

MASTERS Audio Club, February 2017
Jason Wahler, Reality TV Star
Tara Conner, Miss USA 2006



Jason Wahler is a TV personality, actor, and host known for his roles on *Laguna Beach*, *The Hills*, *Celebrity Rap Superstar*, *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew*, and an *E! True Hollywood Story*. **Tara Conner** is a model, advocate, and beauty queen who was Miss USA 2006 and also competed in the Miss Teen USA and Miss Universe pageants.

Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, Jason and Tara were completely transparent about their struggles with addiction and how they transformed into the beautiful lives they now lead.

Jason Wahler

Winn: Hi everybody, Winn Claybaugh here, and welcome to a wonderful issue of MASTERS. And I just love the platform that I have from month to month to send out some wonderful messages. And you can imagine in 20 years we've addressed all kinds of different topics and had a lot of fun and interviewed some pretty incredible people but I've never approached this topic. And it's going to be the topic of addiction and recovery. And so I'm sitting here with Jason Wahler. Welcome, Jason, to MASTERS.

Jason: Thank you so much for having me.

Winn: This will be real, real, real casual and a lot of fun. I used to plan these things out and then they sounded planned out so now we just—it's just you and I chatting. I'm going to read a lot of this and then I have a ton of questions here. So Jason Wahler is a host, actor, and TV personality who appeared on *Laguna Beach*, *The Hills*, *Celebrity Rap Superstar*. I don't think I've heard of that one.

Jason: We'll talk about it.

Winn: Oh, okay. Not one of your finest moments or—?

Jason: No, definitely not. If you can imagine me rapping—

Winn: I don't see you as a rapper. I don't—

Jason: It didn't pan out well.

Winn: Okay. *[laughs]*

Jason: *[laughs]*

Winn: *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew* after battling through a public struggle with addiction. And we'll kind of talk about what does a public struggle look like and feel like. However, you've been sober since July of 2010. Jason has dedicated his life to raising awareness towards addiction in hopes to one day change the public's negative perception of this deadly disease. Through your hard work and dedication, the *E!* Network did an *E! True Hollywood Story* on you. Did that turn out okay?

Jason: So when the *E!* Network came out with that, it was one of the most eye-opening experiences of my life because it was able to show my life from the very beginning of my struggles to where I'm at today. And it was unreal to be able to see that, visually.

Winn: Was it easy to watch? Painful to watch? *[laughs]*

Jason: It was very emotional because when you're in the depths of addiction, you don't really realize what you're doing. You know, you're blinded by a lot of the things that are out there. You know, I mean, it's such a false sense of reality when you're in that, so. It was very emotional but overall it was rewarding.

Winn: 'Cause I've heard from other people if *E!* calls you saying that they're doing an *E! True Hollywood Story*, that's not necessarily good news. *[laughs]*

Jason: Yeah, that's right. And that's what was scary about it. So it was—it ended up being okay, though.

Winn: Okay, good, good. You are the founder and owner of Widespread Recovery in Laguna Beach, California. And your goal is to set the standard in aftercare, which we can absolutely talk about as well. There's a lot more here that we could read and talk about but you've received lots of awards. You're honorary board of The Prism Awards, Entertainment Industry Council, the Los Angeles Mission, The Brent Shapiro Foundation as well as contributing to the highly respectful *Huffington Post*. So, is this kind of like "before" and "after" life for you?

Jason: Yes, in many ways. I mean, by surrendering and taking direction and kind of exiting out of the limelight, I was able to, you know, really focus on self, and a lot of amazing things were able to come to fruition for me through the process of, you know, doing for others as I want done for me.

Winn: Mm-hm. So how bad did it get?

Jason: Let's see. So—

Winn: By the way, we like to talk about our failures just as much as we talk about our successes, you know? People need to know.

Jason: All great change proceeds through chaos, you know?

Winn: There you go.

Jason: And that's the biggest thing that I learned. Well, we'll start with I had 22 arrests.

Winn: Twenty-two—

Jason: Twenty-two arrests.

Winn: —arrests.

Jason: And I went to nine different treatment centers from Florida to Hawaii and every state in between.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: So I did a tour with that. That was from the age of 18 to 23. And then I went to three different psych wards. And then I should have had a successful suicide attempt but I was found—

Winn: Hm.

Jason: —in the time, which I'm more than happy to express about. I'm an open book. You know, by expressing vulnerability, it creates humility and that's something that I'm a firm believer on. If people are going to judge me based on who and what I went through, that's on them.

Winn: So it got pretty bad.

Jason: It got very bad.

Winn: So when you were on a show like *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*, obviously that was still during your—

Jason: It was—

Winn: —addiction period.

Jason: Yes. During the shows, I mean, I was in just—the addiction really started to kick in at the very beginning of it and it progressively got worse through every episode, every season.

Winn: Was it drugs and alcohol or all of the above?

Jason: Alcohol is my main substance but I definitely got into cocaine pretty heavily. But after those two were combined, it was anything goes. I never got into opiates. I didn't like being down. I'm very high with energy and I don't like that to be disturbed.

Winn: Right. And how much of your character—I guess it was a—

Jason: It was a soft-scripted—

Winn: Okay.

Jason: It was—they say that these shows were what revolutionized the TV industry, due to the way it was shot. You know, they had the *Real World*, which was like a reality-based show. These were—they were formatted as reality shows but they were soft-scripted. There wasn't actual scripts but there was producers, there was directors. I mean, we had a whole set of people—which this kind of led into like *The Kardashians*, it led into *Jersey Shore*. You know, some of those successful shows, they were able to capture and shoot, get a very big audience for a lot less money, you know, than what they were doing on cable.

Winn: And how much of your addiction played into the character that you presented?

Jason: Oh, it became—the addiction played fully into the character. I mean, it was—like I said, I had such an overinflated ego, underestimated sense of self-worth, and I always projected who I was through the things I had and never really looked internally. So, I mean, it just kept feeding it and feeding it. So it was feeding an empty void but it was, you know, the addiction just kept progressing.

Winn: Did that become like a highlight of the show? Like, “Ooh, let's get Jason screwed up because that'll play into—”

Jason: *[laughs]* It really created a character, for sure. I mean, I was—my wife is sitting here so please excuse me, honey—but, you know, I mean, I was caught publically cheating. I mean, I was—I mean, things that I just thought that I would totally get away with, forgot that I was shooting a show. I mean, I would do things that were totally not of my character, no morals. You know, my addiction took away everything that I had learned 'cause I was raised right. You know, I came from a great family and stuff and my parents, they were amazing parents but my addiction took over and it just capitalized through the shooting. I mean, over time it became worse and worse and, you know, I was the guy's guy, kind of like the person that was the womanizing, you know, kind of guy who would always get in trouble. So it gave me a character that worked for TV and it kept working and working and then all of a

sudden it became to where it became real life. And that's when the rubber hit the road and it was not fun.

Winn: So what was the final straw, so to speak?

