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Michelle Christie
Founder, No Limits for Deaf Children & 2017 CNN Hero

Dr. Michelle Christie founded the nonprofit organization, No Limits, in 1996 to help underserved and economically disadvantaged children with hearing loss gain the skills to succeed in school and life through its national theater program and afterschool educational centers. As a leader in the field of deafness, she has been the subject of multiple documentaries and received numerous awards for her revolutionary techniques.

Interviewed by Winn Claybaugh, Michelle will warm your heart with her lifelong commitment to serving underprivileged deaf children and give you an educated view into that world.

WC: Hi everybody, Winn Claybaugh here and welcome to what is—I know—going to be an incredible, incredible interview. I’m sitting here with Michelle Christie. And I’m just going to tell you right off the bat: Michelle was selected as one of 25 CNN Heroes in 2017. Was that a surprise to you? Did you know it was coming? I mean—

MC: No. [laughs] Absolutely not. And they called me and they said, “We have to do like three to four weeks of background checks on you before you even get selected. So don’t get excited. Don’t tell anybody.” And so they asked like 30, 40 questions a day, you know?

WC: Wow.

MC: And then eventually they said, “We got the green light. We’re coming tomorrow.” I’m like, “Whoa! Okay, wow.”

WC: That’s incredible.

MC: Yeah.

WC: I mean, I watched it several times.

MC: Ahh.

WC: It was just—

MC: That’s sweet.
WC: [laughs]

MC: [laughs]

WC: So inspiring.

MC: Ahh, thank you.

WC: Incredible.

MC: The kids are inspiring, definitely.

WC: Before we started recording this morning, Michelle and I were sitting here talking and I said I want this interview to be just as much about you as it is about this incredible foundation that you have created, which is called No Limits. And we'll talk about that. No Limits, you started in 1996 to help underserved and economically disadvantaged children with hearing loss gain the skills to succeed in school and life through its national theater program and afterschool educational centers. Obviously, I'm reading this. Michelle—after 18 years in the entertainment industry—well, I'm going to call you Michelle but you're actually Dr. Christie here.

MC: Yeah, but I can't cure anything. It's a doctor in education. [laughs]

WC: Oh yeah, you cure lots of things, sweetheart. You decided to follow your dream of working with children who have a hearing loss. You changed your career path and earned a masters degree in education with a full fellowship and distinguished honors from USC, John Tracy Clinic program. Later, Michelle received her doctorate in education from UCLA. You went to the best of the best, didn't you?

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: Dissertation focused on the needs and experiences of low-income Latino parents of school-aged children with hearing loss.

MC: Hm.

WC: That's pretty specific.

MC: It is, because those are the population I'm really working with. I really am focused on families living in poverty and how do they get through this journey when they find out their child has a hearing loss? 'Cause it can be an uphill battle unless we can help them make the hills not so high.

MC: Dr. Christie has been the subject of multiple documentaries for her revolutionary educational techniques that have been replicated nationwide. No Limits—again, this foundation that you have created—continues to be the only theater group in...
the country for children with hearing loss learning to speak. We’re going to talk about the difference of that.

MC: Yeah.

WC: You actually have performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., with your kids.

MC: Twice.

WC: Twice.

MC: Yes! Twice.

WC: And where else?

MC: Oh, I’m sorry, but Carnegie Hall—

WC: Weren’t you just at Carnegie Hall?

MC: We were at Carnegie Hall. The kids were at Carnegie Hall.

WC: Wasn’t that in January of this year? So—

MC: December.

WC: In December.

MC: Twenty-sixteen. It was amazing.

WC: Congratulations.

MC: Thank you, thank you.

WC: You know, and tell us the story about John Autry, who was probably—well, he was your first student, correct?

MC: He was my first student and—

WC: Just so you know, you guys, John Autry, you’ve seen him on Glee.

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: He’s an actor. He’s—you’ve seen him on other TV shows as well. And tell us about—

MC: Well, I met John—

WC: —that experience.
MC: Yeah. I met John when he was 7.

WC: Okay.

MC: And it was my first year teaching where I was in this school and my job was to get him to be mainstreamed with the hearing peers. So a whole class full of hearing children and he was the only one with a hearing loss.

WC: And how profound was or is his—

MC: He has a severe, profound loss. But at that time, a 5-year-old hearing child has about 5,000 vocabulary words. John was 7 when I met him and I'd say he had about 50.

WC: Wow.

MC: So think about that communication and not being able to communicate, or lack of, to those kids. And he was given to me as, like, my student and I was supposed to get him to raise his hand in class and participate but he had no idea what was going on in the classroom.

WC: Wow.

MC: And the kids were very physical with him. And they were bullying him. They pulled down his pants. They did like really awful things to him. And so he had no way to communicate, so what did he do? He hit them back. You know, he just like had to physically do it and it was really causing trouble at the school. So, and my job immediately is to try to get him those communication skills. So I'd be sitting in the classroom like, “John, raise your hand, raise your hand.” Like, “I know you know the answer.” And he’d just start to cry like big tears—

WC: Hm.

MC: —in these beautiful brown eyes. And then I just said, “Okay, I’ve got to bring him back to my speech room,” and I’m supposed to teach him how to talk, teach him the vocabulary and he wouldn’t talk to me. I would just be talking, he would just sit there and he looked so sad. He had no connection to the world around him. And so I called his mom immediately and said, “Look, what does John like to do? Like I want to find something I can bring in, something that’ll excite him.” They said, “Oh, he loves Michael Jackson.” So I brought in the Bad CD. Remember that Bad CD?

WC: Oh yeah.

MC: And so I brought it in, got a boom box. I had this really small, little speech room and the principal’s office [laughs] was very close but I knew I had to make it really loud and I brought in a fake microphone. So he—I bring him back to the class and he’s there, “Oh, here we go again. I’m not going to say anything.” And I hand
him a mic and then I turn on the music. And he’s just like turning around going, “What?” Like, “Where’d you get this music? How do you know I like this?” So we connected through the music. And then all of a sudden, “Will you teach me how to dance?” And he could do the moonwalk. I mean, he was amazing. Just—

WC: Wow.

MC: —really animated and it was our first connection.

WC: Hmm.

MC: And then he started learning what microphone meant and dancing. He didn’t know what the word dance meant. So I was able to teach him through experiences. So he had to read a story about a dog going to a picnic and so I decided, okay, I’ll bring in a picnic basket and bring a blanket and I brought in a dog’s costume. I went and bought one and we went—I asked the principal, “Is it okay if we outside to the lawn?” and act this story out so he could understand it. And he started picking up language and he started to read the book and be excited about it. And the teacher is like, “Wow, he’s doing so well.” So that summer is when I thought, What can I do for John in the summer? And that’s when I started the theater company. Yeah.

WC: Now, ’cause that was his dream.

MC: That was his dream.

WC: It’s still his dream.

MC: Yeah, well, at first he didn’t know what his dream was and so when we did the theater, it was his first time in front of people, talking.

WC: Wow.

MC: That’s got to be pretty terrifying and all of the kids were the first time ever doing anything in front of an audience. They never got cast in plays and they weren’t chosen. They had to lip read or I sometimes with some of the kids I used to see at the school would just mouth like they were singing even though they weren’t singing and no one taught them the words ’cause they thought, Oh, it’ll be too hard for them. I’m like, “No, no, no. These kids have to learn the language, they’re going have to learn how to say their lines.” And John was amazing that day. And it changed his life in the sense of it gave him confidence. It gave him the understanding of the power of speech. People laughed at his jokes. They loved him. And that year when he did the play—at the end of every No Limits play, they each come out, one by one, taking a bow.

WC: Wow.
MC: And they say, “I can be a ______.” And the craziest thing is at my first rehearsal, I had no idea what I was doing. I was a teacher. I didn’t know how to start a theater production for deaf children. But I remember sitting in a group and going around and saying, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” to all the little kids. And they’re looking at me like I’m crazy. And I’m like, *Do they not understand me?* So I reworded it like, “When you grow up, what do you want to be?” No one would say anything and then this little girl, Jackie, said, “Nobody ask me.”

WC: Wow.

MC: And so that was when we really started talking about the future, like, “What do you want to be?” And then John immediately said, after he started performing a little bit, “I want to be an actor.” And he never changed it and he was in every show. He came back and directed shows and did the workshop team and he’s always wanted to be an actor and he is.

WC: How old is John today?

MC: Twenty-seven.

WC: Yeah, he’s a beautiful boy.

MC: He’s a beautiful soul.

WC: Ah.

MC: Just a beautiful soul. He really is.

WC: Love him.

MC: Me, too.

WC: Now, I’m going to read this: so Michelle started a grassroots effort to educate people across the world about the struggles and triumphs of people with hearing loss who have been raised using spoken language rather than sign language. Tell us the difference. Give us some education here on—and I have a feeling that you take a hit for this, correct?

MC: I do. Well, when I first—

WC: So explain that and then we’ll—

MC: Yeah. There’s a—

WC: People are like, “What do you mean you take a hit?” Well, get into that.

