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Up Close with Elle Bailey, Author Extraordinaire

by TJ Hudgins

TJH: Hello, Elle, how are you?
Elle: Fine, thanks. And you?
TJH: I'm doing all right. Glad you asked. It's nice to meet you.
Elle: And you too.
TJH: (We sit.) Before I put you in the hot seat, I'd like to thank you for agreeing to do this interview.
Elle: Oh, thank you for interviewing me. This is my first one for the book, so forgive me if I seem a little nervous or if it takes me a minute to form my responses.
TJH: Don't worry about it. You'll do fine.
Elle: Thanks.
(She tries to smile through the nervousness.)
TJH: OK, let's get started.
(She takes a deep breath.)
Elle: OK.
TJH: While reviewing my notes, I noticed that you seem to have a non-traditional background for a writer, is that a fair assessment?
Elle: Yes, that's fair.
TJH: Tell me a little bit about it.
(She smiles, relieved to have an easy lead-off question.)
Elle: After graduating from college, I worked as a corporate accountant and later as a management consultant.
TJH: I see. Well that seems like pretty steady work. Why did you make the transition from a corporate career to a career in the arts?
Elle: To be quite honest, I needed a safety net.
TJH: (I nod as she explains.)
Elle: In corporate America, the idea of job security is a thing of the past. So for the sake of my own sanity, I needed to develop a means for earning supplemental income in case I ever wound up in an unemployment line courtesy of my day job.
TJH: I see, so you made the transition for economic reasons.
Elle: In a manner of speaking, yes. I made the transition because I wanted greater earning potential, more stability, more security and more control over my situation than I could have as an employee with an organization. But that's not the only reason I made the career change.
TJH: Oh?
Elle: I also needed an escape.
TJH: An escape from?
Elle: The daily grind. The routine. The hectic pace and grueling schedule. My job was demanding. I worked on teams that put in long days and even longer nights. I don't mean to sound as though I'm complaining. That's certainly not my intent because the job afforded me some wonderful opportunities and a great standard of living. But my quality of life was terrible, that's the point that I'm trying to make. I had no balance between my personal and professional lives. It was all

work and no play. And that type of existence wasn't satisfying for me. I wasn't happy. I'd reached a point where I felt trapped like a caged bird and I needed an outlet. I needed an escape.

TJH: So is that when you discovered your love for writing?

Elle: I don't know that I have a love for writing as much as I seem to have a talent for writing. But I discovered my talent based on the comments and reactions of friends and colleagues who read articles, memos, e-mails, essays or other pieces that I'd written for one reason or another.

TJH: I see. How long have you been writing?

Elle: I started writing, or trying to make a career of it anyway, in 1996. September of '96.

TJH: How did you get your start? Did you take a creative writing course or something similar?

Elle: No. Actually, I've never taken any writing courses other than the English courses that were part of my core curriculum in school.

TJH: So yours is raw talent.

Elle: Yep. (She nods.) I'm a diamond in the rough.

TJH: That's interesting. (I scan my list of questions.) Which writers or works have inspired you? (She squirms in her chair and smiles curiously.)

Elle: Uh oh, here it comes. The jig is up. (After a brief hesitation, she asks...) Do you want me to be brutally honest?

TJH: I wouldn't have it any other way.

Elle: OK, here's the deal. (She almost laughs as she starts to confess.) I feel like something of a fraud here, like I'm masquerading as an author, because I never had any ambition to write. (Like Johnny Carson on the cover of People magazine after a divorce, she holds up her hands as if to say 'I don't know how this happened.')

Elle: Becoming an author was never a goal or dream of mine. I never had an inclination to write. So I have reservations about holding myself out as an author or writer because I didn't spend my lifetime developing the craft as many others do or have done. I know this may sound criminal, but I haven't studied works by some of the most celebrated female authors of our time, Zora, Maya, Toni and Alice. And because I haven't studied the masters or anyone else for that matter, it's hard for me to say with sincerity which writers have "inspired" me.

TJH: I see.

Elle: However, I will say that I am a fan of both Terry McMillan and Michelle McKinney Hammond.

TJH: (I nod while considering the styles of both scribes...) I can see similarities between your style and theirs.

