

Guess what I learned today?

Today I learned about **Amber Ruffin**.

Apparently, Omaha has been quietly producing funny people while the rest of us were busy watching the weather change every fifteen minutes.

Amber Ruffin was born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, and grew up in a large family with four siblings. She attended Benson High School, and eventually went from performing around Omaha to becoming a comedian, writer, actress, television host, and one of those people whose career makes you wonder how exactly somebody gets from Nebraska to late-night television.

It turns out the answer is not one giant leap.

It is a whole bunch of smaller ones.

After high school, Ruffin began performing in local theater productions in Omaha. She also joined improv and comedy groups, which eventually led her far beyond Nebraska. She performed with Boom Chicago, a comedy theater based in Amsterdam, and later worked with improvisational comedy groups in Chicago.

That means her road to television went from Omaha to Amsterdam to Chicago to New York.

This is considerably more complicated than simply getting on Interstate Eighty and heading east.

Eventually, Ruffin auditioned to become a writer for Late Night with Seth Meyers. In twenty fourteen, she joined the show's writing staff and became the first Black woman to write for a late-night network talk show in the United States.

That is the kind of sentence that sounds exciting and slightly disappointing at the same time.

Exciting because she accomplished it.

Disappointing because it took until twenty fourteen.

Once she was working on Late Night, Ruffin began appearing on camera as well. Her comedy was energetic and cheerful, even when the subjects she was talking about were anything but cheerful.

That combination is probably what interests me most about her.

Usually, when we think about serious subjects, we assume they have to be discussed seriously.

Amber Ruffin seems to have looked at that rule and decided it was more of a suggestion.

She has used comedy to talk about racism, politics, culture, current events, and her own experiences. Sometimes the stories are uncomfortable. Sometimes they are ridiculous. Frequently they manage to be both.

And somehow, laughing doesn't make the subject less important.

Sometimes it makes you pay closer attention.

That seems strange at first.

If somebody stood in front of a classroom and announced, "Today we're going to discuss an important social issue," there is a reasonable possibility that several students would immediately begin studying the clock.

But if somebody makes you laugh first, you might stick around long enough to hear what she actually has to say.

That is a pretty useful skill.

Ruffin eventually received her own television program, The Amber Ruffin Show, which premiered on Peacock in twenty twenty. The show combined monologues, sketches, music, jokes, and commentary about things happening in the world.

In other words, somebody from Omaha ended up with her name written across a television show.

Not bad.

What I find especially interesting about Ruffin's story, though, is how little of it seems to follow a perfectly straight line.

There wasn't one obvious road that said:

OMAHA → FAMOUS TELEVISION WRITER.

If there were, I assume more people would take it.

Instead, she performed. She tried improv. She traveled. She worked overseas. She kept learning. She kept auditioning. One opportunity led to another opportunity, which led to something she probably could not have completely predicted when she started.

I think adults sometimes make successful careers sound much more organized than they probably were while they were happening.

We hear the story afterward, when all the pieces already fit.

First she did this.

Then she did that.

Then she became successful.

It sounds like directions for assembling a bookshelf.

Real life probably feels considerably less organized when you are standing in the middle of it.

That might be the biggest thing I learned from Amber Ruffin.

You don't necessarily have to know exactly where something is going before you begin.

You can be interested in something because you enjoy it.

You can get better at it.

You can follow the next opportunity.

And then you can see where it takes you.

There is another part of her story that I like too.

Amber Ruffin didn't become successful by getting rid of the things that made her different. Her personality is part of her work. Her enthusiasm is part of it. Her sense of humor is part of it. Even the way she reacts to something can be part of the joke.

That seems important.

There must be enormous pressure in entertainment, and probably everywhere else, to figure out what successful people are doing and then try to become more like them.

Ruffin's career suggests another possibility.

Maybe the thing that makes you different is not necessarily the thing you need to fix.

Maybe it is the thing you need to use.

And apparently, you can use it while being extremely cheerful.

I respect that.

I also like knowing that another person who grew up in Omaha found her way into a creative career.

Alexander Payne found stories here and turned them into movies.

Amber Ruffin found her voice here and eventually carried it onto television.

Neither story makes Omaha seem like somewhere you have to escape in order to do something interesting.

It makes Omaha seem like somewhere you can start.

There is a difference.

I don't know exactly what I will be doing when I grow up. I have ideas, although my ideas have a habit of multiplying faster than my actual plans.

But maybe that is okay.

Amber Ruffin's life did not need to make perfect sense from the beginning for it to become an interesting story later.

She just needed to keep going long enough to discover where all those little steps were taking her.

Today I learned that sometimes finding your voice isn't about deciding what you are supposed to sound like.

It is about having enough courage to sound like yourself.

And if you can make people laugh while you're doing it, that probably doesn't hurt.