a true relationship with God.

**What do you think you are here on this earth as Robin Givens to learn, and what do you think you are here to teach?**

**RG:** I'm the first of two children and I have a type-A personality. I always say I'm a recovering perfectionist. That's something I've had to learn, and there is a kind of humor in the quest for perfection. It's not very interesting, and you can never really achieve it. That's something that life has taught me. The difficulty that I have gone through has really taught me a sense of compassion. Most people in my life know that I am a compassionate, loving person. I've also had learn to relax a little bit, because my brain does start overworking.



### And what are you here to teach?

**RG:** I would say the same thing: sharing a sense of compassion. Life is short and time truly is our greatest commodity. It's the one thing you never get back. I lost a sister, unexpectedly, almost five years ago and I would do anything to have more of those moments. I try to tell my children that there is not that much to get here [on earth]. You want to have enough time to spend with the people you love. You want to have dinner with the people you love. If you feel like going to Paris, you want to go to Paris with people you love. It's all about the moments, and not the car you drive. Happiness and joy lie in simplicity, so try to keep it simple.

### I agree! Let's dive into your character, Stephanie Carlisle, on *Ambitions*.

**RG:** She doesn't use any of the things I just talked about [laughs]. What interests me about my job is the challenge to bring a character like Stephanie Carlisle to life. To get the role of Stephanie, I borrowed a dress from *The Fix* for the audition. Once I read the script, I felt I could do this role

better than anyone. I just needed to carry that energy into the room with me and believe it. Once I started to dissect her, I knew that I wanted her to be more than what was on the page. I wanted to give her shades and dimensions, a heart, and make her real. She was written as an ice queen, but there is more to her. My interpretation is that she is a woman that has her own set of rules. She also has this sensibility that she is never going to live up to her father, and that's where her wanting comes from.

### Why should audiences tune in to watch w?

**RG:** I could describe it as a guilty pleasure, but someone once said, "There is no guilt in pleasure." It's going to be that kind of fun show where women gather around to watch with some wine and popcorn. Their husbands or boyfriends will walk by and probably join them. I think men will love it as much as women. **ML**

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*Ambitions premieres on Tuesday, June 18 at 10/9c on OWN. Follow Robin on Twitter: @TheRocknRobn and Instagram: @RobinGivens*