Elle: (Genuinely surprised, she asks...) How so?

TJH: Well, as with Terry's novels, I see the strong female protagonist juggling life and love set against the backdrop of an urban landscape. And like Michelle's work, yours has a spiritual bent. I mean, I definitely felt a hallelujah vibe as I read it. (She smiles.)

Elle: I hadn't really thought about it. But you're right. I guess they are two of my major literary influences. (Relieved, she adds...) Good, now I know how to answer that question if anyone ever asks.

TJH: You see, I told you you'd do just fine.

(She smiles again and takes a sip of water as I consider my next question.)

TJH: OK, let's switch gears and talk more about the book.

Elle: Fine with me.

TJH: I enjoyed reading *Living Well*. I found it to be engrossing, captivating even. I was swept up into the drama of the characters' lives from the first page to the last.

Elle: Thank you.

(The sparkle in her eyes is very telling. She appreciates the compliment.)

TJH: I must admit that your writing style is definitely unique. For someone who is unfamiliar with your work, how would you describe it?

Elle: Let's see....I guess I'd have to say that it's a unique blend of reality, wit and wisdom with a spiritual twist.

TJH: In the press kit, I think I saw it described as *Soul Food* meets *Waiting to Exhale* meets *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*.
(She smirks...)

Elle: PR Reps, you've gotta love 'em.

TJH: We don't look good unless we make you look good.

Elle: I suppose. But that comparison is really quite a compliment considering the success of all of those projects. Hopefully, readers will appreciate my book just the same.

TJH: I'm sure they will. At least, I know I did.

Elle: Thank you. That's very kind.

TJH: Don't mention it. The two authors that you've mentioned have very different styles—with Terry being an edgy, pop-fiction writer and Michelle being a much softer, Christian writer. They create vastly different genres of literature. Yet you seem to have married the two and quite successfully I might add. Was that a difficult task?
(She unloads a ton of bricks.)

Elle: To say that it was difficult would be a huge understatement! Oh my goodness, I struggled desperately with marrying the two styles especially while writing some of the stronger language and compromising situations.

TJH: How did you manage to get through it?

Elle: I was writing, or re-writing actually, chapter 4 and I was wrestling with the language to the point that I almost stopped writing completely. I was on hiatus for almost 8 weeks which is an incredible length of time for me to be idle. And I finally decided to go for it, to write it no holds barred, and once the manuscript was finished I'd let a few trusted friends review it. If they agreed that the language or situations were too strong or took away from the theme of the book, then I would tone it down considerably because I did not want anything to detract from the message or theme of the book.

TJH: And how did that work out for you? Is the version that made it to the printer very different from the original draft of your manuscript?

Elle: Not much. My friends were OK with it. But I made a few minor adjustments. (She adds.) That's par for the course with me. I'm probably my toughest critic. I'm rarely satisfied with my work.

TJH: (The first clue that I'm dealing with a perfectionist. I let it pass and press on to my next question.)
Living Well is your first published novel, correct?

Elle: That's correct.

TJH: I think it's quite an accomplishment especially for someone who admits to having no ambition of becoming a writer.

Elle: Thank you.

TJH: What was the inspiration for the book?
(She shifts in her chair. She seems to be getting more comfortable, becoming more at ease with me and the interview process.)

Elle: The book was inspired by actual events in the life of a friend.

TJH: You had a friend whose marriage mirrored that of Charlene and Pierre?

Elle: Yes.

TJH: So, how did the book evolve?

Elle: (She pauses.) Let me think, how did the book evolve? How did the book evolve?

(Her head tilts back. Her eyes go up and to the left. The wheels start churning. She's trying for total recall.)

Elle: Goodness, it all happened so long ago. It's kinda hard to remember how this whole thing got started.

(A few more moments pass and her head is level again.)

Elle: OK, it's all coming back to me now.

(She's sorting through and organizing her thoughts. Finally, she's ready to speak.)

Elle: You know, now that I think about it, the book evolved from a seemingly random incident. But in hindsight, I suppose it was part of a bigger plan.

TJH: Do tell. (I'm intrigued.)

Elle: A girlfriend, the one on whom the character Charlene is based, she was in town on business and we decided to meet after work one night for dinner and a movie. It was September of '96 and we went to see *The First Wives Club*.