Jason: The final straw was—so—*[sighs]*

Winn: Well actually, I guess there were a couple of finals, you know? *[laughs]*

Jason: Well, and that's the thing, is I—the big thing with addiction is people are always talking about you have to hit a bottom, which I don't believe is the case. I mean, I—like I said, through all the different arrests, through the different treatment centers, through the hell I put people through, I mean, the relationships, the friends I lost, all those things. I mean, I actually got sober in a spot where, you know, I went to a really deep, dark place when I tried taking my life. It wasn't contemplation, it wasn't a cry for help. I committed. I took a bunch of Antabuse pills. I took a fifth of vodka, drank it, took a bunch of Antabuse pills and then washed it down with another fifth. And I remember exactly—it gives me goosebumps to this day—I mean, just really remembering like saying, "This is it." You know? And at 22 years old.

Winn: Wow.

Jason: And by the grace of God, the person I was dating at the time came back and found me 'cause she forgot her wallet. I mean, I'm literally here because of a wallet.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: And, you know, I remember waking up in the hospital with black tar all over me, you know? And I was like, "How—" I couldn't even get out this way. I mean, I've survived all the fights, survived all the—just the negative situations I put myself in. But the turning point was—and it's getting to that—is through all these things, that wasn't enough to get me sober.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: And I remember going into a therapist's office with my parents, which I had gone into often. And for some reason, I don't know what it was, I'd gotten—I'd actually done well after that for about six months and then I got a DUI. Which—I only have one DUI, which is more than enough but people think I have a ton.

Winn: Wait, so all the other arrests were—

Jason: Public intoxication, fighting, possession charges. But the—one of the last—actually the last arrest was a DUI. And I remember we were just sitting in a room—'cause that was just kind of like the straw that broke the camel's back

after everything. I mean, you'd think there were so many different spots but, I mean, I remember sitting in the therapist's office with my parents and they just looked over at me and—they've been married 36 years now, no actually 40 years—and we were sitting in the therapist's office and my dad looked over at me and I—he's like the patriarch of our family, you know, he's been strong and kind of that person—but he looked over and just kind of had a tear drop down and just said, "We don't know what to do anymore. We've tried anything and everything. We're just waiting for the—we're like two planks of wood, waiting for the phone call that you're dead." And for some reason, something clicked there. And I'd literally seen my dad physically—and my mom—physically age 10, 12 years in a matter of a year or two.

Winn: Wow.

Jason: I mean, just over that little period of time and I go, "You know what? I don't care enough about myself. I'm going to do this for them as motivation for the time being."

Winn: Hm.

Jason: And that was when my path to recovery started.

Winn: Wow. So what was the recovery that worked, though?

Jason: The biggest thing that—with the substance abuse and the things I struggled with is—look, the best of my decision makings kept getting me to the same places. I thought I was always the genius. I'd always thought I could process and, "I'm done this time." And that's the thing with addiction. That's the neurological, chemical imbalance. I mean, this is the only disease that tells you, "You don't have a disease." When you have cancer, you know you have cancer. When you have a tumor, you know you have a tumor. But this is the only disease that tells you, "You don't have one." And that's when I was at a spot—the biggest thing that I learned from Dr. Drew is I needed to surrender and take guidance, period. At that point, then that whole thing established a foundation, which transitioned into fellowship, which transitioned into service, which I maintain today. And that's what I do for recovery. That's how I stay sober, by—you know, there's nothing more gratifying than getting out of your head and helping other people and not looking for anything in return, which is the biggest thing. Addicts and alcoholics are the most present, more sensitive kind of humans that you can kind of adapt to and we have a problem staying in the moment. So a big part of it is for us to stay present. And that's what I do today.

Winn: Talk about the negative connotations that society has with addiction, alcoholism.

Jason: One, that it's a moral issue. That it's not a disease. That it's scumbags. That it's people that are no good, they're just—they're of no use or no value. That

they're kind of worthless is, I think, kind of like something that sums it up is—and that—either it's the bottom-of-the-barrel kind of people, I mean, just provide no true value to society and/or it's a moral issue and it's a choice. And look, addiction does not dictate who we are but it sure as hell doesn't justify our actions.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: When we're in active addiction, that's something that is very imperative for people to know is, is we're sick. And we're not saying we want you to say what we're doing is okay but also just to understand this is the only disease you can get yelled at for having.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: And it's all about approach.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: You know, times have changed. Look at the millennials versus what it was 30, 40 years ago. The militant way is the old way of working. I mean, it's—you approach it with love, compassion, let them know you're there, you're going to be there a hundred percent. You're not going to support negative behaviors, you're going to set a boundary and stick to it.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: But you will be there for them when they're wanting to do well and that you'll provide them opportunities.

Winn: Talk about the other stigmas revolving around addiction. When I interviewed a woman who—she calls herself a suicide-prevention activist.

Jason: Mm-hm.

Winn: And she said, you know, if somebody was going through cancer or—you wouldn't say, you know, "Hey, just, you know, buck up, you know, and just put a good face on and you'll overcome this." But that's what they say to somebody who's depressed.

Jason: Correct.

Winn: And I have a feeling that maybe there's that same approach—

Jason: Connotation, yeah. There—

Winn: Connotation with addictions.

Jason: Absolutely. And that's the biggest thing is people are so uneducated with this. And this is something that we're seeing. It's affecting one-fourth, if not more, of our population. It almost affects every single person. They know somebody that is suffering with substance abuse or mental health.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: But the education and lack of prevention that we have on this makes people have those negative connotations that are, you know, "Just why can't you do this?" or, "I don't understand that." And that's where I think a lot of this with education and studies on this is imperative for the growth of this. But, I mean, you nailed it. It's the exact same thing, "Why can't you buck up? Why can't you just stop this?" And it's one of those things, if you don't suffer with substance abuse or mental health to that severity of having to want to escape reality—'cause I look at it: there's no normality in escaping reality. It's like your body has sensors for a reason. When you're stressed, you're sad, you're mad, you're glad, you're happy, it's—your body's telling you stuff and you need to listen to it. But in general, that approach to people of, "Just buck up," or "Just do that," that right there is just—it's being naïve and lack of education.

Winn: When you and I first met and we talked, you said that you wanted to put a new face on addiction.

Jason: There is so much animosity toward substance abuse with all the insurance fraud, with the people that are running these companies. Sometimes these people are sicker than their own patients that are in their facilities that they're treating.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: And they should and I would agree with them on that. That there is a lot of people that are in this industry that shouldn't be in this industry. There's no standards. There needs to be a qualification—me and you, if we wanted to go treat somebody for cancer today, we couldn't go do that.

Winn: Right.

Jason: I mean, you have to go get you the proper education. You have to have those—you know, exactly, the proper education in order to get the certificates and you need to do the studies and all those things. Anybody can go open a treatment center.

Winn: Wow.

Jason: And it's asinine to that. So that's why we had this—we have a bunch of people—the symptoms of an alcoholic or an addict are lie, cheat, steal. You get these people that are active in their disease going and opening and

running these places. They're doing that within our industry and they're causing a lot of chaos and they're actually causing the people that are doing good work harm. But I can tell you today—I'd be confident in saying this—I'd say 70 percent of the treatment centers that are out there, I wouldn't refer to.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: That's a lot of treatment centers. And I—there are good ones out there.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: I know there are for a fact but it's unfortunate that there's more bad than good treatment today.

Winn: You opened up a facility in Laguna Beach.

