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Life coaching – rising in popularity should it be regulated? A look into the life and work of emerging life coaching star Gina DeVee

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Life Coaching and Gina DeVee

The conference room ballroom in France is full of women in suits and heels sitting around a table. Then the room parts and a woman, Gina DeVee, in a high ponytail, white chiffon dress and tall high heels steps on the stage. Immediately the room breaks into applause as she grabs the microphone.

“Every single person you have ever read about dared to desire,” screams DeVee into the microphone.
“Moses dared to part the Red Sea. Michaelangelo dared to paint that masterpiece on the Sistine Chapel.

At first glance the scene might look like something playing out in a church with DeVee as the charismatic preacher. But this is no church – and DeVee is no preacher.

DeVee, who is president of her lifestyle- and business-coaching firm Divine Living, is an emerging superstar in the rapidly growing but unregulated field of life coaching. Critics say without regulation this \$2 billion industry, which straddles therapy and business, has no standard level of accountability and can bring harm to clients.

DeVee’s one year coaching program, where she helps clients achieve their life and business goals, registered in South Pasadena California and charges between \$7500 and \$13,000 – depending on whether participants sign up during a discount period. For that year, participants are enrolled in one of two tracks: A business track, for people who already have their own service-based business and are looking to expand through DeVee’s business coaching, and those looking to become coaches themselves – who can earn up to 80 accredited hours through the International Coaching Federation, a voluntary internal accreditation organization .

Every month during the Academy, DeVee gives participants two informative business or coaching video modules, and in on a biweekly phone call where they can ask her questions about the modules. In addition, participants are invited to four three-day conferences around the world, but they provide airfare and accommodations.

DeVee has used this model to rake in serious money – she says that the company made over \$5 million last year. Divine Living was launched in 2014 and she said since then more than 760 women have gone through the program from 40 countries.

DeVee is not alone. The ICF has estimated that there are 53,300, lifestyle and business coaches worldwide with a third of them in North America. There are no barriers to entry to the coaching field. And even though DeVee’s coaching training program is accredited by the ICF– the value of that is dubious, because the industry is not regulated by any outside entity.

DeVee says at the core of her program is connecting women’s true purpose with their business and coaching. Still, she doesn’t offer refunds and likens the commitment to buying a car. More than anything she says she’s selling a lifestyle.

“People say it’s the lifestyle that stands out. I’m unapologetic about living a great lifestyle. We want to contribute, but we also want to wear Jimmy Choos and stay at beautiful hotels and the mothers send their kids to great schools,” said DeVee.

Connection to the Clintons

DeVee’s website features her jet setting across the country in expensive pantsuits and stilettos, but her beginning was less extravagant. DeVee who was born “Gina Ratliffe” was born in Bloomfield Hills, an upscale suburb of Michigan. Her parents were both school teachers, and she attended Western Michigan

University. But she said her whole life opened wide during a Supreme Court internship stint in 1995 that placed her in Washington D.C. at the height of the Clinton presidency.

During her time in DC she got wrapped up in a small scandal with a Chinese businessman named Johnny Chung, who was trying to get influence with the Clintons. DeVee spoke at a deposition about Chung's role in the White House, where she talked about working for him for less than three months – during which he promised her lavish trips to Beijing, high pay and a chance to live in his \$3 million mansion. She said he didn't reimburse her for things she purchased on his expense account. But she wouldn't comment about the rest of the experience.

When she returned to Michigan she said she was depressed and not sure which direction to take her career. She got her master's degree in clinical psychology and became a clinical director at Access Christian Counseling in Southfield, Michigan. But DeVee said that no matter how many clients she took on she still couldn't make ends meet.

“I was seeing probably 35 clients a week plus working at the clinic. I was working about 75 hours a week. And my take home pay was like \$2,000 a month. And at this point I was 30 years old and living with my parents. I couldn't get out of debt. I couldn't pay my student loans,” said DeVee. “I would sit at home at night and watch people on Access Hollywood, and shows like that, and it seemed everyone was pretty and having fun at LA.”

And so, DeVee said, she moved to Santa Barbara where her brother lived and became a life coach. At first she struggled but then she went to a coaching conference and she knew she wanted two of the presenters to coach her and help develop her business. The only drawback: She would need \$30,000 to sign up for their coaching programs. She said that was the impetus she needed to create her first “financial miracle.”