MC: There’s a debate between children who are born with hearing loss: should they learn to speak or should they learn sign language? And it’s a big, heated debate.
It’s almost—it’s like back in the 1800s, ’cause what used to happen is kids who wanted to learn sign language, they were told to sit on their hands or they were told not to use sign language. And so there’s a lot of frustration and anger based on the past. And then technology started coming about. Twenty years ago when I started, they just had cochlear implants in the 1990s. And so it was very new technology but with cochlear implants kids were learning to speak because they could hear pretty well. They had to learn what they were hearing and the meaning of it but they were hearing like you and me in the sense of being able to hear all the speech sounds. So there was more prominence toward spoken language. And so the Deaf community, who believes solely in sign language—doesn’t even really feel comfortable with kids, you know, wearing hearing aids as adults. They just feel like there’s no need to wear a hearing device because you were born deaf and you should be proud—

WC: So you should remain—

MC: You should remain deaf and be proud of that.

WC: Okay.

MC: Because there’s a Deaf culture. There’s a Deaf history. So signing only was the preference. And so when you go into this field and you start teaching deaf children how to speak, they feel like you’re taking away the culture. You’re shrinking it, right? Because here you have—if everyone’s signing, you’ll have more people in your Deaf culture.

WC: Hm.

MC: But if you start teaching them how to speak and they don’t learn sign language, then that culture is going to diminish. They used to call it the Deaf genocide; hearing aids, hearing devices is the Deaf genocide.

WC: Okay.

MC: And so it’s really heated and it—I understand it in many ways because it’s scary. If you only can communicate with someone else who knows sign language, you become very isolated so you want more people to learn sign language.

WC: Mm-hm.

MC: And the problem a little bit is that 90 percent of families who have children with hearing loss are you and me. They’re hearing.

WC: So the parents are hearing.

MC: Hearing. And so they think, Okay, well, just like if I was Japanese, I want to teach my kid Japanese. If I’m speaking English, I want my child to speak English. And the technology was allowing it to become more successful for the kids.
WC: Mm-hm.

MC: And so that really kind of took a turn and so now when I started No Limits, it was still pretty much a situation where spoken language was still a little bit, “Well, I don’t know if these kids—they have profound losses, they’re never going to learn to speak. Why are you forcing and torturing them to speak?” And I really believe that the kids could do both. They don’t have—if you learn to speak, you have to learn it within the critical window years, which is usually zero to six. I feel like the window is a little bit longer ‘cause some of our kids don’t hear until five and a half and they speak beautifully today. But they also learn sign language as adults. So we’re never against sign language. We’ve never been against sign language. It’s just giving parents a choice.

WC: Okay.

MC: And even John, as you’ll see, he signs.

WC: Mm-hm.

MC: I sign. I sign, as well. So there’s nothing against sign language. It’s just that the window of opportunity to learn speech is usually in the beginning years.

WC: So you have kids come to you—

MC: Mm-hm.

WC:—who have had no language—

MC: Oh—

WC: —and they’re at what age? Give us—

MC: Ah. I—

WC: —some of the—I hate to say it—some of the horrific stories.

MC: Well, what’s crazy is 20 years ago, the stories are the same today. So that’s what’s the most frustrating is what have we done or what have we not done to make it better for the kids? Because when I first started, I had seven-year-olds not knowing their name. I have five-and-a-half-year-olds coming in, just getting hearing aids for the first time. But there’s universal newborn screening, you know, at the hospital. I’m sure Sofia—

WC: She was tested.

MC: She was tested.

WC: Yeah, I was there.
MC: Right? So they’re tested right then but say they fail. They’ve got to contact the parent. Well, if you’re low-income, a lot of times you’re scared.

WC: Mm-hm.

MC: You don’t know what’s going to go on. You think, Maybe they’re wrong, and you just delay it. And then there’s a loss to follow-up where they stop following up—

WC: Delay, meaning getting hearing aids or—

MC: Getting hearing aids, finding out if maybe the test was wrong. Maybe it is. Okay, maybe the child’s—

WC: Right.

MC: —fine. So a lot of our families find out around three, three or four.

WC: Okay.

MC: And now, they’ve got to get hearing aids. Well, hearing aids are $6,000.

WC: Insurance doesn’t cover?

MC: About 5 percent.

WC: Wow.

MC: And they only show a stipend, like $500.

WC: Wow.

MC: And most of our families don’t have insurance, right?

WC: Right. Okay.

MC: So here you are, “What am I going to do? I’ll rely on the state.” Okay, well, the state will provide it. Well, the turnaround for hearing aids sometimes is up to 12 to 14 months.

WC: Wow.

MC: So now their kid’s four and a half and now they’re putting on sound for the first time. We call that the hearing age: the day that they can start to hear. Their hearing age isn’t one, when they got diagnosed. It’s, you know, when they start to hear. So we have kids—and the majority of our kids today are five and a half and, Winn, it’s like they’re hollow inside. They have spent five and a half years looking at mouths move—

WC: Hm.
MC: —and not know one word, not have any connection.

WC: What does that—what does that mean for a child to not have language, to not hear the voice of their parents, to not—

MC: Yeah.

WC: —be able to express love and receive love? What does that—

MC: It’s like the child—what it’s like to be able to not feel any connection to sound is very lonely. And you can see it in the kids. When they first come to No Limits, they will not look at you. You can tell they have no language ’cause if they look at you, is your mouth going to say, “Hi. How are you?” You’re going to start talking and they don’t know what you’re saying.

WC: Okay.

MC: So they get very isolated and alone. They tend to have sometimes behavior issues because they’re trying to touch you and tell you what they need but they don’t have the language to do it. So a lot of times they’re put in like behavior programs and it’s not a behavior issue; it’s a language issue.

WC: Okay.

MC: And it’s really difficult on the parents. Think about it. You want your baby to say something to you.

WC: Right.

MC: You want to feel that connection and sometimes parents don’t know what to do and they stop talking to their child because they don’t see the response of it. And that’s really hard on parents to find out later how important it was for them to continue to try to engage with their child.

WC: Hm.

MC: But once they get to No Limits, within 10 weeks, they know their name.

WC: Hm.

MC: They know their age. They know they have a birthday. And you can just see the difference. It’s like this hollow look in their eyes and they will look at you and they—I’m not kidding, there’s like all of a sudden something turns on and you can see it through their eyes. They’re smiling. They’re coming up to you, which is, you know, something they would never do, and they’re saying, “Hi.” And someone’s saying, “Hi,” back. And they’re turning to their name. They know Mary means them and how exciting that must be—
WC: Wow.

MC: —to know that they have meaning in their life now. And it changes the stress level in the families tremendously.

WC: What percentage of the parents of the kids that you work with are hearing?

MC: We just have one parent who has a hearing loss. The rest are hearing.

WC: Wow. Okay.

MC: Yeah. So out of 600 kids.

WC: Okay now, some people are thinking, Oh well, the second that they get a cochlear implant or the hearing aids, problem solved. Educate us on what the brain has to go through to be able to—I don’t even know the words to ask.

MC: Well, with a hearing loss, all of a sudden you start to hear. You go, “Oh my gosh. There’s sound.” So all of a sudden electrodes—everything’s going on in your brain. Things are going to the auditory nerve that’s never been there before. Your brain has to process sound and so you have to teach the meaning of that sound. So it takes a little bit of time to connect it. But, like anything, you start to learn it, once you start to get the hang of what we’re trying to do; that this is a ball, you look at a ball and that “ball” means this and you connect it. It goes a lot more quickly than just kind of every single word has to be taught. They start to pick it up a lot faster. They start to hear the rhythm of language and understand that, you know, most of the time if they want something you have to start with, “I want,” and those words. So, without training, though, the cochlear implant, the hearing aid is pretty much useless. Put a hearing aid on a kid who has had no language before, they’re not going to get very much out of it. They might get some environmental sounds. It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just white noise. It’s like us going to Russia. You hear them speaking Russian and we hear it but doesn’t mean we understand it. And so for these kids, it’s so frustrating to hear white noise all the time. So you have to stop and train.

WC: Okay. I want to kind of jump around here a little bit, if that’s okay.

MC: Sure.

WC: First of all, why theater?

MC: Hmm.

WC: Like why—you know, I get it that you’re teaching them, you know, language and you’re dealing with some of the other issues related to being low-income—

MC: Mm-hm.
WC: —and Latino and all that, but why put them in theater?

MC: For me, the reason I started a theater program is I wanted them to feel good about who they were. It was not just educational, like teaching them grammar and literacy and all of that good stuff. That came with theater: creativity and expression. But I wanted them to feel great about who they were and are, but most importantly, I wanted the audience, too, to see them and perceive them differently. I wanted their classmates not to see them as, “Oh, that's that kid over there with the hearing aids,” or “disabled kid and he's always got a little extra help.” I wanted to put them in a professional production. This was not at a school. It was never at a school. It was always at a paid theater where people came in and paid for the show. And so these kids were special. They were doing a professional production. So when people came in, they expected a lot from them. And that was great.

WC: Oh.

MC: They didn’t see them anymore as disabled. They were like, “Oh, they're in a show. They're going to be performing for us.”

WC: Wow.