TJH: (I nod at the recollection of the film.)

Elle: Early in the movie, Stockard Channing's character committed suicide. And during that scene, "Charlene" made a comment and I don't recall exactly what she said, but she made a comment which made me think that she might try to commit suicide or otherwise hurt herself in order to reach out to her husband. And very flippantly I replied, "Girlfriend, please. Don't even think about it 'cause that nut you're married to would stop you long enough to ask if your life insurance is paid up. And if you said, 'yes', he'd move out of your way and let you do it."

TJH: Ouch!

Elle: Yeah. Admittedly, it was not one of my more diplomatic moments. It was purely a knee-jerk reaction. But fortunately, we had a good relationship where we could talk to each other like that without causing irreparable damage.

TJH: Kinda like sister-friends.

Elle: Exactly. So anyway, we watched the rest of the movie and later that evening when I got home, I started thinking about some of the things that we'd laughed and talked about over the course of the evening. And for some reason, I was taken back to that suicide scene and I remembered the look on her face while she was watching that scene. And I thought to myself, if she tries to hurt herself in an effort to reach out to this man and if I don't do anything to try to stop her, I'll be upset with myself. So I started thinking about what I could do to try to reach out to her. Bear in mind, "Charlene", our mutual friends and I had long since *talked* about her troubled relationship. There was nothing left that any of us could say. We'd talked until we were blue in the face. So, we were beyond the point of talking about the situation. I knew I couldn't talk to her. I had to figure out another means of reaching out to her.

TJH: (I nod in agreement.)

Elle: For whatever reason, I thought about writing. Actually, I take that back. I thought about writing because people had told me that I was a wordsmith, that I had a way with words and a talent for writing. That's why I decided to write. So initially, I thought that I'd write a letter to "Charlene" explaining "a friend's" marital situation and I'd ask her for advice (as a married woman) to pass along to my other married friend. My thinking was that the advice she gave me, assuming it was good advice, I would give it right back to her in a "practice what you preach" sort of way.

TJH: I feel you.

Elle: But as I started to write the letter, the floodgates of my memory opened and before I knew it, I had written five full pages and I hadn't even scratched the surface of their issues. At that point, I realized that I had too much information for a letter. So then I thought that I could potentially write it in the form of a short story. And then, being the dreamer that I am, I just got the idea to take it a step further and try to turn it into a novel.

TJH: Just like that, you decided to write a novel.

Elle: Just like that.

TJH: And this all happened in one night?

Elle: In one very long night. (She admits...) That's how I am. When I get an idea, I run with it. Even if it means enduring a sleepless night, I stay up and work until I get all of my thoughts down on paper.

TJH: So you're driven.

Elle: Almost to a fault. (She says regretfully.) Anyway, I went back and forth with myself trying to decide whether or not I actually could write a novel. And when I considered the most basic elements of a novel—words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters—I knew that *in theory* I had the ability to do it. So at the very least, I had to *try* to do it. (She explains...) Given my personality, I can accept trying and not succeeding. But I can't accept *not trying*. So once I made up my mind that I could do it, the stage was set. I was going to write a novel. All that was left was for me to dust off the (brain) cells where the rules of grammar and composition were stored and I was on my way.

TJH: You make it sound so simple. I have to ask, was it hard getting started?

Elle: It was and it wasn't. At that point in my life, I'm sure the lengthiest piece I'd ever written was a term paper. So that was my point of reference. I tried to remember the rules for writing term papers, compositions or anything of considerable length. Now, admittedly, I broke most of those rules in the book.

TJH: Call it creative license.

Elle: That's just what I intend to do. (She says with a wink and a smile.) Anyway, my teachers had always taught me to start with an outline, so that's what I did. I drafted an outline for the story. Before I ever typed one word or chapter, I knew how the story would start and end. I had a vision for the entire work. And with the outline in place, it became the roadmap that I used to connect the dots from Point A to Point B.

TJH: So how did "Charlene" figure into the process?

Elle: I roughed out the outline and synopsis for the book and the next day—

TJH: Wait a minute, you mean all of this happened over night?