Jason: Correct.

Winn: Did you get grief for that?

Jason: Uh, no—

Winn: Neighborhood doesn't want you there?

Jason: I'll be totally transparent with you. When we opened up—well, 'cause we do a different approach, too. We do a good neighbor policy. Before we open up we go meet with the neighbors, invite them over, let them know who we are, let them know if there's ever any issues or anything that they'll be contacting us directly. But we don't have a treatment center. We have a recovery residence that we opened up—

Winn: Tell us the difference then.

Jason: Well, recovery residence is it's not a medical facility. It's basically aftercare. So after somebody goes into detox treatment and does their IOP or PHP programming, which is partial hospitalization programming or intensive outpatient, then they would come to us. We're like the last step 'cause I believe it's not hard to get sober, it's hard to stay sober.

Winn: Right.

Jason: So our focus is the aftercare portion. But the way we set this up—'cause there's a ton of animosity towards sober livings. And when they're not run correctly, I would be in the same spot, too. I mean, I look at a sober living like us, which is providing solution to the community, we're of service to the community, we help out the Friendship Shelter, we help out within the whole community. We work as an asset with them.

Winn: Right.

Jason: As opposed to a nuisance to them. You know, we're not harboring a bunch of sick people. I mean, we have standards and qualifications that you have to have before you can come into our facility. You ain't coming into our sober living unless you have a minimum of 30 days sober.

Winn: Okay.

Jason: But we ended up having a ton of pushback in the beginning and now people are saying, "When are you going to open more?"

Winn: Huh.

Jason: Because of what we've been able to provide.

Winn: So how long are people with you, then?

Jason: So that's another good talking point that you brought up with substance abuse and mental health is 'cause there is no magic number. It's—everybody's different.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: Whether you had Joey come in that's a younger kid that's 18 years old but has no life skills versus a 35-year-old that has had a job, has had a career and stuff like that but needed to get re-acclimated. Joey might be with us for a little bit longer due to the things that we'd help with: the résumé building, help him with job placement, help him with—I mean, 'cause we've taught kids nowadays how to change trash liners. We've taught them how to do their laundry. I mean, some of these things that you would think that are a joke, we're really facing against.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: We're teaching a lot of these things so it's a lack of life skills and that versus let's say the 35-year-old that came in. He might only be with us for a month. He just needed to get that stabilization after he went to treatment. He needed that help re-acclimating back into society; going out to his natural stressors; be in life; bringing it back into a controlled environment so he can process these things. That's what we are phenomenal at doing because that's the hardest thing for me. I went to nine treatment centers and there was times when I really wanted to get sober but I just didn't have the skills to get out there. Like, okay you're contained. It's not hard to stay sober in a safe environment. When you leave and you have access to all these—the phones, the computers—all these different things, it is very hard to transition back in without assistance and that because you know—all you want to do is go to the easier, quicker way out.

Winn: Right.

Jason: When we know anything worth having is not easy.

Winn: Huh.

Jason: You know, and you've got to put forth that effort, so a big thing that we help with is that transition.

Winn: So people with you a week, a year?

Jason: Anywhere from, I'd say, a minimum of 30 to 40 days.

Winn: Okay.

Jason: And we've had somebody up for nine months.

Winn: Okay.

Jason: But we're also—too much treatment is not good. People need to understand that. That can be counterproductive. It actually can cause more harm than good. So we base it upon where they're at and where they are with their life skills and stuff. But when they come in with us, they have to be in work, they have to be in school, or they have to be continuing their programming with a vetted facility that we connect them with. And if they're not, we have them do service work three days a week until they are a part of one of those.

Winn: What kind of service work?

Jason: Working at homeless shelters, working at the LA Mission. We have them doing beach cleanup. We work closely with a church that has a—*[snaps fingers]* what do you call them—a thrift store. I mean, any kind of service work. We let them go down to the dog grooming place, walk the dogs. I mean, anything that you can think of, we adapt and adjust because everybody's different. We try to find what fits their best need and—but we want to get them motivated. Our whole approach with this is we want you to take ownership in your recovery. We want to find what you're passionate about. We want you to guide this, with assistance.

Winn: So when you were on *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew*, you were already clean.

Jason: I was already clean when I went on the show.

Winn: Okay.

Jason: So I went to a—I went to Florida—

Winn: Are all of them over—? Oh, no.

Jason: No.

Winn: Okay. So some are still using.

Jason: Some are still—yeah. Everybody was still using but me.

Winn: Really?

Jason: Yeah. I went in there—

Winn: And how long had you been sober?

Jason: I went in there about a month and a half to two months clean. I'd have to look at the exact dates but I would say it was at least a month and a half to two months clean. And when I went in there, you know, it was—I went in there to change the negative perception that society had on me. And I went in there like—I was like a background prop because, you know, unfortunately—and she's my dear friend—but Janice Dickinson or you have Leif Garrett. I mean, these guys are coming off some serious substances and stuff. I mean, they were really going through hard withdrawals and I was just kind of as an observer, you know what I mean? And it was seriously hard to watch.

Winn: So you were put—who were you in there with?

Jason: Janice Dickinson, Leif Garrett, Jeremy London, Jason Davis, Rachel Uchitel—

Winn: And how long were you there?

Jason: I was there for three weeks.

Winn: What's the best thing you learned from Dr. Drew and that experience?

Jason: Dr. Drew—the biggest thing that I still utilize every day, which was the surrendering, taking guidance and direction.

Winn: What does that mean for you?

Jason: For me, it was letting go. And—

Winn: I mean, I could ask your wife here, "Does he surrender?" but that's another topic.

Jason: Oh, man. Oh, man.

Winn: Yeah.

Jason: That part of it though, was—is, I had—and that's when he said, the best of your decision making keeps getting you back to these same places.

Winn: Right.

Jason: And that's what ego—I mean, that's what self-will—

Winn: Well like, “I know better.”

Jason: Yeah, exactly. And that was—that right there—the dumbified, layman's term version for me is what resonated.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: And I still have to practice that every day. Look, I—and that's the thing. That's why it's so important to be present. That's why they say, “Take it a day at a time,” 'cause if you go too far past that, our minds just domino.

Winn: And what do you surrender to? Like what's your process—are you surrendering to—

Jason: My higher power is God. I mean, I'm a Christian. You know, Jesus is my go-to guy. And that's my higher power that I surrender to and I pray to him every day.

Winn: Okay. What about other things—I was joking but surrendering to your wife. You know, let other people make decisions. Let other—were you the type that was the opposite of that?

Jason: Yes, a hundred percent. And—but that's pause. That's a big thing that I've learned with that. And yes, I mean, it's listening to other people. I used to—and I still probably talk too much but, you know, I mean, that's the biggest thing, is taking direction, learning to listen to others. I don't have all the answers.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: I've learned that. And I had to learn that the hard way. But, I mean, even for people that struggle with God or different things, people I work with, we'll go say, “Dude, go try to block that wave.” If they have a problem with a higher power or something that's more powerful than them—I've taken a lot of guys down to the water and I say, “Go try to stop that wave real quick.” And then, long story short is that becomes their higher power for the time being. And it's anything that you can just surrender to and let go and have peace at.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: You know? And just know that you can go to that place and feel confident.