MC: And what I could do with the audience is to say to them, “Look what they’re capable of doing. No longer feel sorry for our kids.”

WC: Okay.

MC: “Look at what they can do.”

WC: At the end of performance, you said that each one comes out and takes an individual [laughs] bow.

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: Which is [voice breaks]—

MC: So sweet. It’s so sweet.

WC: Then you also do Q&A.

MC: Well, with the Silent NO—

WC: So the audience can interact with—what are—yeah, explain that.

MC: So with our—when we started the theater group in ’96, we didn’t have a Q&A. What we did was we did autographs. So we said to the audience, “Our actors are going to sit on the edge of the stage. Please come up and they’ll sign your—the autograph in the Playbill.” So what I did was break that kind of, “Oh gosh, I
don’t—”, you know, hearing people talking to these deaf kids. They didn’t want to hurt their feelings if they didn’t understand them. And what did the kids get? “You were great. Fantastic. You were funny.” And so they’re getting compliments and then the audience is feeling a little more connected to these kids. But with Silent NO MORE, the show that recently was debuted at Carnegie Hall, we do a Q&A. And the reason we do the Q&A is that we want the audience to participate and understand the needs of these actors who are sharing these incredible, inspiring stories. They’ve gone through a lot of heartache to get where they are today. And then also we invite the signing-only community, which is called the Big D. So there’s a Big D and a little d. Big D means signing only. Little d means you can speak and sign.

WC: Okay.

MC: And there’s a big distinction in the Deaf community between the two. And if you are brought up with a cochlear implant or wearing hearing aids and learning to speak, you will never be welcomed into the Deaf community, according to the rules.

WC: Wow.

MC: So here we are, we’re raising kids learning to speak. Now they become fluent in sign language, they get older and they want to be part of the Deaf community and they want to be part of the hearing community.

WC: Okay.

MC: And the Deaf community says, “Hmm, uh-uh. Yes, you know sign language but you have a cochlear implant.”

WC: Hm.

MC: And so the whole show is about can we break that? Is there a way that we can break this divide of years of history—hundreds of years at this point—of this debate? And can’t we unite because our kids, yes, they’ve learned to speak, but they are signing and they want to have a culture, too. And right now they’re stuck in the middle. It’s a lot like Kathy talks about is like she’s—yes, she speaks so she’s part of the hearing world but she wants to be part of the Deaf world, where she’s right in the middle.

WC: Yeah.

MC: There’s no culture for these kids and so as they get older they start to feel lonely and isolated themselves because they’re in the mainstream with the hearing world but the fact is, Winn, you know John. He misses information: someone talks behind him, someone talks beside him and he doesn’t see or hear. He misses information.
WC: Right.

MC: So he’s not really part of the hearing world even though you can communicate with him.

WC: Right.

MC: So, for John, is like he really wants to be part of the Deaf community and right now, it’s starting to change a little bit, which is good, but a lot of our kids really want to have that.

WC: Do you have a lot of, as you call them, the Big D—

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: —signing-only people come to these plays, the shows that you do?

MC: I invite them. Yes. Specifically.

WC: And do a lot show up?

MC: Yes.

WC: Okay.

MC: It’s fantastic. And what’s so amazing is that they will go up and ask questions and they’ll say, “I don’t believe in what you do, of teaching these kids to speak, but let me tell you something: I had no idea they had struggles.”

WC: Hm.

MC: “I assumed that they were part of the hearing world and they got all the benefits of the hearing world.” And it’s changed people’s perception.

WC: Wow.

MC: And they have taken—they even say—I mean, the majority of the time we have at least five people who come up and say, “I am embarrassed that I have judged people.”

WC: Wow.

MC: And that’s education, right?

WC: Right.

MC: It’s just bringing people together—

WC: Awareness.
MC: —and having that discussion and seeing that our kids are the same as their kids. And the fact is, they’re in the same field. If you take off the hearing aids of a Big D and a little d, they’re all deaf.

WC: Right.

MC: They all can’t hear. So whether they sign or speak, does it really matter?

WC: Mm-hm.

MC: And I think that’s where we’re trying to—we’re really talking about the elephant in the room. Nobody is addressing it and so it’s become very powerful, the performances.

WC: I’m curious to know, what are the types of questions that the hearing audience asks?

MC: The hearing audience will ask questions like, “Do you have a lot of friends? Do you ever take your hearing aids off and wish that you could hear again?” Most of the kids onstage will say, “You know, I like being deaf. I’m okay with it, even though I’ve had all the struggles.” They wouldn’t change it. It’s who they are. A lot of the questions by the hearing people are more about how the cochlear implant works or how hearing aids work. “How much can you really hear?” There’s always these like “deaf and mute,” you know, where they have these phrases, old-fashioned. They’re, “Are you stone-deaf?” There’s no such thing as stone-deaf. You know, it’s—profoundly deaf means that an airplane comes by us right now and it’s like zooming by, we wouldn’t hear an airplane.

WC: Hm.

MC: A profound loss.

WC: Hm.

MC: I would say 98 percent of our kids have profound losses.

WC: Wow.

MC: And so you—

WC: And is that at birth or was it later through a—

MC: Most of our—

WC: —a disease or—?

MC: That’s a good question ’cause people often ask, you know, “How come these kids have a deafness? What happened? Were they sick at birth?” Sometimes it’s
prematurity. Fifty percent is genetic and then 50 percent is what you’re saying, like disease. Sometimes kids get meningitis—

WC: Mm-hm.

MC: —and they lose their hearing. Sometimes when babies are born prematurely, they literally will tell the parents, “We’re giving the medicine to keep your child alive but the medicine will cause deafness.”

WC: Really?

MC: Yeah.

WC: Wow.

MC: So the medicine is causing it, so parents have to make that choice and of course they’re going to choose, you know, keeping their child alive so they get the hearing devices right after birth.

WC: Okay, now I’m really—I want to jump—

MC: Yeah.

WC: —around and talk about you. So—by the way, our very good friend Kathy Buckley, who I interviewed with MASTERS, she was the first hearing-impaired comedienne and—

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: —has been on The Tonight Show and traveled with Tony Robbins for years.

MC: Yeah.

WC: She’s this phenomenal, phenomenal woman and speaker and so she—

MC: And my friend.

WC: And my friend.

MC: No, my friend! She’s my friend.

WC: My friend!

MC: [laughs]

WC: She helped me come up with some things to ask you so she wanted me to ask you who you were. Who was Michelle Christie when you were five years old?

MC: Hm. I was a shy, scared, lonely five-year-old.
WC: And why was that? What was your upbringing? Did you have siblings?

MC: Mm-hm. I did.

WC: What was your home life with, you know, your parents?

MC: Mm-hm. Well, when I was born my mom had already been married and she had my brother and sister from a different man. She met my dad, did not marry him, and had me. And then at birth, they had planned to put me up for adoption because it was just, you know, it was one of those accidental things. I guess when I was born, she decided to keep me. And my dad, you know, he said he went to church and prayed and basically, you know, he wasn't ready to raise me so—

WC: Okay.

MC: —he moved to Chicago. And my mom raised me with my brother and sister.

WC: Okay.

MC: And my mom was an aspiring actress and she worked three jobs. She also worked at bars and did her thing. But she really did not know how to parent and I think that, you know, she would say and often, like she wished she didn't have us because we kind of prevented her—

WC: She would say that?

MC: Yeah. She would say that to us a lot because we got in her way of stardom, she felt. Like she—all she wanted to be was famous. And she was beautiful and, yes, talented but she was never around. So she would go and work at night or all day long and we wouldn’t see her sometimes for days and my sister was five years—

WC: At what age?

MC: At five. I was five. We—she would leave for days. My sister, my brother—my brother was nine and my sister was ten and they basically raised us. My brother describes our childhood as like wild cats. We had no discipline. We had no food. We would just—you know, no bedtime stories. We were just left to kind of fend for ourselves.

WC: Hm.

MC: And my sister was very—you know, when I look at her, 'cause she was five years older, she as my hero. Like she took care of us and she tried her best. She would go to the store and try to scrape up money. We used to do things where—it sounds kind of insane but it was, I think, pretty smart when I look back—we would pretend to have scavenger hunts. We’d go—like not on our block 'cause they knew us—and we would go to other blocks and we’d pretend to have a list
of like thread and, you know, you know, a piece of yarn and, you know, all of these things and in between would be food, would be like cakes—

WC: So that’s how you would get food.

MC: That’s how we’d get food.

WC: Wow. [laughs] Oh my gosh.

MC: And so we would—but we were smart enough to know like, “What do you feel like?” And like, “Bacon and eggs sounds really good.” [laughs] So we’d go and like we’d put our menu together and then we’d mix in these weird things so people wouldn’t think that we were asking for food. So, you know, I’d hear my sister go, “We got eggs!” and I’m like, “I got bacon!” [laughs]

WC: Wow.

MC: And we would come home and, you know, we were always, you know, together. Being years apart from my brother and sister, it was a little bit harder. Also, they looked very different than me. They were very tall and olive skinned and they just looked different so no one ever thought that I was part of the family.

WC: Hm.

MC: But because I had a different dad, you know?