Elle: Yes. It all happened over the course of one very long night. (She shakes her head.) I'm sure I didn't sleep much that night despite having to go to work the next day. But that happens from time to time. I'm a workaholic. I'm trying to recover from it, but I'm not there yet.

TJH: I see.

Elle: Anyway, the next day, I sent the drafts to "Charlene". She called me and said, "Girl, we're going to have a New York Times bestseller on our hands." And that was all she wrote.

TJH: So she was on board?

Elle: Absolutely.

TJH: That's how the concept for the book evolved. Now let's talk about the actual writing process. How difficult was it to actually write the book?

Elle: I have to admit that the first chapter was the most difficult chapter to write.

TJH: How so?

Elle: Well. (Again, she shifts in her seat.) Writing is a discipline. It requires discipline. And it took me a while to adjust to writing with the discipline required to paint a picture with words. But once I finished the first chapter, my confidence was up and I found my groove. So the other chapters came together more easily. In fact, at some point, I don't recall when, but at some point the characters actually came to life for me. They started to speak to me—meaning their personalities and traits were developed to the point that I could envision them as real characters in some sort of dramatic production. Once I reached that point, I started having fun. Once I reached that point, I started to really understand and enjoy the creative process.

TJH: That's a great segue to my next question. It's about the characters. Talk to me about the characters. You've said that the character "Charlene" and by default "Pierre", those characters are based on a couple that you know. How much of the book is based on their experience and how much of it is a product of your imagination?

Elle: That's a good question. I guess I'd have to say that chapter 2 is based on their experience. As difficult as it may be to believe, there is very little of my imagination at work in chapter 2. About 90% of that chapter is based on information which she'd shared with other co-workers and me when we worked together.

TJH: And you were able to recall all of that information shared during casual conversations?

Elle: Pretty much. I didn't intentionally commit those things to memory. But somehow, when the idea for the book came, all of those memories just flooded my mind.

TJH: That's amazing. You must have a steel-trap mind.

Elle: So I've been told.

TJH: So that's it. Chapter 2 was based on "Charlene's" experience and the rest was a product of your imagination.

Elle: For the most part, yes.

TJH: That's incredible. OK, we've talked a little bit about Charlene and Pierre. Let's talk about a few of the other characters that are central to the story. For instance, Lauryn. I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that she represents you.

Elle: That's a good guess. Lauryn is the character whose life pretty much parallels my own. But there are elements of my personality or personal experiences in almost all of the main characters.

TJH: Such as?

Elle: Such as Pierre's ambition and Charlene's love for travel. There's also the girls' penchant for shopping, fine dining and overall living well. Then there's Jezebel's career as a sports writer. The idea for that came about because I'm a big sports fan. So I decided to weave those aspects of my life into the story.

TJH: You did a good job, I might add.

Elle: Thank you.

TJH: One character that you didn't mention is one of my personal favorites.

Elle: Which one would that be?

TJH: Derek.

Elle: (She smiles.) Ahhh, Mr. Wright.

TJH: No doubt his name was intentional.

Elle: Without a doubt.

TJH: You have to admit though that he seems too good to be true. Is he based on a real person or is he a purely fictional character?

(Immediately, the author flashes a brilliant smile. For a moment, I think I've evoked fond memories of someone special. But she quickly dashes that hope.)

Elle: Unfortunately, Derek is a figment of my imagination. In fact, he's the kind of guy that, if I could be in a relationship right now and if I could have love in my life, he's the kind of guy that I would want to be with. You know, he's my Mr. Goodbar.

TJH: Explain. That whole "Mr. Goodbar" thing, explain it to me.

Elle: "Mr. Goodbar" is a nickname that my girlfriends and I use to describe a guy who's smooth, sweet and chocolate.

TJH: Is that so?

Elle: No, I'm just kidding—although Derek did fit that bill. Seriously though, we use that term, "Mr. Goodbar", to describe a guy who's a keeper. The distinction is based on a rating system of sorts. It's based on qualities that are important to the person seeking a mate. So for example, the

qualities that may make a guy “Mr. Goodbar” material or better yet, the qualities that make Derek “Mr. Goodbar” material are his personal relationship with God; his strong family ties; his intellect, character and the ability to manage his resources well.

TJH: Wow, that’s pretty interesting. And it’s a pretty tall order.