Winn: Now you travel and speak. Who are your primary audiences?

Jason: My primary audience would be the college demographic. The younger—the millennials would be my demographic.

Winn: Okay. Do you ever speak to kids as young as in high school, too, or—?

Jason: I'm actually in the process right now with a few other colleagues and friends of mine, we're actually putting a prevention program together to start going to middle schools—

Winn: Huh.

Jason: —high schools. 'Cause we did some speaking engagements at the—you know, we'd get together with the mayors of the cities and stuff and put together speaking engagements for that but we actually want to go into the schools and go into some of these areas, you know, with a couple different doctors to have the backing of the medical practice piece of it with also what our lives were like. And to give people real examples of what it could look like without substances because life without drugs and alcohol—the freeing of the bondage of having that alleviated and not having anything dictate your life or control you is pretty damn amazing.

Winn: So when you go into college campuses, are you going in with your celebrity behind you? I mean, is that kind of your foot in the door? "Here's Jason, he used to be on *The Hills*," and that's how they play you?

Jason: Yes. That's—yeah. A lot of that because a lot of people—not—a lot of people today know that I'm sober, you know what I mean? But, I mean, a lot of people that are—especially through the—'cause our show reruns every year.

Winn: *[laughs]* So—

Jason: And so it's a constant reminder.

Winn: —you're still screwed up, man.

Jason: *[laughs]* Yeah. So when we go out there—

Winn: "Oh, I saw him last week. What a mess he is."

Jason: *[laughs]* But it keeps it fresh in those guys' eyes as, "Oh my God, that guy is sober now?"

Winn: Hm.

Jason: So it draws attention to it because, I mean, like I said, on the outside I was living the dream. And that's what it—you know, looking at the suicide piece—that's something I forgot to add in here, was at 18, 19 years old, I was already very, very successful. You know, I mean, this—I mean, the amount for

money, there was access, there was notoriety, there was, you know, there was fame. I mean, I was paid to travel, I mean, and party around the world. I mean, at 18, 19 years old most of your friends are looking for fake IDs and I'm like, "Hey, let's go on the plane. We're going to go to New York, do an appearance, get the nicest room and then make some money and then we'll come back." And, I mean, that's what I did. I'd do 30 states every six months.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: And like I said, at first I thought I was living the dream.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: I mean, I really did until I realized that I was living the biggest nightmare.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: And that's where it transitioned to be able to express that. Like the second biggest thing that I learned from Dr. Drew—and me and him are actually—we work together, he's my mentor now, which has been awesome. But the biggest thing is some people have old souls. He goes, "You've lived one." And that helps me relate to people because whether you're a 15-year-old or an 80-year-old, I can relate to a lot of different things that I've gone through personally in my life 'cause a lot of things that I've gone through, either you don't survive or you shouldn't see.

Winn: Right.

Jason: And to be able to put that into context on somebody that's fresh out of high school or somebody that's in, you know, their late 70s, 80 years old, I can connect with them.

Winn: Have you written down your story?

Jason: It's too scary. No. Through—like I said, the closest I've gotten to doing my story is the *E! True Hollywood Story*. You know, there's—like I said, that segment gives a very, very 50,000-foot view. But, I mean, there's some things that I probably should talk about that I haven't. I mean, just the different types—being held at gunpoint. I mean, just different things I put myself into that people probably don't know. Just being mixed up with the wrong crowds. Like I said, I mean, not only should I have died from the substance abuse, the amount I've used, to the car accidents. I mean, the fights I put myself in front of. I mean, there's some bad things that really took place. I mean, I'm very, very, very, very, very fortunate to be here.

Winn: Do you have a desire to pursue a career again in the entertainment industry?

Jason: I—

Winn: 'Cause I have a good friend who is a celebrity and she loves it when she's on the air because when she's on the air, then her charity skyrockets. Her—she has a bigger voice, she's able to get a lot more done, people listen to her and—so.

Jason: Well, so right now we are in the process of putting a deal together with Telepictures. Yes. So I would never—let me just start back with this: is I never, ever thought I would want to go back to the entertainment industry because I just was so fearful of what happened. I was very scared of that ever coming back again 'cause I know the temptations. That's why I had to remove myself from LA 'cause when I first got sober after like seven, eight months I was at an event and I noticed myself drinking eight or nine Red Bulls and I go, "This is addict behaviors." You know what I mean? Luckily I was there with a sober person and I had to remove myself. But I just know myself so well. But I finally—just reconnecting with Drew over the last few years and just kind of getting all these domino effects. I mean, I'm going, "If I can utilize this platform," and I feel like God put me here for a reason. Like I said, I think I went through this public hell—and I mean, 'cause having TMZ, all these different—*Us Weekly's*, the *People* magazines, all these—I mean, it was just boom, boom, boom, "Arrested Again. Arrested—" It was just all these different things and, I mean, that was the talk of the town and I wasn't even doing TV anymore. You know? It was just constantly—it was like, "When is Jason going to get arrested again?"

Winn: Right.

Jason: And—

Winn: I'm guessing you haven't kept a scrapbook of all of that.

Jason: I have.

Winn: Oh, you have?

Jason: I have—

Winn: Oh good. *[laughs]*

Jason: I have—do you want me—I'll tell you something that you'll probably like. Oh, she knows. She saw it yesterday.

Winn: Oh good.

Jason: I actually have my favorite mugshot in an 8x10 frame.

Winn: Okay.

Jason: By my bathroom.

Winn: And that's to remind you or—?

Jason: So I never forget where I came from.

Winn: Okay.

Jason: And that's something I'll never take down. I highly advise people to do that as a reminder. That exact photo is what—I remember when I got arrested, I was looking at the TV, pounding bock. I go, "And I can't believe you did this again," which is the insanity portion of that, you know what I mean?

Winn: Right.

Jason: That—and that photo used to make me cringe. I—that arrest made me not even want to go outside anymore.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: I mean, it was just so publically humiliating and to have that blasted everywhere—

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: —you know, was so hard. That photo that I used to drink over is now something I can look at and actually smile on.

Winn: So when you're in front of an audience—college campus—what's your message?

Jason: My message is that there's hope, there's a better way. That there's a full life to be able to live, that you don't need substances to get through your day-to-day, and that life is actually truly beautiful.

Winn: And what do they connect with the most?

Jason: A bunch of people come up and just say—and really respect—'cause a lot of—you know how many people are sitting in that audience that are suicidal, that are depressed, that really are so low and they feel like they're alone? 'Cause I was in that same exact spot that nobody could connect with.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: Because nobody was speaking out about that. To be able to get in front of them, for people—some people that, you know, look up to me or different things like that. To be able to connect, to be that person that's followed you for 10 years, you know, of your—whatever you want to call it—the career of the TV, the shows that I was on. I mean, to be able to see where they're at, to be able to have that hope and insight to these people. I mean, after—that's

the best part about those is having all these people come up to you after and say that they're—you gave them a different outlook. You gave them hope and inspiration and stuff. That's the most rewarding thing. There's no amount of money or drugs that can give you that.

Winn: And I'm sure you hear the stories, too.

Jason: Oh, hell yeah.