WC: Right.

MC: So five years old I spent a lot of time by myself. I didn’t talk at all.

WC: How did you do in school?

MC: You know, school was my savior.

WC: Okay.

MC: School was my home. It was my safe place. I never wanted to go home.

WC: Hm.

MC: So we lived in a place where I’d walk to school and walk home, you know, by myself to the school. And I just would stay as long as I possibly could at school ’cause I never wanted to go home to that empty house ’cause my brother and sister were older so they never really came home either. So we’d just kind of fend for ourselves. I would play by myself, like tetherball or, you know, just do as much as I could to avoid going home.

WC: Hm. You think that’s what maybe guided you into education? Wanting to create that safe—
MC: Yeah, I think so.

WC: —place for kids who would be considered the underdog?

MC: Yeah, I’m very much the underdog, for sure. I think, for me, not being able to communicate very well, I didn’t do well in school. I was a good student in the sense like I did everything a teacher told me to do. I tried to get great grades, I did everything I could but the fact was is that no one read a book to me. We didn’t have books at home. We didn’t have anyone helping me with homework. So I was an overachiever because I wanted to make those teachers proud of me. So I worked extra, extra hard but not, I think—

WC: Well, Dr. Christie, it paid off.

MC: [laughs] I’m the only one who went to college so I am proud of that in my immediate family. My sister was really smart, really brilliant, thankfully. She never went to school. She, you know, she ditched all the time ‘cause she didn’t—nobody was following up and she forged everybody’s teacher’s name. She was like, “Work the system,” but she graduated from high school and my brother barely made it but we all kind of got—we found ways to survive.

WC: Hm.

MC: And I think what’s amazing is, I feel like I’ve been blessed with acts of kindness. These people who just come in probably have no idea what kind of impact they had on my life but like our neighbors. As I was getting older, I think they started kind of figuring it out, like there’s something—

WC: That these three kids are wildcats and—

MC: Yeah.

WC: —they’re left alone for days.

MC: Mm-hm. And so somehow, and I don’t know the story, the backstory, but all of a sudden I was going over to the Herndon’s family’s house for dinner. And they took me, and another family took my brother, and another family took my sister. So we would sit—

WC: So they all got together and [laughs]—

MC: They all got together and said, “Let’s feed them.”

WC: Wow.

MC: And instead of turning in my mom, they were doing things like that ’cause I think they knew that we’d need to have a family, you know, a mom, even though she wasn’t really around, is that I sat with a family. I sat with a mom and a dad and
siblings and they argued at the table and they said, “Pass the butter,” and I was like, “Butter?” Like, “Yummy!” [laughs] You know? So I was able to see what life was supposed to be like.

WC: Right.

MC: And it was inspiring for me ’cause I felt like maybe one day I’m going to get that. And my mom didn’t have any relatives so I had no aunts, uncles, grandparents. We had no relatives at all and that was a really lonely time ’cause no one was coming and visiting us or cousins or we didn’t have anything. It was just the three of us.

WC: Hm. Do you have a special story of a teacher that made a big impact in your life?

MC: Yeah, there’s this teacher and it’s the craziest name. I know you’re not going to believe me but her name was Mrs. Smiley. [laughs]

WC: That’s great.

MC: I swear to God. Her name was—

WC: Mrs. Smiley.

MC: You have to be a teacher when you have Mrs. Smiley as your name, right?

WC: I know. And then to be a nice, good teacher, too.

MC: [laughs] Yeah.

WC: Yeah.

MC: Exactly. So she was a third-grade teacher and she was someone who knew I was staying after school a lot. So she would ask me—right before the bell would ring every day and say, “Hey, do you want to stay after and help me grade papers? Hey, do you want to erase the board for me?” And I just thought I was the most special person. I had no idea that she probably knew what was going on but I just felt really special. And she used to always say, you know, “You can do it. You’re going to be great. You’re a good girl.” And she fed things in my head so when I was feeling down or lonely I could hear her voice in me saying, “You’re going to get through this. You’re going to be okay. You’re a great kid. You’re so smart.” And I’d be like, She thinks I’m smart!

WC: Hm.

MC: Like I didn’t think I was smart. Everyone else seemed to be doing so much better than me but she believed in me.
MC: And she saw something special in me and I want to be that Mrs. Smiley to the kids that I work with.

WC: Hm. So what was your last connection with her?

MC: Oh, just recently she—the CNN Heroes—[laughs] it’s so funny that—

WC: Oh, you’re kidding. They—she’s—

MC: Yes!

WC: So she’s alive and they talked to her or what?

MC: Well, what happened is my son says, “Why don’t you write Mrs. Smiley?” I go, “I don’t know how to do that.” And of course, like 30 seconds later he’s like, “Here she is. Here’s her email.” [laughs]

WC: Oh, of course. Your son is how old? He’s—?

MC: Thirteen. Yeah.

WC: Exactly. They can figure those things out. Yeah.

MC: He’s like, “Here it is.” So I wrote her and then she wrote me back and it was just really special because, I think, for her, what a gift that I can give her to say, “You really impacted my life and a lot of the reason I started No Limits is because you believed in me.” And I don’t think she had any clue like how much—

WC: Wow.

MC: —it meant and how her voice was in my head. And sadly, when my sister died—she died in a car accident when I was 15 and I remember her writing a letter to—and I remember thinking, Mrs. Smiley is thinking about my family right now. And this is 10 years later. Like she didn’t have to—probably like seven to ten years later—she wrote and I just—I still have that letter.

WC: Wow.

MC: Because it was like she just didn’t—wasn’t just a third-grade teacher.

WC: Right.

MC: Right? She was more than that. She really cared and wanted to know that—and she wrote an interesting letter ’cause it said, “To Shannon,” my mom, and said, “Make sure you take care of your other kids.”

WC: Hmm.

MC: Kind of like, “Don’t forget.”
WC: Right.

MC: “Don't forget the other ones.”

WC: Hm.

MC: You know? And it was a real meaningful thing 'cause she was still thinking of my brother and me.

WC: So how old is Mrs. Smiley today?

MC: I don't know. I think she's in her 70s. She looks great. So.

WC: Wow.

MC: Yeah.

WC: That's so cool.

MC: It is cool.

WC: Okay, so you said your mom was an aspiring actress.

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: Did you fall into that, as well?

MC: Well, I think what happened, just by chance, is I went on an interview with her. It was something for her and they cast me.

WC: [laughs] What was it for?

MC: It was for a commercial.

WC: And how old were you?

MC: I was eight and I think at that point my mom knew that this would be an opportunity to bring money in for the family.

WC: Okay.

MC: So I became—got an agent. And I did not like it. It wasn't my thing and I was really shy. This was not something I wanted to do. I don't like being in front. I'm always a behind-the-scenes person, even today. It's just hard for me.

WC: Right.

MC: It's just not something I'm comfortable doing. And so I started doing acting and I started getting commercials after commercials. I was a redhead, freckle-faced kid
and that was kind of the cool thing back then. And so I was getting all this—these shows and it was just crazy and it kind of caused tension in the family. As much as it brought in money it also pissed off my mom because she was—

WC: Because you were successful and—right.

MC: Yeah, and I didn’t even want it and that’s—I think sometimes makes it worse, right?

WC: Right.

MC: Because I’m not even trying. And so I did some acting then, and then I really loved theater. I started theater in high school and it was my release. And it allowed me to be somebody else and I love that and just being someone else. And so theater brought me out of my shell. I started feeling a lot better about myself, feeling stronger. And I could see I was changing. I was becoming more confident. And so I had a very strong theater background and I started doing professional plays outside, even in high school, going to acting classes and just really putting my heart and soul in it. And so when the theater came for No Limits, it just seemed like a natural thing ’cause I did have the theater background. I was very much like John.

WC: Mm-hm.

MC: You know, John not talking; John shy; John struggling to be who he was and accepting who he was. And so the theater was a great way for John and for me to grow as human beings.

WC: And you guys, just go ahead and go to YouTube and put in “John Autry” so you can see his performance on Glee.

MC: Yeah, it’s beautiful.

WC: It will just bring you to tears.

MC: Oh, it’s just amazing.

WC: It’s—he signs—

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: —and speaks to John Lennon’s Imagine.

MC: Yeah.

WC: It’s phenomenal. On Glee.

MC: And what’s amazing about John is he gives back. Like he could just move on. But what does he do? He comes back to No Limits. He works with the kids.
When the parents come in and they just found out their baby has a hearing loss, I mean, it is painful—

WC: Oh, I’m sure.

MC: —to be at that meeting. And they’re crying and they’ve never met anyone who speaks, who are successful adults. And I’m like, “Oh! Hold on one second. John, come here, come here, come here.” And John walks in and he’s like, “Hey.” And they’re like, “Wh-what?” You know?

WC: [laughs]

MC: And they’re just so blown away by him.

WC: Right.

MC: And think about the power of that for a parent who is lost, has no idea what to do. And when they go on the Internet and they just see all this negativity about how they’re going to function at a fourth grade level, they’re going to have a hard time graduating from high school. And then you look at John, you’re like, “What?” And I go, “Guess what? There’s a lot of them.” [laughs]

WC: Wow.