Elle: Like I said, he’s a figment of my imagination.

TJH: (We both laugh.) OK, back to basics.

Elle: Sure.

TJH: The titles, for the book and the individual chapters, how did you come up with those?

Elle: It was actually pretty easy. Once the creative juices started flowing, everything, including the titles, just seemed to come together as the story unfolded. Since the chapters deal with different time periods in Charlene’s life, I just tried to think of titles that summarized the theme for each period. And it was the same way with the book. I wanted a smart, memorable title that reflected the overall theme of the book and *Living Well is the Best Revenge* just came to mind.

TJH: I have to admit, I like that title. It’s catchy and I think it speaks volumes.

Elle: Thanks.

TJH: OK, let’s talk about location. You currently live in Atlanta. Is that correct?

Elle: Yes. I live in the metro area.

TJH: Yet the story is set in Chicago. Why?

Elle: There are a few reasons why I decided to base the story in Chicago. The first reason being that home is where the heart is. Even though I’m not currently a resident, I was born and raised there. My family still lives there and when I settle down, I want to live in that area. So I still consider it home. The second reason is that like a lot of hip-hop artists, I wanted to “represent”, if I can say that and get away with it.

TJH: I’ll allow it.

Elle: Thanks. (She smiles.) Anyway, I wanted to pay homage to my hometown. I mean, Chicago is a great city with a rich, storied history. It’s full of colorful characters and interesting people. There’s a lot to see and do there and I wanted to let people know it. In essence, I wanted to celebrate Chicago and show readers the unique and endearing side of the city, the side of the city that natives know and love.

(No sooner than she finishes the love fest for the Windy City, she immediately jumps in to spin mode. She gives props to her current place of residence. It’s obvious, she’s been coached well.)

Elle: Now, that’s not to take anything away from Atlanta which is a fabulous city in and of its self. I mean, it too is an historic city full of wonderful people and incredible opportunities. But, I just didn’t think that I knew enough about Atlanta, even though I’ve lived there for a number of years, I didn’t think that I knew enough about the city to really sell it or do it justice in the book.

TJH: Nice recovery.

(Like a kid with her hand caught in the cookie jar, she grins...)

Elle: Thanks.

TJH: OK, so we’ve covered the inspiration for the book as well as some of the characters. Let’s talk now about the book’s theme. What is the message that you’re trying to convey through *Living Well*? What do you want readers to take away from this book?

Elle: That’s a great question. I’m so glad you asked.

(Again, she lights up as the focus of the interview returns to her work. It’s easy to see that this book is her baby. It’s her pride and joy.)

Elle: Different people will remember different things about the book. For instance, some will remember the romance. Some will remember the drama or comedy as it were. Some will remember the spirituality, hopefully. And some will remember random things like, oh, I don’t know, Pierre’s obsession with Jaguars and expensive cars.

TJH: Oh, I know I will! I will *neeeever* look at another Jaguar without thinking about Pierre.
(She laughs.)

Elle: See? That's what I mean.

TJH: That fool bought all those cars and didn't have dime one to pay for 'em. Now, that's just ridiculous. That's the part that just got me all upset. He was running up bills that he couldn't pay!

Elle: Girl, wasn't he though?

TJH: (She agrees, egging me on.) That's just ridiculous. Shoot. We would have split up over that foolishness. I wouldn't have had to catch him with another woman. I'd have left him on account of all those bills. Shoot, I can do bad by myself. I don't need *no* help to starve to death.
(She's laughing heartily. It's obvious that I've gotten off track. My journalistic integrity has gone completely out the window. And even though I'm still a little worked up over the memory of the situation, I quickly try to regroup.)

TJH: I'm sorry for getting sidetracked.

Elle: Oh, no. No, don't apologize. Please don't apologize because that's the reaction that I was going for.

TJH: How's that?

Elle: Your strong reaction, that type of reaction is a huge compliment for a writer. It's as with any other type of artist, say for example a comedian. The laughter of the audience is like music to a comedian's ears. It's a huge sign of approval because that's a comedian's goal—to make people laugh. And for me, a writer, I use words to create characters and words to create a sequence of events that ultimately tell a story. In this story, Pierre was the villain, he was the bad guy. So the fact that you feel so strongly about him, the fact that you, you basically hate him, that makes me sooo happy! You know. I'm thrilled with that type of reaction because it means that I did a good job in creating his character.