Winn: When you're that vulnerable, on a stage in front of a bunch of strangers then it kind of gives—not kind of—it does give people permission to come up and share—

Jason: I've had—

Winn: —horrific stories.

Jason: I've had people come up to me right there and say, "I need to go. I need help right now." I mean, I've had anything you can experience. I mean, that's like the beauty of this is being able to go be vulnerable, like I said, that's something the opposite of who I was. I was so closed. By doing the complete opposite of what I'd done, that's why taking direction and surrendering, you know what I mean, is transition. It completely transformed my life.

Winn: Hm. So how much are you out there speaking, then?

Jason: Right now with like—so going back to the TV component of this—right now we have a podcast, which is very similar to what you do. It's raising awareness and giving—we have all elements of life come in, whether it's somebody that's credible through the entertainment industry, a celebrity, to musicians to employees at McDonald's. I mean, anything you can think of. We have every walk of life that can come in and we discuss whether they need help, what they're going through. We have people that are actually currently on drugs that will come in and we're talking to them. So, I mean, we actually are doing a whole thing in a platform that's raising awareness around substance abuse. And getting people appropriate care is number one.

Winn: Okay.

Jason: Number two is—Tarek. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the show *Flip or Flop*. But a very close—

Winn: Is that a home show?

Jason: Yeah. It's a home show on HGTV. It's a really cool show. Him and I are doing a show called *What Gets You High* because your brain can produce more potent chemicals than heroin. You've just got to let it work.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: So we do a whole bunch of activities around natural highs. I mean, you know, things that get you going. And so we're doing a YouTube show called *What Gets You High* and we're actually having live callers call in and we will actually help them, whether it's anything from bocce ball to croquet to great white shark diving, paintball. I mean, we're going to experience and give these people a motive because so many people are so down on themselves every day. After you do something, you do some hard work and stuff, go reward yourself. You know what I mean? And so—'cause we're not implementing "this is what you're going to do every day for all day." It's more of "these are elements that you can take," because I've seen so many people when they come into our facilities and we tell their parents, "Oh, we're going to go golfing," or "We're going to go paintballing. We're going to do these different things," they go, "Why is he doing that?" I said, "When's the last time your son has genuinely laughed?"

Winn: Hm.

Jason: "When's the last time he's actually had a real heart-to-heart out exploding moment that was genuinely happy?" And that's when you get a lot of silence. And that's those transitions that they get to look forward to. That's them going out to the club. That's them going to do cocaine. That's them going to do heroine. Those things, you've got to let that body actively regenerate and recharge that.

Winn: The podcast that you do, this comes out how often?

Jason: It will be out every—so we've—we're shooting the—we actually are on episode number four. We're shooting six total first and then we'll be putting them out weekly.

Winn: Start releasing them.

Jason: Yeah, start releasing and then we want to have some backups just in case one of us are—well, for the podcast I'm on that solo but in case I get sick or something, we just want to have a backup.

Winn: Right, right.

Jason: And then those will be coming out weekly and then the YouTube—

Winn: And those are coming out when?

Jason: They'll be starting the first of January.

Winn: January 2017.

Jason: Seventeen.

Winn: Okay, cool.

Jason: Yeah, so—

Winn: And how do people find these?

Jason: People can find those, if you go to JasonWahler.com—J-A-S-O-N-W-A-H-L-E-R.com—that's where they'll be posted and also on iTunes. And then from there, like I said, we have an amazing opportunity: Dr. Drew and I are in negotiations with Telepictures right now on a TV series deal, so.

Winn: You told me that you were passionate about self-care.

Jason: Yes.

Winn: Talk about that.

Jason: Self-care is crucial. It is so easy to get inundated with work. I mean, it can—and that's the other thing with addiction. A big part of that is—for me, I get—since I've gotten sober I've—I get overly inundated with people wanting to help and I've got a very big heart and I sometimes forget to take care of me when I'm doing that. So a big portion of self-care is treating yourself and taking—

Winn: And what does that look like for you, then?

Jason: So, taking time. I mean, like today—and, I mean, literally in my schedule I've had to outline times of the day that I will literally block out for me whether it's going to get a manicure and a pedicure, whether it's going to go boxing, whether it's going to go hit golf balls with a friend. It's really just taking genuine time 'cause what my grandpa told me before he passed away was, "Life is all about the memories that you create, the love that you have, and the legacy you leave behind." And you've got to be able to take care of a couple of those things before you can create that legacy. If you're not taking care of self, you're not going to be any good for anybody else. My wife can surely attest to that, I know that. And she's a component of that because she pushes me. She knows when I get too inundated with work because, look, substance abuse and mental health parlays now into so many other things, whether it's sex, drugs, alcohol, gambling. It could be work. It could be working out. It could—there's so many different things that it parlays into and the way I look at that is if your life is out of balance and is getting affected by something negatively that's taking you away from what you should really be achieving—

Winn: Which, again, could be the gym.

Jason: It could be anything. It could be anything healthy.

Winn: Like people could say, “Well, how is this bad for me? I’m at the gym eight hours a day.”

Jason: But it takes away from you spending quality time with people that you care about or love or want to have—and that’s—everything comes down to balance.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: It’s having things in order and in balance.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: But anything that disturbs you of achieving what you’re really here to do, which a big part of that is spending time with families—I mean, whatever it is to you. That’s a part for me. But when I don’t do self-care and I don’t have that, I miss out on the things I want to do personally. And that’s very important for people to understand is you have to take care of yourself.

Winn: And how often do you have to remind yourself of that?

Jason: Daily.

Winn: Daily.

Jason: I have to remind myself daily of self-care. But it’s implemented. I get to see it in my wife. I get to see it in the people I work with. I get—I promote that because if—that’s the thing, too. It’s like Google, their whole success and how they take care of their employees. They do those kinds of—I mean, you scratch my back, I scratch your back. You know what I mean? And it’s by them doing well, you do well and vice versa.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: And it’s so important to have that. That’s why I love that you come see the people we work with, the energy that everybody has and the motivation and all that stuff, ’cause you’re part of your environment. You’re so like-minded with people that you surround yourself with and that’s what I love about this is I look at the people I hang out with today versus six and a half years ago.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: Night and day.

Winn: Hm. What are your self-highs, natural highs?

Jason: Oh man, where do you want to go with that? I mean, my favorite things to do—I’m an extremist. I love dirt biking, I love riding Harleys, I love shark

diving, I love scuba diving. My favorite one that I've ever had—well, obviously surfing—my favorite one that I've ever done is fighter jets. I was able to fly in some fighter jets with my uncle and my father-in-law.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: Which was—I'll never forget. But, I mean, go-cart—you name it. I literally—paintballing, snowboarding, skateboarding. I'm a pretty active person. Wakeboarding. I love outdoors.

Winn: Huh. Do you have kids?

Jason: Not yet.

Winn: Okay.

Jason: *[laughs]* I've got a big pup.

Winn: I'm just thinking maybe that will change when you— *[laughs]*

Jason: It will.

Winn: Oh, I'm like—'cause I have a daughter, a four and a half year-old daughter, and I'm afraid to do anything that's going to hurt me, you know?