MC: We have a lot of kids who are in college or graduated from college who are doing really well and successful. And to give that hope to a parent, there’s nothing better.

WC: Wow.

MC: Nothing better.

WC: How many kids are you currently working with?

MC: We have 600 kids a year that we work with—

WC: Wow.

MC: —nationwide with our theater program. We have a leadership class for the teens so John can come back for that, as well, and really teach the kids how to get through those hard times. Like that high school years where, you know, there’s a lot going on. So we can guide them through it because we want these kids to go to college. We really do. And if they decide not to go, that’s up to them but they better be college ready. We’re going to everything we can—

WC: Wow.

MC: —so they have that choice.
WC: So these kids—you know, I apologize, I’m jumping all over the place.

MC: No worries.

WC: So these kids that you’re serving, these 600 kids, so they’re in regular schools and then they come to you at night?

MC: Good question. So we have educational centers where it’s an afterschool program.

WC: Okay.

MC: So they’ll come after school. So during the day they do their schoolwork. Now, unfortunately a lot of these kids are not in great school programs. So some of them are in what they call self-contained classes, just with other kids with hearing loss. The problem with LAUSD and some of the bigger programs is that they’re throwing them in with other disabilities, so kids who maybe don’t speak or have autism. And it’s just a different disability. It’s a different need and so they’re not getting a lot of communication and they’re staying in these classrooms and not growing. I have so many people who, you know, will come and say, “Well, you know, Christian’s doing really well.” And I go, “But he can’t read and write and he’s nine.” And they say, “Well, he’s doing better than everyone else in the class.”

WC: [laughs]

MC: I’m like, “But you’re comparing the other five students. I need you to compare to the majority, where they’re going to have to get a job and they’re going to have to—”

WC: Wow.

MC: “—be able to communicate.” So the school system just is not providing what these kids need so we kind of fill in all the loopholes. So it’s required by teachers, if they’re teaching fifth grade, they must teach fifth grade material. But if they test these kids—and you’ll see on these things called IEPs, these little contracts by the school—that they function at a second grade but then they require the teacher to teach fifth grade. Well, do you think—if they’re functioning at a second grade, how are they going to understand fifth-grade material? So we can go back. That’s why our kids do so—

WC: Right.

MC: We go back and we teach a second grade, fill in all the things that they missed, get them up to third grade, fourth grade, and then eventually they’ll be on grade level. And the program at No Limits is—our goal is when they’re in our program for one year, they gain two years or more of language.
WC: Wow.

MC: So when they do it, within three years we can get them mainstreamed with their hearing peers.

WC: So they're coming in how many days a week after school?

MC: Three. It's hard.

WC: Three days a week.

MC: Yeah, it's a lot.

WC: And they're there 'til when?

MC: So they'll come at 3:30 and stay 'til 5:30, 6:30.

WC: Wow.

MC: And it's individual therapy but parents have to be in the classroom with them. So it's teacher-parent-child. And then we also have a literacy program so they'll be able to read and write. And then we also have some academic tutoring. Whatever they need, we're going to fill it. We have loaner hearing aids. We have STEM program, which is Science Technology Engineering Math. Parent education. Parents are required, two hours a week. They have to come to parent education.

WC: Sweet.

MC: And so the parents love it. But we require it because we say, okay, it can't be optional because we know this is a key to the success of these kids. So the parents learn how they can work with their kids at home. And remember, these are families who, some of them haven't graduated from middle school or high school.

WC: Right.

MC: So they're thinking, My kid's going to go to college? Are you sure? Is that possible?

WC: [laughs] So we are actually telling the parents what the potential of their child is.

WC: Wow.

MC: And so it's really emotional for them. And even a lot of these families feel such guilt because they don't have the financial means to help their child and that's really painful.

WC: Okay, so they're not paying for this.
MC: No, it's free.

WC: They don't have the means to pay for it. It's all free.

MC: It's free.

WC: How do you pay for it?

MC: Funding. We do a lot of grant writing. We try to diversify our portfolio. So we have about a third of it is grant writing. So we write a lot of grants. A third of it is events and a third of it is individuals. And so we're really kind of dividing it all up. So we have a big gala. We have some walk-a-thons. But we focus a lot on diversifying our revenue. And we've doubled our operating budget the last five years and a lot because of Paul Mitchell, what you guys have done for our kids. We've been able to open up new centers in Las Vegas and Oxnard. The cool thing about No Limits is we're frugal. Like we—if we can get it for free, we're going to get it for free. We're not going—

WC: Right.

MC: —to spend money on just wasteful things that we—if it's paper and pens and dry erase markers. We've got a wish list program and people donate all of that stuff so our expense is the teachers. We pay the teachers so the parents don't have to pay. And the teachers give us an incredible rate. They could get double what they're doing but—

WC: Right.

MC: —they want to work with these kids.

WC: Right.

MC: And it's amazing, we have 100 percent of our kids go to college. One hundred.

WC: Wow.

MC: One hundred. So I'm really proud of that and we want to keep that going.

WC: Well, I don't want to, you know, brag here but I just put it out there so people realize, you know, what can be done. My Paul Mitchell students have donated, to date, over $600,000 to No Limits.

MC: [pauses and voice breaks] You know, I don't know how to thank you for that. I really don't. It's weird coming from poverty myself and so I know the struggles these families go through and if someone like a Paul Mitchell was out there for my mom to help her when she was struggling or for us to have food or for us to help with academics or any of that stuff. You know, I think about my brother and sister who really struggled and it's just—it would have changed the world, so.
WC: Right.

MC: Thank you.

WC: How much are these kids bullied?

MC: Oh. I think—I don’t want to just say kids with hearing loss are bullied ’cause a lot of kids are bullied outside of hearing loss.

WC: Right.

MC: But our kids get bullied but you know what’s interesting? This new generation of kids—we just had a leadership program and we asked them about bullying and they’re a little bit like—because we’ve kind of prepared them for advocacy, they have better advocacy skills than probably my own son because he’s not had to prepare for it. So they’re kind of funny to me. Like I was, “Oh, did you get bullied?” And like, “Yeah, I tell them they’re just idiots.”

WC: [laughs]

MC: You know, I’m like, “Oh.” Like they don’t care. Like they are like, “If they don’t like me then I don’t like them.” You know?

WC: Right.

MC: And so if they pick on them, they know to walk away. They know to tell a teacher but they don’t take it seriously. They just have—they feel really good about themselves.

WC: Wow.

MC: So the bullying has continued but their reaction has changed.

WC: You speak about deaf children having dreams. Why is that so important to you?

MC: I think having dreams gets you to the destination. It’s like, okay, we’re going to go to Chicago. Well, if you don’t get a map and figure out where Chicago is, you’re probably not going to get there. [laughs] So, for us, it’s having a dream, knowing where you’re headed. And if it’s college, let’s have that dream and let’s work on it and figure out the path to take you there. So a lot of times I’ll ask the parents, “What do you want for your child?” You know, “I want them to be able to get a job.”

WC: Right.

MC: “To be independent.” Well, “How are you going to do that? What are you doing as a parent to make that path as clear as possible?” So we have a college-going
culture at No Limits where we talk to the parents. You take the kids to universities—

WC: Hm.

MC: —and walk around the campuses and the kids are sometimes more amused by the Taco Bell and the arcade machine that they see at the colleges.

WC: Right.

MC: But then they go in the library, it’s like, “You guys are going to go to college.” And it’s like, “Wow. I can go to college, too?”

WC: Wow.

MC: And, you know, for me, college was never discussed in my family. So none of us went to college and it wasn’t 'til I was 23 that I went for my undergrad.

WC: Yes, Doctor.

MC: [laughs]

WC: So I was told that deafness is the number-one birth defect?

MC: I know. Isn’t that crazy? Thirty-three babies a day are born with hearing loss.

WC: Wow.

MC: And it's—90 percent, like I said, are hearing parents.

WC: Wow.

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: So what is the difference between deaf and hard of hearing?

MC: Well, there's—the medical term deaf means you have the inability to hear but hard of hearing is where people feel that you're probably speaking. You have a lot more hearing than someone who's deaf. There's a big controversy over it now because we don't really know, like if you ask a deaf person, “Are you deaf?” they would think, Well, I don't sign so I guess I'm not deaf. But they have profound loss so they are clinically or medically deaf. Because it means more than just the medical term; it means culture.

WC: Got it.

MC: So if you're a Big D Deaf, means signing only. For our kids, John would describe himself as Deaf because he's very comfortable with himself.
WC: Okay.

MC: But the fact is if you take off your hearing aid, you can't hear anything.

WC: Got it. And why did you choose deaf children? I mean, is there deafness in your family?

MC: There’s no deafness. There’s no deafness in my family. I don’t know anyone who’s deaf. Maybe people ignored me. I don’t know. But I just love it.

WC: How did you—

MC: [laughs]

WC: 'Cause you were a speech therapist.