TJH: Oh. Oh, OK. Girl, 'cause ooh, honey. That fool, he was living foul. I don't know what I'd have done if I was in Charlene's shoes. But I think it's safe to say, it wouldn't have been pretty.
(She smiles and shakes her head in agreement.)

TJH: Uhm. Now, where were we? (Scanning my notes.) Shoot, just thinking about that fool has got my blood pressure all up, made me lose my train of thought.
(Smartly, she doesn't say a word. She savors the moment. She's proud of her work.)

TJH: Oh, yeah. We were talking about what you want people to take away from the book.
(She nods with recollection.)

Elle: Right. OK, I was saying that, um, lasting impressions of the book will vary from person to person. And I knew that and I expected it. I wanted people to have fun with the book. I wanted them to enjoy reading the book...despite its length. But the thing that I hope people take away from the book concerns the value and importance of relationships.

TJH: (I nod at the revelation.)

Elle: I wanted to highlight the importance of relationships, all types of relationships—parent-child relationships, family relationships, romantic relationships, friendships and even relationships with colleagues. 'Cause if you think about it, Charlene, Lauryn, Yvonne and some of the others, they met by way of the office but they vibed like sisters or friends. So, that was one point that I wanted to come across—the value and importance of maintaining *healthy* relationships.

TJH: Healthy relationships.

Elle: Yes, healthy relationships. Operative word there being “healthy”.

TJH: Gotcha. The unhealthy ones, either fix 'em or let 'em go.

Elle: Exactly. Another point that I hoped was evident was that of personal growth.
(Given her expression and tone, I sense that she's becoming more comfortable with the interview.)

Elle: Whether we admit to it or not, every one of us has issues. So I wanted all of my characters to have issues—faults, flaws, trials, tribulations, etc... In fact, that was the motive for chapter 4. I wanted to introduce the supporting cast in an entertaining way. But I also wanted to show that each one of them had issues that they'd either overcome or needed to overcome. And although we don't see each one of the supporting characters overcome her issues, we do see that happen for our main characters, Charlene and Derek. We actually witness Charlene's personal growth and we hear about Derek's personal growth through his heart-to-heart talks with Charlene. So that was another point that I was trying to make with the book.

TJH: That's interesting, especially the part about chapter 4. That was a pretty creative and original approach that you used to introduce the characters.

Elle: Thank you.
(She happily accepts the compliment then takes a sip of water.)

Elle: There's one additional thing that I hope readers take away from the book. And if this point wasn't obvious then I really didn't do my job well.
(She takes a deep breath then unburdens herself.)

Elle: The final thing that I want readers to take away from the book is the importance of having faith in God and belief in the promises of God. And too, not only is it important to have faith in Him and belief in His promises, but it's also important to have a personal relationship with Him.

TJH: As Charlene and Derek both did?

Elle: Right.

TJH: As you do?

Elle: As I'm *trying* to do.

TJH: I feel you on that one. (We both nod acknowledging the difficulty of trying to live a right life. But rather than get off on a tangent, I stick to my list of questions.) OK, I want to talk now about the publishing process. You actually self-published this work. Why?

Elle: That's easy enough, because I couldn't get an agent or publisher.

TJH: Really?

Elle: Really. Actually, this time around, I didn't even try to get an agent or publisher.

TJH: This time around. So you've tried to get published before?

Elle: When I finished the original manuscript in March of '97, I tried to get an agent or publisher. I spent about a year going down that path to no avail.

TJH: You couldn't get either one?

Elle: Couldn't get either one. No one was interested in developing new talent. They wanted established artists or folks who had ready-made audiences so that they could turn a quick profit.

TJH: Business as usual.

Elle: You know it.

TJH: So you finished the original manuscript in '97. Why did it take so long for you to actually publish it?

Elle: Well, once I finished the novel, I was kind of excited. I was curious to know what else I could write. So I started trying my hand at other forms of writing—lyrics, poetry, screenwriting. I spent a few years going down that path. And at the same time that I was discovering my creative talents, I was crisscrossing the globe on account of my day job. In fact, I spent the better part of a year in Asia. And when I came back, my job became even more demanding. So, between working, traveling and trying to manage my life, time just flew by.
(She shrugs almost apologetically.)