Jason: And I'm sure that's going to be a big—

Winn: I'm a little—or a lot—older than you are anyway so I've got to—

Jason: No, you can't be.

Winn: I'm 57.

Jason: Yeah, right.

Winn: I'm 57.

Jason: Let me see your ID.

Winn: Really am.

Jason: I would not have guessed that. I was thinking 48 or 49.

Winn: He's giving me compliments on this—

Jason: I'm being truthful.

Winn: —for people—

Jason: It's an honest program.

Winn: —to listen to.

Jason: It's how I work.

Winn: Okay, okay. So talk about prevention.

Jason: Prevention. A big piece of prevention that we are focusing on is creating awareness around what addiction really is, which is the fact that this is a genetic, primary, chronic, progressive, and fatal disease. That is a big component that we're wanting to bring to this.

Winn: You said that just now like it's exhausting to say it because you probably have to say it a lot.

Jason: It—well, it is because you look at this, I mean, there's so many factual evidence out there. I mean, the fact that this is the leading cause of death in 18- to 40-year-old males is opiate overdoses. The fact that we are 5 percent of the population as America, out of the whole world, and we consume 90 percent of all prescription drugs.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: I mean, there's just so many factual evidence out there that I think people just need to be addressed. I mean, there's—I could go down a whole gamut of things that we could just—there's boom, boom, boom, that are just absolutely appalling.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: That people still want to justify these things as, "Oh, this is yours. This is you." I think a lot of people are actually in it and they don't want to admit it.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: Which is another thing is people need to be just—if we could get more people to be open and honest about this with prevention, having people that people look up to. That's what I'm trying to do is grab the people that I have in my circles. It doesn't mean you have to be of affluence or anything like that. It's—I'm trying to go towards the targeting areas—I call them "normies," people that don't suffer with substance abuse and mental health. I want to get those people. I want to go attack and talk to them. When I say "attack," it's bring awareness to them and talk to them. But just openly express my story 'cause a lot of—it's the same painting, different colors.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: I mean, everybody's—it's—I just did an interview with a kingpin, *America's Most Wanted*, on my podcast. He has a new show that's coming out on Lifetime. Me and him talked and a kid, a little kid from Laguna Beach that grew up in Emerald Bay—we had the exact same stories. We just came from two different backgrounds.

Winn: Wow.

Jason: And being able to express—I go—I looked at Leah when we were doing this and I go, "You've got to be kidding me." I mean, I literally was just in shock because I was like this is—literally *America's Most Wanted*. I mean, he was on the TV show *America's Most Wanted*. I mean, this guy was—I mean, this is a guy from like *American Gangster*. You would not want to cross this dude and I go, "Dude, this is the exact same story." If we can express that and it's like I said, my story won't maybe hit every single person and I know for a fact it won't. But the reality is if we can get more people talking about this from all elements—whether it's an eating disorder, whether it's primary psych issues, whether it's substance abuse, whether it's gambling—all these different things, we can have key components in talking about this, talk about it.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: And that's what prevention is, is just discussing the current issues that we're facing.

Winn: You encourage people, then, to tell those stories?

Jason: Yes. Get out there. And that's the biggest thing is people need—educate yourself. Talk to people that have gone through this. Talk to doctors. Talk to family members that have gone through this. Don't go on Google, you know? They need to go and educate themselves and when you go to facilities and you're looking at—go meet not only the marketing people, not used car salesmen that are going to sell you a product, go in there and meet the staff. Go meet the people that are working with the clients. Pull a client aside and say, "How do you like this place?" Really do that: the vetted interest and vetted searching for these. That's a big piece that I highly educate—or recommend people to do is do your research. Would you just randomly send your loved one that had a brain tumor to a random place? No. You need to look at this the same way.

Winn: Hm. What do they say? People spend more time picking out a pair of shoes—

Jason: A hundred percent.

Winn: —than—*[laughs]*

Jason: They—yeah. That's—

Winn: —these kinds of important decisions.

Jason: Yeah and I think that's—and it's hard, though, because, like I said, going back to the part with the insurance fraud: these different people that are in this for the wrong reasons. It's hard and I highly suggest that—'cause like I said, we can't do this by ourselves. My whole parallel with people is how can we link arms? 'Cause we need to partner with the like-minded people and make a movement to get these other people out of here.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: And so it's those like-minded facilities that are doing good work. Keep doing it and connect with the right people. You know, connect with us. We want to connect. We—you know, we have a hard time finding—you know, it's easy to find bad ones. We want to find those good ones, so. We want to raise awareness with the right people.

Winn: What's your best advice for somebody listening to this who is in the throes of addiction?

Jason: One, you're not alone. Two, there's a way out. And you are loved and cared and you are suffering with a disease and don't beat yourself up.

Winn: Hm. What's your best advice to a loved one of someone who is in the throes of addiction?

Jason: So when there's a loved one that's looking out for help, the biggest thing I could suggest to them is set boundaries immediately. Be there and willing to help a hundred percent if they're willing to do what's going to best benefit them. If they're not willing to do that, the painful process of this, it's tough love. You need to set those boundaries and step away until they are willing to get help. Literally every time they call you, you say, "You willing to get help?" "Nope." Click. And that you keep repeating those set boundaries because wherever there's an addict or an alcoholic, there's a co-dependent. And the reality of it is, is that's the—you're actually causing more harm than good to these people.

Winn: Did your family or friends do interventions with you?

Jason: They did. They did. But I was—my parents were—like I said, sometimes the alcoholic and addicts, wherever that co-dependent is, sometimes they're just as sick if not sicker.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: I knew how to manipulate the situation so well over my parents. I—and I say this but let me finish before anybody has judgement on it—but I hated Al-Anon. I hated that because that's what stopped my addiction. My parents

went to the Betty Ford program years ago, got two weeks of education on Al-Anon, and that's when a lot of this all—this all—there was a big story that kind of came into—

Winn: You couldn't fool them anymore. You couldn't manipulate the situation.

Jason: No. When I saw that the line was very clear, I said, "Okay. I get it."

Winn: Right.

Jason: So that was a big component of sobriety for me, too.

Winn: You said a lot of your recovery and staying clean and sober is service.

Jason: Correct.

Winn: Can you talk about that?

Jason: Yeah. I mean, service is one of the biggest things. You know, for me, like I said, with natural highs and—you know, when you see somebody come in—so Dr. Drew told me when I was looking at him and I came in here—you know, I had—it was my second birthday that I had for sobriety and he came in. Right when I walked in he goes, "This is exactly why I do this." And I was like, "What the hell is he talking about?" And when he expressed to see where I was when I came in, even though I was a little bit sober, I mean, the way my neuro—the frontal cortex was operating, the way your neurological, you know, chemical imbalance, all that stuff had to even out. The way all that stuff was to where I was at, he goes, "This is exactly why I do this, to see the growth and change." That piece for service, for anything, I mean, the biggest thing is helping people on a daily, trying to get proper help, proper placement, proper, you know, treatment, whatever that may be. But service is anything—I try to do something every single day. Do something nice for somebody and don't get caught. Whether it's opening the door. I mean, Starbucks. I'll always, in the drive-through, pay for the person behind me. I mean, I always do selfless acts on a daily basis. That, right there, by giving I get so much more. You know what I mean? And I'm such a component of that. I mean, helping out at the church, you know what I mean? Like I said, with the LA Mission, all these different boards I'm on. It's all my—just dedicated time to helping them grow, helping them do what's best to get to the most people and affect the most people in a positive way. And those are those things—like I said, there's nothing like when you really are doing something genuinely to get out of self and to help someone else.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: There's nothing more rewarding.