MC: Well, I became a speech therapist after I decided to go in the field but it was one of those things. I was working in the entertainment industry my whole life and wasn’t satisfied with that and just decided one day, you know what? I know sign language. I had been learning it through the years. I think it’s a beautiful language. And I quit my job and basically volunteered for a year in the deaf community, signing at signing programs, working with kids who sign, and then decided I’ll get my masters and become a teacher of the deaf.

WC: How difficult was it for you to learn how to sign? And are you pretty fluent?

MC: I’m pretty good.

WC: Yeah?

MC: I mean, I’m pretty good. I feel like—for our kids, it takes about three months. Someone my age, it takes a little bit longer, a couple years.

WC: Ah.

MC: Like where you’re really able to be fluent or be certified.

WC: And how did you learn?

MC: You know what? I didn’t know anyone deaf so I did a lot of reading books and then when I worked in the deaf community, they were all signing so I learned by meeting other deaf people that I didn’t really know.

WC: So was there like a turning point for you where you got so specific with working with low-income, Latino families in the deaf world and that you need to create a children’s theater?

MC: Yeah.
WC: What was the turning point?

MC: Well, when I first started, it was with John. That was the reason I started the theater group.

WC: Right.

MC: So I got other kids to do that. So at that point, it wasn't necessarily low-income families or Latino families, it was all families I can help with the theater program. Then I started doing the theater program and people said, “Well—” someone called me from New York, “Are you going to come out here?” And I’m like, “Hm. I’m just in LA.” They’re like, “Well, we want to do it out here.” So someone funded it, brought me out there and I did a New York show. And then someone from Connecticut, I had just got back to LA and they’re like, “Will you come up to Connecticut and do it here? I just saw the show. Our kids need it.” So all of a sudden I’ve been asked to go and I was flying everywhere [laughs] and doing all of this craziness and what I learned was, as I was talking to the families, the low-income families were struggling. And I could close my eyes, Winn, and I could tell you by just listening to the kids’ speech who had the money to get private therapy and who didn’t.

WC: Okay.

MC: And that just didn’t seem fair.

WC: Right.

MC: So I came back to LA and I said—I went to my board and I said, “We need to start an educational center and we’ve got to help these low-income families have an equal playing field. It’s unfair that this hearing loss—if you have money, your kids are probably going to do okay. If you don’t have money, your kids are going to be at a fourth-grade level by the time they get to high school.

WC: Wow.

MC: And like it’s not an intellectual thing, right? It has nothing to do with your brain. It has to do with the fact that you didn’t get the services or the resources. So there was no way I was going to allow that to happen. So we take the underdogs. I mean, I get calls from people, they say, “Look, this parent—you know, I don’t think you should take them. Their kid’s not going to do very well. They’re never going to learn to speak. Don’t waste your time.” And I’m like—

WC: Wait. That call comes from who?

MC: Oh, implant centers, people with—audiologists. And I’m like, “Whoa, I’m sorry but we don’t really know that. So I don’t think we should be making those assumptions.” And then what happened is, when I started 20 years ago, the fact
is that hearing aids weren’t digital at that point, cochlear implants were just coming out, so it was going against the norm.

WC: Mm-hm.

MC: So they were thinking, Why are you doing this? Why are you helping these kids who are never going to succeed? But thank God I did because the kids did fine. They’re all doing really well. I mean, every single one in our program, you know, is in college or graduated from college. So, I mean, thankfully, you know, I wasn’t going to be so narrow-minded and just assume that they’re low-income, that they’re never going to make it.

WC: Talk to us about advocacy.

MC: Hm.

WC: So are you going into public school systems to educate on how to properly provide services and resources for kids who are deaf?

MC: Well, what we—

WC: Are you helping, you know, governments change laws and—?

MC: Well, we’ve been fighting a lot for advocacy because there are some certain things that are just absolutely crazy. For instance, at the schools in LA, if a child can afford hearing aids—so they go to the school and the school says, “Hey, we’ve got loaner hearing aids. You can wear them during the day.” So you’ve got your little four-year-old, little five-year-old borrowing these hearing aids at school. Seems terrific, right? At least they have sound. They’re learning. When they get to the bus stop, the teacher puts out their hand and the kid has to give back the hearing aids. So they go home at 2:30. What happens from 2:30 ’til the next day?

WC: Wow.

MC: They have no connection to their family. They have—and they start to cry because they like their ears. They like to hear. And so we really fought against that and now that has changed where they’re—they were allowing people to have iPads or students to have iPads [laughs] they could take home.

WC: [laughs] But no—

MC: No hearing aids. Like that doesn’t make any sense.

WC: Right, right.

MC: So it was a really easy argument once [laughs] iPads came in. But for us, we are about educating and advocacy for the families. Our parents go out there and
advocate for their child but what we ask them to do is pay it forward. So they have to take two families a year—

WC: Mm-hm.

MC: —and teach them the advocacy skills that they learned at No Limits, outside of No Limits. It can’t be a parent inside No Limits. They’re getting the services they need. So a family who can’t come three days a week, who doesn’t have the resources to get out; they’ll go to them and help them become advocates. ‘Cause the best thing a parent can do is to go into that meeting and be prepared.

WC: Fight for their child.

MC: And fight for their child. Say, “I’m sorry, that’s just not enough. I won’t sign it. I’m not signing it. Better figure something out.” And they know exactly what to do. So the No Limits families is hilarious now because the school system’s like, “Oh, you go to No Limits? All right.” Just like, you know, “Just get to the point.” [laughs] “What do you want?”

WC: [laughs] Right.

MC: Because our—they’re just knowing—

WC: Right.

MC: —that the parents are not going to back down.

WC: Do you help other organizations across the country, other foundations who are trying to do what you’re doing? You just said that they fly you out to Connecticut so that you could help that group put on a theater show.

MC: Right. So we work with a lot of schools across the country, also a lot of foundations who maybe give implants but they want to see the results of the implants so we can work with their kids and put theater productions on. A lot of our goal is to keep partnering and keep educating about the abilities. And sometimes you’ll get a school who works with children with hearing loss and they’ll say, “Well, is it okay if they just read their lines?” And I’m like, “No.” [laughs]

WC: [laughs]

MC: “No. They’re going to memorize them.” They’re like, “But he’s only seven.” I’m like, “Oh well, we have five-year-olds,” so they memorize their lines. [laughs] So it’s even teaching the educational, you know, system and the educators to keep their high expectations.

WC: Expect more.
MC: Expect more from them.
WC: Right.
MC: “They’re not going to—.” No, no, no. You’re not—and then sometimes I’ve come—the last week I come to all the shows and I’ll see that the teachers are mouthing the words to the—
WC: [laughs]
MC: Like giving them the lines. And I’m like, “No, no, no. They have to kind of go up there and figure it out.” Because you don’t know what’s going to happen on stage. And so, but I remember Kathy Buckley saying to me, “Oh my gosh, Michelle, you’re so tough on the kids. Like give them a break.” And I’m like, “Oh, no, no.” We have to keep the expectations high ’cause once we start lowering them, the kids will lower them, too. And the fact is that these kids are professionals on stage who are absolutely amazing. You would be shocked on how well they speak, how well they follow directions. And we had the Learning Channel and PBS do a show on the kids and they featured us and they went backstage and saw how the kids changed costumes and did everything on their own. They were very independent. They said, “We’ve been to professional productions and there’s more people helping the kids than you do.” And—
WC: Wow.
MC: —it’s because we want to teach them life skills. We want them to be able to achieve their dreams.
WC: Who writes the shows that they’re performing?
MC: I do.
WC: You write? [laughs]
MC: I—[laughs]
WC: Geez.
MC: You’ve got to remember—
WC: Don’t tell me you’re sewing the costumes and everything.
MC: Well, when I first started I didn’t have any money and I was living in my one-bedroom apartment and I put everything on my credit cards. Now, thankfully, we have, you know, costume people and set designers and stuff. But with the plays we wanted them to be original ’cause I didn’t want anyone to have, like, the better part or the lead role. I wanted everyone to feel like they had a lead role. So I’m able to write the plays where everyone has equal access on stage.
WC: Ahh.

MC: It was really important to me. Also, if a child like John always—he doesn’t hear his “s” sounds. So even today he doesn’t hear “s” or “sh” or the “th” sound. So but he still needs to know how to pronounce them, right? So I can take a name, a character that I wrote named Hank and I can change it to Sam. So John would have to—I would say, “Which character are you?” and he would say, “Am.” And I go, “No, it’s Sssam.” And then I can practice the “s” sound just by using it and changing the character’s name. And it doesn’t impact us in any way so I can change words in the play based on the needs of each child’s ability.

WC: Wow.

MC: So it’s really fun.

WC: Okay, well, back to John again. If he doesn’t hear—

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: —“s” or “sh” then how do you teach him to be able to speak it?

MC: Fantastic question. So he doesn’t hear it but he has had to learn grammar so he knows when—like when he was little he’d say like, “I have two dog.” And I’d go, “John, it’s two dogs. There’s two so you have to put an ‘s’ on it.” So his brain has now been programmed because he’s been practicing so long how to pronounce words and knowing that he’s not hearing it but he still needs to say it. But you’ll still catch him. I still catch him missing some of those words and—

WC: But wait a minute. So if he—when he says the “s” sound, does he hear himself say it?