Elle: Before I knew it, years had passed. I think it was July of '03 when I finally started working on the re-write and trying to get the manuscript ready to go to market.

TJH: And it took you from the summer of '03 until the summer of '08 to produce the finished product?

Elle: Pretty much. I probably could have released it a little sooner, but I was asked to work on a project for my pastor in the spring of '05. And his book wound up taking a lot more time to complete than was originally expected. In fact, I lost a year of working on my book due to that project. So after I fulfilled that commitment in '06, I went into hibernation. From about September of '06 to October of '07, I didn't do anything except go to work, go to church and write. That's it. That's all I did until the manuscript was finished. And after that, I took a minute to detox and to exhale 'cause I was drained. I was tired. I was stressed. I was a mess.

TJH: I'd imagine that you were happy.

Elle: Oh, that goes without saying. (She quickly adds.) But being chronically sleep-deprived leaves me kinda numb to sensations and emotions from time to time. It leaves me kinda zombie-like.

TJH: I can relate all too well.

Elle: So like in late November or early December of last year—

TJH: After you'd had a chance to catch your breath.

Elle: Yeah, after I'd had a minute to regroup, the analytical side of my mind kicked in to gear and I came up with this monster project plan for publishing the book. And it took a little time, but things pretty much fell into place much like I'd hoped they would.

TJH: It was a long time coming, but it's here now.
(Smiling broadly, she nods.)

Elle: That's right. It's here now, thank God, and that's all that matters.

TJH: Wow, that's a pretty incredible story. It shows a lot of determination on your part.

Elle: Thank you.

TJH: I'm curious, what did you do with your other writings?

Elle: They're in the book—some of them are anyway.

TJH: So, the original poems and lyrics in *Living Well*, those are yours as well?

Elle: That depends. (Cautiously, she asks...) Did you like them?

TJH: Very much so.

Elle: OK, then. Yes, they're mine.
(She giggles. Like many artists, she's definitely sensitive about her work.)

TJH: I especially liked *Dear Sister*.

Elle: Thank you. That's one of my favorites too.

TJH: It reminded me of so many women, you know, sister-friends, who are near and dear to me. And I thought that you expressed those sentiments so beautifully and poignantly that it really rang true for me.
(Seeming genuinely surprised, the lady bites her lip to contain a huge smile. It's a subtle gesture, but it suggests a shyness which was previously undisclosed.)

Elle: I'm speechless. It seems so inadequate, but thank you for such a huge compliment.

TJH: No, thank you for such beautiful prose.

Elle: Thank God for the gift. I suppose that's the only appropriate thing to say.

TJH: (I nod in agreement while eyeing the clock. Realizing that our time is drawing to a close, I move on down my list of questions and pose another.) It's apparent to me that you're a versatile writer. So, I have to ask, what's next for you? Do you have any other projects in the works?

Elle: You know what? I have absolutely no idea what's next. That's very unusual for me not to have a plan or sense of direction. But as I said before, I never expected to become a writer. So, for now, I just want to ride this wave and see where it takes me.

TJH: Well, where would you like for this to go? What would you like to see happen with *Living Well*?

Elle: I'd love to see it on the big screen someday although that might be difficult since the book covers a 30-year period in Charlene's life. We'd have to cut a lot of material and/or get really creative in paring down the script to make it work for a screen adaptation.