Winn: I like what you said that, you know, sometimes your service is paying for the car behind you at Starbucks. I think a lot of people think that service is at a soup kitchen.

Jason: Right.

Winn: It can be that and it needs to be that but it's just simple acts all day, every day.

Jason: It's opening the door for somebody. It's saying—just, I mean, just going up to somebody, like when I'm in the restroom and I see a custodian cleaning. I say, "I appreciate you keeping this bathroom clean."

Winn: Hm.

Jason: You know? I mean, it's—'cause it's—genuinely, you know? And I even give them a little bit of money, you know what I mean? It's just because so many people are walked on and not appreciated.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Jason: You know? And it's just nice to be able to reflect on that. And that's what I said, it doesn't have to be big stuff. Like I said, I go down to Skid Row and I'll do stuff, you know, downtown on Skid Row to—just helping somebody, like they even say in movies, help the lady across the street.

Winn: I can't believe we have to start wrapping this up. What's your final message for our listeners?

Jason: My final message for everyone is if you know somebody that's struggling or if you know somebody that needs help, reach out and understand that this is a disease, that this is something that is affecting so many different people. And, you know, like I always say, you're not alone. And just be very, very mindful of how you approach us. It's a very, very hard, messed-up situation that you'll be in but there is a way out and there is help.

Winn: Hm. Thanks for being so honest and vulnerable. Transparent.

Jason: You're welcome.

Winn: I think I remember the first time that I shared that I had become clean and I didn't mean to. And it was actually a year later and it just slipped out onstage at an event. And I was like, "What have I done?"

Jason: And I appreciate that because I think—and I don't want to—like I said, I respect all the traditions and all these different things for all different people but I think if I didn't hear somebody that I could relate to or connect to, I wouldn't be where I'm at.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: I think it's important to be able to share your message. I think we have so much stigma based around this stuff, too. In the program, people that are sober, they need to talk and they need to share. I mean, I think it's—it would affect people because the reason there is a stigma on it is because it's very crucial to let people—like, it's just so important that people that are in the program can share their stories because it will connect and help so many other people. We need to stop being so adamant on time and different—I think there's—we keep so many people sick because of people's contingencies on time and different things. And, you know, that's another thing I did want to touch on real quick is that's why we also started the National Assessment Foundation, which is something that I'm part of the board with Tim Storey and Dr. Drew and, you know, a bunch of these different people that we're working with are a part of this because it's actually a place you can call and get help, not contingent on your insurance, not whether you have money. It's a place that will help you no matter what when you call to help you get the best placement that you can. If they can't help you with a placement, they'll give you education with insurance. They'll let you know what you have rights to 'cause a lot of people don't know that you have the opportunity to, you know, for qualifying events. If you move counties, if you get arrested, if you get a divorce, you have opportunities to get insurance. This is all a hundred percent legal, ethical ways for you to get the appropriate help that you need. And Tim's actually writing a book to help people get placed on this.

Winn: Hm.

Jason: You know, so it—if you call in, you not only will get the education and solution towards what you're needing help with and direction, but they will also send you a book and an outline of some talking points and things that will help you through the process.

Winn: Wow. Now how do people find out about that?

Jason: So if you want to find out about the National Assessment Foundation, you can either go on my site, JasonWahler.com, or you actually can call 888-535-2133.

Winn: Cool. We'll put this information on our site, as well.

Jason: No, I appreciate that. That's—that'd be awesome. But it's an amazing service that they offer.

Winn: Wow. Congratulations.

Jason: I appreciate you having me.

Winn: This is great. This is great. It's great.
Jason: I really appreciate it.
Winn: I've got goosebumps. Thanks, Jason. I'm proud of you.
Jason: Appreciate it, man.

Tara Conner

Winn: Hi everybody, Winn Claybaugh here, and just so grateful for this opportunity to spend time with amazing people. I think that the best teachers are storytellers and, yes, we tell other people's stories but then we also tell our own stories. And I think that when people are open and honest and have the courage to tell their stories, lives are changed, lives are saved, and I think that that's what this interview is going to be all about. I'm sitting here with Tara Conner. Tara, welcome to MASTERS.

Tara: Ah, thanks for having me, Winn. It's good to see you.

Winn: Now, we just barely met a little while ago.

Tara: Mm-hm.

Winn: But, of course, the second I met you I wanted my photo with you—

Tara: *[laughs]*

Winn: —because she's stunningly beautiful.

Tara: Ahh.

Winn: She's got this incredible presence about her and it's because of her story. Also, it doesn't hurt the fact that you, at one point, you were Miss USA.

Tara: I was, yeah. *[laughs]*

Winn: Which is kind of sort of the beginning of the story—

Tara: Yeah.

Winn: —of why we're sitting here and that was certainly a benchmark in your life.

Tara: Right.

Winn: Not just because you won a title but because of what happened during that time and—

Tara: Yeah.

Winn: So just let me give you just a small background on Tara and then we'll ask her to tell her story. Tara is a television personality and recovery advocate. Through her work she shares her experience, strength, and hope with audiences throughout the United States. Tara was crowned Miss USA in 2006. During December of that year, she entered the Caron—

Tara: Caron.

Winn: —Treatment Center and completed 30 days of treatment for alcohol and drug addiction. And you have now celebrated 10 years of sobriety.

Tara: Yeah.

Winn: Wasn't your celebration—your—

Tara: It was yesterday.

Winn: Yesterday.

Tara: Yeah.

Winn: Wow.

Tara: Yeah!

Winn: We timed this well. Congratulations.

Tara: Thank you. I'm double digits.

Winn: Ten years of sobriety.

Tara: Yeah, it's crazy. Isn't that wild?

Winn: It is wild. And I—when you and I met—

Tara: Mm-hm.

Winn: —and we were introduced by a good friend and, "This is Tara and she has a purpose. She has a mission to change people's views about what the face of addiction looks like."

Tara: Right.

Winn: And that's all he said. And, of course, that's when I was interested.

Tara: Oh, cool. *[laughs]*

Winn: Because I—

Tara: What an introduction.

Winn: Yeah.

Tara: Yeah.

Winn: Again, to be able to use a platform to spread a wonderful message, I think that that's incredible. So go ahead and just, you know, tell us your story. So— I mean, obviously your story of addiction started before you were crowned Miss USA but—

Tara: It did.

Winn: —now you're crowned Miss USA. Let's talk about that.

Tara: Yeah. I think a lot of people thought that I won Miss USA and then moved to New York City from a small town in Kentucky and just lost my marbles, you know? And during that year, I had tested positive for cocaine and of course it was this huge story. It got leaked. It was on the radio. I was driving into the city from New Jersey and I turn on the radio and I hear, "Miss USA has failed a drug test for cocaine!" And I was just like, "Oh crap." *[laughs]* Like what's going to happen now? And then by the end of the night I was on SportsCenter. So I immediately become a household name in a very infamous way and it was mortifying. I mean, obviously. Now, I completely recognize that I put myself in this position but at the same time, you know, I faced this stigma head-on because, you know, to give you an idea: I'm 20 years old at the time and I can't even have a legal drink yet. To me, I still feel like a child, right?