MC: No, but he knows where his tongue’s supposed to be for the “Sam.”

WC: Wow.

MC: It’s pretty cool, huh? It’s just the whole function of the body and how the brain works and fills in all the gaps for him. He really would be a—you know, he’s thinking of getting a cochlear implant. He’s scared but he wants to get one. A lot of it is insurance right now. They’re about a hun—

WC: What would that do for him? What would change for him to do that?

MC: I—

WC: ’Cause he has hearing aids but what would that do?

MC: It would—if he received a cochlear implant, he would end up not having to work so hard.
WC: Okay.

MC: He works really hard to listen. He’s looking at you, he’s filling in all the gaps through his lip reading skills. If he had a cochlear implant, you could sit next to him, not look at him and—he would still need to get training but once he would receive the training, after a year he would be able to talk, maybe even hear his name behind.

WC: Okay.

MC: So if you said, “John!” he’d probably turn around. He does it sometimes but it’s usually, you know, because he knows that someone’s behind him, he might turn around but it would be pretty amazing for him.

WC: Educate us about the cochlear implant. Is it—

MC: It’s—

WC: You see it as it’s—

MC: Yeah. So the deaf community—

WC: So cosmetically—

MC: Cosmetically, you can see it.

WC: —it’s extreme.

MC: For boys especially, right? Because, you know, girls, you can’t even tell they have cochlear implants on. The girls cover them up. Literally, you cannot tell.

WC: Right.

MC: Boys with more hair—you, yourself, would be seeing a lot and John, too. You would see his implant.

WC: Huh.

MC: But implants used to be these big, huge sacks that would sit in front of your chest and you would have to have special pockets in your shirt and right now they look like hearing aids. They’re just bigger but then they have this—it’s called a magnet—

WC: Right.

MC: —and that receiver goes—and you can see it. So, just like CNN Heroes: they showed a picture of the implant and there was like these comments about the kids looking like robots and picking on the kids with some of the responses. And it was really painful because these kids saw it.
WC: Gosh.

MC: And it's like this is allowing these kids to hear. I mean, hear crickets, hear birds.

WC: Right.

MC: Hear their stomach growl, which is kind of terrifying 'cause they just really didn't think the stomach made noise. So when they said like, “Oh, my stomach is growling,” they just thought it was [laughs] a term and they’re like, “What is that sound?” They’re like, “Oh, your stomach’s really growling.” So they can hear sounds that are just absolutely amazing. So—

WC: Did you hear about that father who had—

MC: Yes!

WC: —a tattoo.

MC: A tattoo! I love that!

WC: Yeah.

MC: Wasn’t that awesome?

WC: ’Cause his—tell the story.

MC: So he has a baby, a little girl who has an implant and so he had no hair and he just, he tattooed an implant so he would be like his daughter.

WC: Yeah.

MC: Or his daughter would be like him. But it was a beautiful moment. And the cochlear implant today, like if you talk to our kids, our kids don’t care. Like they really—it doesn’t bother them.

WC: Right.

MC: They say now kids with digital devices or hearing devices will wear their implant more than they will wear their hearing aids because they get so much value out of it. Kids when they are like middle school, high school—we have a couple kids now who, you know, they think Oh gosh, if I can get away with not wearing it, people won’t know and I’ll have more girls or more boys, or whatever they, you know, they’re trying to date and it just feels awkward.

WC: Mm-hm.

MC: With the implant, those kids tend not to take them off.
WC: I hear that at one of your productions, Jerry Seinfeld showed up and you guys turned him away.

MC: Yeah.

WC: [laughs]

MC: Yeah. So I was at my first show. Winn, it was my first show. I didn’t even know anyone was going to be coming let alone, you know, Jerry Seinfeld. So it was at this theater that I had had all my acting classes at so I knew it well. It was called the Beverly Hills Playhouse. It’s a beautiful little theater and I was so nervous. I was crying like three days before thinking, What the hell have I got myself into?

WC: Right.

MC: What if the kids don’t hear on stage? And there was a volunteer and she was at the door and I said, “Look, once I shut the door, do not open the door because the light will come in and it may distract the kids.” I didn’t know it was her first time on stage. I said, “Absolutely no one.” She’s like, “Okay, Michelle,” you know? So Jerry Seinfeld gets there late with his manager—who’s very famous, George Shapiro—comes in and he’s like, “I’d like to see the play.” And she’s like, “Well, Michelle Christie—”

WC: [laughs] Oh my gosh.

MC: [laughs] They were using my name, “—said no.” He’s like, “Who is this Michelle Christie?” [laughs] “She said no.” So I don’t even know ’til afterwards, after the show. She comes and she goes, “Do you know Jerry Seinfeld, that really famous comic? He was here.” I go, “He was? He saw the show?” She goes, “Oh no, I didn’t let him in. You told me not to.” [laughs]

WC: [laughs] Oh my gosh.

MC: And I was like, [screams] “AH!” [laughs] You know? At this point, literally no funding, no grants, no budget. So it was pretty hilarious.

WC: Did you connect with him later at another point?

MC: Well, George Shapiro called me and yelled at me. He put a voicemail message on and he said, “Hi, this is George Shapiro. I’m Jerry Seinfeld’s agent or manager and he—uh, I don’t know, there’s some Michelle Christie or something—.” Now, he doesn’t know that I’m the CEO, you know, secretary, costume designer, playwright. He’s like, “I need to talk to this Michelle Christie who would not let us in.” So I called him back and I explained the situation. He goes, “Oh, it’s okay.” He was very cool about it. But I’m like, “You can come back anytime.”

WC: So did he? Did he ever—?
MC: No.

WC: Okay. But you work with some pretty famous, famous people. I went to an event, a fundraising event for you and it was Jay Leno was the one that was—

MC: [whispers] I know.

WC: —performing that night. And Oprah did a show about you.

MC: Yeah. It’s been—and then we—oh my gosh, we went to this event where I was being honored and then found out President Bush was being honored, too.

WC: Sweet!

MC: I was like, “What?!” And so that was pretty funny and President Clinton was in the audience and so.

WC: Oh my gosh. Well—

MC: Yeah but Katie Perry was performing that night so they were much more impressed with Katie Perry than all of us.

WC: Oh, I doubt it. I doubt it.

MC: [laughs]

WC: I mean, you’ve received all kinds of—you received the George Washington Medal of Honor award, Hearing Angel Humanitarian Award.

MC: Yeah but, Winn, you know this. Like you know all the awards—it’s really waking up in the morning and—

WC: Right.

MC: —being grateful for what you do. And so that’s where I’m at. I don’t—all the awards or even the CNN Heroes is really embarrassing and it’s humbling but it’s a little bit like, “Oh my goodness.” But if it brings—

WC: But it spreads the word.

MC: It spreads the word.

WC: Yeah.

MC: And that’s the reason why it’s important and we’ve—

WC: Yeah.

MC: —received so much—
WC: Oh I'm sure.

MC: —you know, positivity coming from this. It’s been amazing. So the shy, little five-year-old who doesn't [laughs] want to be in front of anyone, you know, has learned it has to be the face of—

WC: You have to.

MC: —No Limits. You have to do it—

WC: You have to do it.

MC: —to get—’cause you have to help the kids and so you have to overcome those fears.

WC: How did you get to Kennedy Center and Carnegie Hall with your show?

MC: Well, we ended up doing this one show that we wrote called, Timeless Journey, and we were partnering with a school out in Washington, D.C., and we thought, Well, let’s just present it to the Kennedy Center and see if they’d be interested in having our kids perform, and they were all on board.

WC: Geez.

MC: It was amazing. It was the first time in history deaf children who speak were onstage. And it was amazing, a full house. It was so incredible.

WC: So how many people were there?

MC: There were like thousands. It was like weird. I was shocked. I just sometimes—I’m always like, “How did they learn about this?” It’s great.

WC: Can I ask you, how difficult is this for you on a personal level?

MC: Hm.

WC: ’Cause I know you’re a single mom—

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: —with a 13-year-old boy.

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: I mean, that’s stuff right there. I know that you got attacked a lot after the CNN Heroes thing.

MC: Mm-hm.
WC: So I'm sure you—you said a lot of positivity but you got—

MC: Yeah.

WC: ——brutalized.

MC: I think on a personal level, the 13-year-old, that's the joy of my life. There's no trouble there.

WC: Oh, he's adorable, too.

MC: He's a sweet, sweet boy. He makes my life so much better. I think at first I was shocked by the type of comments. Insulting children just seems unacceptable to me, you know?

WC: Oh, where are they? Who are these people? I will—

MC: Right, yeah. And so that part was shocking—

WC: Sheesh.

MC: ——you know, for me. And then when they attacked me personally about what I do, I don't mind if people have a disagreement about it but there were comments that were below the belt that had nothing to do with anything that I'm doing.

WC: Right.

MC: It was just their own personal debate. But I also took this as an opportunity, right? This is a time that we need to talk about this that you think it's okay to call people the B-word or like I think they called me a whore and like—I mean, just like it has nothing to do with what I do.