TJH: Sounds like you've given it some thought.
Elle: Maybe a time or two.
TJH: Um, hmm, something tells me that you've given it more than a little thought. It sounds like you have your sights set firmly on the box office.
Elle: Only time will tell.
(The look on her face lets me know she won't rest until her mission is accomplished. In an instant, I develop a mix of admiration and respect for this sister. She knows what she wants and she's not afraid to go get it.)
TJH: OK, Elle, last question about the book.
(She nods expectantly.)
TJH: I liked the storyline. I liked the "church" scenes, if you will. I mean, "Faith for the Journey" moved me to tears.
(Her face lights up at my admission.)
TJH: And I loved the girlfriends' gatherings.
Elle: Does my heart good to hear you say all those things.
TJH: It's a pleasure. But by far, my absolute favorite part of the book was the proposal. I'm curious, was that based on personal experience?
(Immediately, she grimaces and groans, early indications that this is a sensitive subject.)
Elle: We'd done so well up to this point!
TJH: How so?
Elle: By focusing on the book. By avoiding questions about my personal life, particularly those regarding the "M" word.
TJH: Ah.
Elle: But I have to give you credit. You couched it so well that I didn't even see it coming.
TJH: (I nod confidently.) It's a trade secret.
Elle: Ah, I see.
TJH: OK, enough stalling. Dish. What's the scoop?
(Reluctantly, she starts to speak.)
Elle: No, the proposal was not based on personal experience. It was a complete fabrication.
TJH: Well, that wasn't so bad. Why all the dread about answering the question?
Elle: Because when someone asks about relationships or marriage, they usually don't stop at one question. There's usually a whole series of questions...are you married or why aren't you married; are you seeing anybody or why aren't you seeing anybody; when are you going to get married, when are you going to have kids and on and on. And I don't have good answers to any of those questions, so I just try to avoid the whole situation whenever possible.
TJH: OK, not to belabor the point, but I'm curious so I have to ask. Would you like to be married?
Elle: Possibly. Someday.
TJH: (I can see that's all she wants to say on the subject, so I move right along.) Earlier in the interview, you admitted that becoming a writer was not your goal or dream. What was your childhood dream?
(She perks up. The smile returns.)
Elle: When I was a kid, I wanted to sing. I wanted to grow up and become a singer.
TJH: Really?
Elle: It's the only thing that I've ever wanted to do. Music has always been and will always be my passion. It moves me. It soothes me. It picks me up when I'm down. It just, it brings me joy. My love for music is unlike anything I've ever experienced. I love it.
TJH: So why not pursue a career in it?
Elle: If it had been the Lord's will, I'd have done it. But apparently, He had other plans for me.

TJH: If you could do it all over again, would you give up writing for it?
Elle: I'd give up all of my other talents, known and unknown, for it.
TJH: Is it that serious?
Elle: It's that serious.
TJH: Wow. That's intense.
(The nod indicates she agrees.)
TJH: OK, we've got to wrap this up soon. Before we do, tell me something about yourself. How do you spend your free time? What are your hobbies or interests?
Elle: (She laughs.) Free time, what's that? I don't have any free time! My day job keeps me busy morning, noon and night. Plus that, I'm on the road 4 to 5 days a week and that complicates everything. I've spent my nights and weekends for the last decade or more trying to finish this book and launch a new career. So the idea of free time is foreign to me. I don't have free time. In fact, I don't really have a life right now.
TJH: Well when you do get to take a break, what are some of the things that you like to do?
Elle: OK, that I can handle.
(She takes a sip of water before responding.)
Elle: I guess I have to say that I'm not very different from my characters. I like to do the same kinds of things that my characters did in the book.
TJH: Such as?
Elle: Such as traveling, shopping, going to the spa, guy watching, gabbing with the girls. Those are the things that I like to do when I get the chance. I also like planning or hosting parties for my family and friends.
TJH: So you like to play hostess.
Elle: Yes.
TJH: Does that mean that you also like to cook?
Elle: It absolutely does not. Even though my kitchen is stocked with all of the latest gadgets and I have a couple dozen cookbooks, they're all pretty much just for decoration. You know, just for show.
TJH: So if Mr. Wright or Mr. Goodbar, to borrow a phrase, if he was to come along—
Elle: Let me put it this way. If he likes to cook, that's great. If he's got a cook, that's even better!
TJH: Go on, girl.
(She laughs.)
TJH: And on that note, I think we're going to end it. That's going to do it for us today, Elle. Thank you for the interview. It's been a pleasure.
Elle: Thank you. I enjoyed it.
TJH: See? That wasn't so bad.
Elle: No, not at all.
(A huge sigh of relief lets me know that she's glad to be out of the hot seat. She's glad this interview is over.)

** TJ Hudgins is a media relations professional and blogger based in northern Virginia. While working as a public relations consultant pays the bills, her ultimate goal is to work in the television and film industry.*