“I had one of my three clients who was finishing up a package and was on life coaching and relationship coaching – because that stuff I could do,” said DeVee. “He said now I want to talk to you about sales coaching. And I was like, what? And I was terrified because I knew he was a multimillionaire. I knew he was a business owner. I never asked him anything about his business because I didn't want him to think I was an idiot in that department. So I never even asked him. So I said, OK, what is it that you sell? And he said basement waterproofing. And I don't know if you've seen my picture but I did not look anymore like a basement waterproofing sales manager than I do now.”

She said even though she didn't have the expertise, he ended up buying 10 packages for his sales team at \$6,000 a package.

Since then, DeVee said she has gone on to build up a coaching empire around her business Divine Living Academy that markets a lifestyle of freedom, luxury and glamour through Gina's coaching program. The Academy started as an initial one-year track, but Gina has added intermediate one-year tracks for those who have been through the program and are looking to scale up.

Fans of DeVee

DeVee and her brand of marketing a glamorous, jet-setting lifestyle certainly isn't cheap. Personal 1:1 coaching with DeVee is \$1,000 an hour. But many say the investment is worth it. Carri Richard kick started her business through the Divine Living Academy, a \$7500 investment. In addition, she invested in a half-day session with DeVee at \$10,000 and two hours at \$2,000 – but she says it was worth it.

Richard, a long time IT professional is the full time principal product manager for Appliance Solution at Veritas Technologies, but recently she started her own coaching business, Synchronize Faith Works. She helps coach single mothers who are raising children and juggling careers, but also want to find “Mr. Right.”

“It’s worth every penny. I started a business. It’s incorporated. I have clients. Even with a full-time job, I’ve had 14 or 15 clients at this point,” said Richard. She started her business during the Divine Living Academy this year. It has only taken in \$8,000 of income so far, but she said she expects to scale up and recoup the cost.

She said she coaches from her life experience: She got out of an abusive 10-year relationship and had to build up her self-confidence and esteem to get where she is today. She said her painful experience has also increased her empathy for helping others.

And she said DeVee’s Divine Living Academy was paramount in helping her kick off her coaching business to turn her dreams into a reality.

“I was terrified of being visible. The most important piece to me is the mindset - the personal work that has to occur and the community with which to do it. I see the example; the great thing about the Academy community is that there are some brand new coaches like me, but there are also coaches who are going to take it to the next level,” said Richard.

She said the experience and the community is so strong that she signed up to do the Divine Living Academy again next year – mostly to stay connected to a community of international women coaches.

Critics of DeVee

But not everyone is on the DeVee train – if you google “Gina DeVee” all sorts of anonymous complaints come up.

For two of Gina’s previous companies Faithworks and Esther Experience critics say that Gina overcharged their credit cards, didn’t uphold a money back guarantee and misrepresented her services.

One complaint filed by an anonymous internet user called “speaking-to-help-others” wrote the following complaint: “I too was a victim of the smoke and mirror marketing machine that is Gina DeVee and her entourage. ... I know that there are a lot of us out there who want to speak up publicly about the company. know too that there are a lot of us working to get refunds for the misrepresentation in respect of the academy.”

But these complaints are unanimous and it was impossible to get a hold of someone critical of DeVee on record.

DeVee said it’s impossible to achieve her level of success without having haters – especially in the life coaching industry, where clients have to make big changes to see real results.

“The weight loss industry is probably the best example: People get excited and they want results. And they don’t realize to get the results, or get them consistently, that you need to work at it consistently,” said DeVee.

But although DeVee makes no written guarantees that clients will make hundreds of thousands of dollars in their first year of coaching – the glossy testimonials on the Divine Living website, feature two women, Emily Williams and Jessica Nazarali, who made six figures within their first year of coaching. Nazarali, a brunette, has written on the website that she is making so much that her and her husband have quit their jobs to travel the world.

DeVee said it was unfair for lifestyle and business-coaching clients to demand refunds for her services, when they wouldn’t for other goods.

“It’s an interesting industry, because I find unlike when you buy a car or an airline ticket, people seem to think they can just get their money back,” said DeVee.

Whatever their refund policies, the automobile and airline industries are heavily regulated; DeVee's world is not. Although the International Coaching Federation is a regulatory association, it is voluntary and internal. There is no barrier to entry and anyone can call himself or herself a coach.

Because of this lack of regulation, there is a wide range of experience among the 12 DeVee-trained coaches this reporter interviewed. One fashion coach, Megan LaRussa Chenoweth had experience: She had graduated from the Parson School of Design, and had been a retail analyst in New York City.