WC: How does that—[laughs]

MC: Oh, but you know what? I have to say I did get one good one that I've never been called: I was an inspirational porn star.

WC: Porn star?

MC: Oh, but inspirational.

WC: Oh!

MC: Because I just like I'm inspirational cause the video was—

WC: Where did that come from?

MC: [laughs] Because I guess the video, the two-minute video was inspirational so I must be an inspirational porn star.
When I interviewed Tara Conner, who was Miss USA that got busted for cocaine use—

— and so she’s, you know, sitting in rehab with a crown. I mean, not literally, but—

I know what you mean. Mm-hm.

Yeah, and so she said in the interview that I did with her that, you know, people call her a coke whore.

[laughs] Yeah.

“That’s it?”

“That’s all you got?”

And when we recorded that, again, Vance, who edits all my— he’s like, “Do you want to edit that out?” And I’m like, “No.”

Yeah.

No, I don’t.

I think—

Because—

Yeah.

—we’ve all been called stuff, you know? It’s like, “Really? That’s all you got?”

Yeah and I think for me, like just being called names that— like just things that are below the belt and have nothing to do with—I think it was more hurtful for my son because my son would see it. Because it was—

Oh my gosh.

— it’s there for everyone to see.

Right.
MC: And so, for him, you know, he just couldn’t believe that people would say mean things, whether it was me or somebody else. And what’s very cool is I wrote back to a lot of them and was able to kind of get them to understand what we’re doing.

WC: Hm.

MC: And it’s like once you start to understand—to make these quick judgements on anybody—I think I get more defensive when it has to do with the children or the parents. It’s like a parent has the right to make the choice of what they do and to say that these parents are cruel because they’re making their children wear hearing aids and that’s torture, I was like, you know what? If your kid can’t see, you give them glasses. So if these parents want their kids to hear and they give them hearing aids, that is up to them. And—

WC: Because I’m sitting here thinking I don’t really want to—I don’t care other than the porn star, that was—

MC: [laughs]

WC: —that was entertaining for me to hear. I don’t really care to hear what the comments were but I’m sure people listening to this like, “Wait a minute. She works with deaf and hard-of-hearing kids. How could anybody attack that?”

MC: Yeah, and the kids are all going to college—

WC: Wow.

MC: —it’s not like they’re miserable. But then they’ll actually watch the CNN Heroes—

WC: You horrible woman, you.

MC: And they do. They say these—but it wasn’t—it was just more shocking that they—you know what’s sad? This is what CNN said: they called me on it and they said, “You know what’s sad? Is that the people who are the ones criticizing, if you look at their social media text or Twitter, they don’t spell the words correctly. They don’t have good grammar.” And you think, Geez, these are the people who really need to get educated, too. Like they didn’t probably get a good education ’cause the school system failed them.

WC: If you had one dream for No Limits, what would it be?

MC: The dream I would have for No Limits is that it wouldn’t be needed.

WC: Hm.

MC: I would love to, you know, close my eyes one day, go up to the heavens, and know that the kids are getting everything they need during the day and that all the services that they’re receiving—because, you know, these kids should be
outside playing. As much as it's so much fun to be at No Limits and I would love to keep that part going, we can do that where it's not needed, it's just wanted.

WC: Hm.

MC: And right now it's a need.

WC: Hm.

MC: These kids will not do well, unfortunately, unless they get the services, and the majority of kids do not. The statistics over 40 years ago was 80 percent of people with hearing loss graduate at a third-grade level.

WC: Hm.

MC: Well, 40 years later, we're at fourth grade.

WC: Wow. Wow.

MC: That's terrible. That's unacceptable.

WC: What does the deaf community want us to know? And I've asked—

MC: Yeah.

WC: —that question of people who were quadriplegics—

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: —or amputees or whatever else and it's usually like, “Well, just ask us, you know?”

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: “Don't pretend that you don't see us.”

MC: Yeah.

WC: “Come up and ask, 'How'd you lose your legs?'”

MC: Yeah.

WC: “What's that like for you?” So they—

MC: I think the deaf community wants us—I think they don't want to be forgotten. I think that they want to be heard. They want us to value their culture, which I do. I think it's so important that I'm actually wanting our kids to be part of it. But because they're being kind of stubborn with their rules, they're losing out and so I
would love to have that discussion of trying to listen to what they want. Like what do you really need from us? Because right now they’re not willing to listen.

WC: Hm.

MC: You know, they’re at a point where—they’re actually trying to put—pass a law, a federal law that requires and mandates that anyone who has a child with hearing loss must teach sign language only.

WC: That would never go through, would it?

MC: I don’t think so.

WC: I mean, how do you—[laughs]

MC: But that is what’s going through—

WC: Right.

MC: —and that if a parent did not teach their child language—sign language—that they would be considered neglect and they could be taken away. Their child could be taken away from them.

WC: Huh.

MC: That’s insane to me. It’s like a parent has a choice to do what they want to do. We can’t get into the homes, you know, and I think today it’s just scary for them and—I don’t know. It’s funny to me because I know the CNN Heroes doesn’t show any sign language but all our middle and high schoolers are fluent in sign language but they speak beautifully.

WC: Right.

MC: And they do both. So we’re not against it. And they didn’t see it so they made this judgement about it and, you know, that’s a shame. It goes back to what you said: ask the question.

WC: Right.

MC: Ask the question.

WC: What do your kids want?

MC: Hm.

WC: The rest of us.

MC: I think for our kids, I think they want to be asked instead of pointed to their ears and say, “What is that thing on there?” I think our kids love when someone goes
up and says, “What is that?” And they’re like, “Oh, it’s something that helps me
hear. It’s called a cochlear implant.” And they’ll just tell you all about it.

WC: Right.

MC: And they get excited that someone took the time. The other thing that our kids
really value is when someone listens to them and doesn’t give up. So as they’re
learning to speak, some of their—they’re hard to understand.

WC: Right.

MC: You know, it takes a little bit of time. And sometimes people will nod and go, “Oh
yay,” and then it’s—they knew that they had no idea what they were talking
about. And so they pretend they understand rather than getting out a piece of
paper and say, “What are you talking about? Are you talking about school? Are
you talking about your dog?” And then narrowing it down because when you give
that effort—

WC: Huh.

MC: —it says, “I believe in you. I believe that you’re going to do okay and I’m not
going to—”

WC: Wow.

MC: And so just giving them that respect.

WC: How do people get involved with what you’re doing?

MC: We are so lucky. We have such a strong foundation of volunteers, so anytime
anyone wants to volunteer, we are up for that.

WC: Or across the country.

MC: Yeah.

WC: I mean, ’cause you’re based in—

MC: Yeah. We’re based in—our headquarters are in LA. We have—

WC: You have a school in Vegas.

MC: Vegas and Oxnard.

WC: Right.

MC: And we have an office in New York. And so, for us, getting involved is just writing
us. We’re really responsive. We really want people to get involved. If they want to
do little fundraisers in their community, that’s great. We can set up fundraising
pages for them. We can have them come work with the kids if they want to. If they just want to sponsor a costume; to maybe sponsor a gala; any area, we will take and receive. And I’ve got to tell you, we’re really—try to be really good about showing our gratitude ’cause when we get—oh my gosh. How many times we’ve jumped in the air from Paul Mitchell. But, you know, you get a check in the mail or they came and did our documentary and they did the hair and makeup for our documentary. I mean, just the joy we feel.

WC: Mm-hm.

MC: It’s just such a wonderful thing to see so many people giving up their time for our kids.

WC: Talk to somebody who is listening to this, doesn’t matter where—

MC: Mm-hm.

WC: —and they know a family, they know a kid or it’s in their own family that’s struggling with, coping with a son or daughter or a friend might have hearing loss.

MC: I will get on the phone with you anytime.

WC: Right.

MC: Michelle@nolimitsfordeafchildren.org. I—write me, call me. I will get on the phone. I will talk to every parent. I do it all the time for families. I don’t care—you don’t have to be low-income. I’m telling you, the pain is the same whether you have money or you don’t because you’re still lost, you’re still confused. Think about it: 90 percent of families are having these kids, they’ve never had anyone in their family have a hearing loss. They have no idea what to do, where to go. And yes, they have resources but it doesn’t make it any easier when you still feel confused and lost and the future feels like it’s going to be a long journey.

WC: Hm. Oh my gosh. You’re amazing. Do you have a final message?

MC: I—my final message would be: be a Mrs. Smiley, you know?

WC: [laughs]

MC: Just be a Mrs. Smiley. I know it’s a crazy thing but it could be just random acts of kindness and you don’t have to get recognition for it but just—you know, sometimes just, if you see anybody who has a special need, go up to them, say hello, make them feel like they’re part of this world. Don’t ignore them. Do little acts of kindness, even if it’s as simple as buying coffee for the person behind you, you know? It’s just those little things where people—we keep spreading love and giving and I feel like it just makes the world a lot better place.

WC: Hm. Beautiful. Michelle, thank you so much—
MC: Thank you.

WC: —for doing this. I mean, I love to be using this platform with MASTERS to educate our listeners on all sorts of things. But just the inspiration that you deliver is, oh—

MC: Love you.


MC: Mwah.