But another coach, Lauren Joyce, specialized in “magnetism” and was a sign language interpreter beforehand. Her specialty was making men attracted to her and said her experience was that she could walk into a bar and five men would try to buy her a drink. Chenoweth said she made an additional \$80,000 this year since starting DeVee’s program, Joyce said she grosses \$10,000 a month with her coaching business.

Critics of Life Coaching

Jesse Owens has been a life coach for the last seven years and is author of the book “My Life Coach Wears A Tutu: A Free-Thinkers Guide To Life Coaching.” He says the non-regulation of the field is problematic for its long-term credibility and sustainability.

“There’s a lot of space for it to grow and expand. And it has a big shadow. It’s this kind of overpromise, under deliver. I think it’s important for people to understand that you’re not going to change your life in a weekend -- no matter how many people are in the room are hopping around,” said Owens.

Owens said he worked for Tony Robbins, a leading life coach who became well known in the industry for his infomercials and self-help books. Owens said at Robbins events he saw people get psyched up and spend a lot of money on stuff that didn’t get results.

But Owens said the problems affecting the industry are not indicative of life coaching alone – but of American values that prize quick results for little work.

“The industry is reflective of society. And in American society everyone wants fast results with the least amount of effort,” said Owens. “There is a fine line between hockster and motivator -- selling hope to the most vulnerable. You have these really great sales people selling big fat dreams to people with not a whole lot of skill,” said Owens.

In the last few years there have been allegations of outright fraud in the industry. In January, in Colorado life coaches set up a series of shell companies in a ponzi scheme that raked in between \$8 and \$20 million, according to Court House News Service.

And in March, the Federal Trade Commission settled charges with a Utah man and three companies he controls about a deceptive work-at-home scheme conning millions of dollars from consumers by falsely promising consumers they could earn thousands of dollars a month by purchasing coaching services.

In the Executive Summary of the 2016 ICF Global Coaching Study, an internally conducted survey with responses from over 15,000 coach practitioners all over the world, the biggest future obstacle identified by coach practitioners was untrained people calling themselves coaches.

Which is why many who are in the coaching business say having outside regulations could help it long term. Larry Marks, staff psychologist at the University of Central Florida Counseling and Testing Center, also does life coaching and thinks regulations could help protect the public from fraud and help legitimize the industry.

“The reason that regulation is of any kind of professional practice is in place is to protect the public,” said Marks. “To that end, I think regulation could be helpful. There are people who practice coaching who already have some advanced degrees in psychology. When it’s in the realm of that field it makes sense. If you have people who have no experience providing coaching, that’s where I think mental-health professionals might look at it with some skepticism.”

Owens echoed Marks, but added that part of that regulation should include having realistic base standards that clients should meet, so that the coach can help create the results he’s advertising.

“I charge \$10,000 or \$20,000 for my clients to work with me per year and I’m really picky about my clients. I had one kid who wanted to throw the whole thing on the credit card. I looked at his history and credit card. And didn’t take it because he wasn’t ready. If coaching needs improvement it’s about being honest enough to really qualify people and have what it takes before you take their money,” said Owens.

Against Outside Regulations

But not everyone thinks having an outside body regulating the industry would be beneficial. C. Todd Hamilton, assistant executive director for the International Coaching Federation, wrote in an email that an outside regulatory body would add unnecessary layers of bureaucracy – which would mire the industry in red tape.

“Just within the United States, this could mean 50 different laws regulating coaching. As coaching often happens across state lines, or even national borders, most coaches prefer self-regulation by professional coaching associations,” wrote Hamilton in an email.

DeVee echoed Hamilton, and said a big reason why she had left the field of psychology was because she felt bound by unnecessary bureaucracy that made her act outside of her client’s best interest. Once she said she was forced to institutionalize a teenager during a family therapy session, because the child threatened to commit suicide. She said she knew he was just doing it for his parent’s attention –but because of regulation she had to institutionalize him, which was incredibly traumatic for both him and her, because he’d said the word “suicide.”

“In general, I do like and appreciate that the industry is unregulated,” said DeVee. “I think there’s a greater opportunity for creativity, serving people and making money with greater freedom,” said DeVee.

She added that at the end of the day consumers are smart – if a life coach doesn’t have the experience people will stop working with him or her. And regulation in an industry isn’t necessarily synonymous with quality.

“There are a lot of people running around calling themselves lawyers, who graduated from law school, who aren’t great lawyers, so I don’t know that that necessarily safeguards things,” said DeVee.