Winn: Mm-hm.

Tara: I know I'm an adult but I feel like a child and I'm in very adult situations that I'm just not prepared for and I don't have the tools for. And so a couple of weeks later, while they're trying to decide, you know, what are they going to do with me—is she going to keep the title or are they going to fire her?— 'cause, of course, Donald Trump was my boss. And so I have him calling me saying, "What am I supposed to do with this? You're dancing on tables. You're kissing girls." I was just like—

Winn: Is that your Donald Trump imitation right there?

Tara: No.

Winn: That's okay, we don't need one.

Tara: *[laughs]*

Winn: Go ahead.

Tara: And so I remember right after my 21st birthday—so this all took around, I guess it was more like a week—but I turned 21. I don't drink because at the time I was just like everyone's looking at me, so I should just lay low, you know what I mean?

Winn: Mm-hm.

Tara: And then we have this massive press conference where Donald Trump announces to the world that, "Tara"—it's Tara—

Winn: Right.

Tara: *[laughs]*

Winn: He mispronounces your name.

Tara: Yeah.

Winn: Right.

Tara: *[laughs]*

Winn: I saw that.

Tara: "Is going to be given a second chance." And then he called me. He said, "Obviously she's an alcoholic," in this press conference. And then, of course, I'm still in denial because I don't know what an alcoholic is at this point, you know what I mean? And I get up there and try to defend myself with crocodile tears just saying, "You know, "I wouldn't call myself an alcoholic. I think that's pushing the envelope a little bit." *[laughs]*

Winn: Right.

Tara: You know? And then he said, "Obviously she's going to need treatment," and two days later I'm in the Caron Treatment Center just saying, "How did I get here?"

Winn: Hm.

Tara: You know? And it was insane. I mean, there were—I—all I had was an open mind when I went in.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Tara: And I said, "Everything happens for a reason. I must be here for a reason." But there was another cool thing where all of my skeletons were out of the

closet and then a few different skeletons that I didn't know that I had and there was a freedom because I didn't have to hide who I was anymore.

Winn: What does that feel like to have that, 'cause, you know, I'm a recovering addict myself—

Tara: Right.

Winn: —but it wasn't publicized.

Tara: Right.

Winn: You know, I didn't have Rosie O'Donnell talking about it on *The View*.

Tara: Yeah.

Winn: I wasn't on the *Larry King Show*—

Tara: Mm-hm.

Winn: —with my addiction. I mean, what does that feel like to have that so exposed on such a huge platform?

Tara: I don't know. I mean, I think for me—because I was so young and because I kind of grew up being so focused on how things looked on the outside that I kind of hid who I really was my entire life, or at least I attempted to. And, you know, I don't think that it's normal for people to get sober in front of everyone. I think that it's, you know, it's like having your cancer treatment in front of the world. It's bizarre, you know?

Winn: Mm-hm.

Tara: But, you know, what happened for me was when I went to treatment I found out what an alcoholic and an addict was. Like I figured out what separated me from my peers and why I felt so chronically unique. And then, you know, when I figured out that, oh wow, there's actually like a problem here, there's an answer to the reason why I have been the way that I am my entire life, when I figured out that there was a solution to it and that there was a way out of that, I was overjoyed. So when I get out of treatment I have around like 30-something days sober and I have to do a media tour because that's normal. You know what I mean? *[laughs]* So I'm doing all of these—

Winn: Yeah, we all come out of treatment and then do a media tour.

Tara: Right. And it—

Winn: Geez.

Tara: —was almost set up as like—I don't know if it was an apology tour. I mean, for me, I was just so excited because I was like, "Oh my gosh, guys! You don't even know! Like I found something incredible that you should all know about." Right? Because—

Winn: Sobriety, treatment.

Tara: Sobriety—

Winn: Recovery.

Tara: Recovery is possible. There are so many people out there just like me! *[laughs]* You know? And it doesn't matter who you are or where you come from or what it looks like. Like we're all the same!

Winn: Right.

Tara: And, I mean, I was just so inspired because I suffered my entire life and I didn't know what it was that I was suffering from. But I knew I was suffering. And so, for me, I thought, *Oh my gosh. Let me tell as many people as I can that you don't have to suffer anymore.* So I'm doing these interviews with the intent of spreading a message of "There's a way out," right? "And there's hope." And then I found that I was being shamed. So, "Mess USA Shows Up Here." So I had people calling me, "Mess USA," "Disgraced Miss USA." And it just struck me so odd because I was sick. You know, I wasn't like this hot-mess kid that was just going out trying to terrorize the town, you know? It wasn't my intention to be a bad role model.

Winn: So it wasn't the message people wanted to hear. And especially, they didn't want to hear it from you.

Tara: Right! Because I think, for them, they wanted that, you know, sob story of like, "How did you get so messed up?"

Winn: Right, right.

Tara: "You were molested, right?"

Winn: Right, right.

Tara: Like, "What else happened to you?"

Winn: Right.

Tara: And it's like, yeah these things happened to me but that's not why I'm an addict. *[laughs]* You know what I mean?

Winn: Right.

Tara: And so, you know, I started kind of living out loud, which, for me—I feel like God knows how to get to all of us. Do you know what I mean? Because I'm one of those people that if you come to me and say, "Look, I think you have a problem with this." Like I'll look at you and say, "Well, we all have problems."
[laughs]

Winn: Right.

Tara: And I never was able to look inward. But like I said, there was this freedom because I grew up with this idea because of my past traumas and dysfunction in my family and my town where I grew up and all of the wreckage that I caused there, I was like, "If I can just try to make everything look good on the outside then maybe one of these days my insides will catch up." And so this new idea that I developed had created this inability to tell the truth and it was killing me and I thought it was helping me. In my experience, when I was separated from drugs and alcohol long enough—that's what treatment did for me. It got me separated long enough to where my mind could clear to where I could be approached with a solution where I could listen, right?

Winn: Okay.

Tara: And so what I learned about myself was that the difference between an addict and a non-addict is that if I put a drink or a drug in my body, I've manifested this allergy, right? It's like a—they call it the phenomenon of craving. So like if I put a drug into my system, I will go to any lengths to get the next one. I will put my life on the line and I will do things that I swore I would never do because my mind and my body separate and my mind is saying, "Hey, you shouldn't do this." But then my body's already doing it. And I can't explain it. I'm like, "How did I do that?" Like, I mean, how many times have we heard people say like, "What did I do last night? I don't know how that happened." Right? And if I didn't put the first drink or drug in, then you would think—like people are like, "Well you should just stop!"

Winn: Right.

Tara: "Just don't do it." It's like D.A.R.E., just say no. Right?

Winn: Right.

Tara: But the messed up part is that I have this mind that—the disease centers in the mind. It's a mental illness, right? So I have this disease that centers in my mind that will *convince* me against all odds and against all experience that I've ever had, that will say, "Well, this time it's going to be different."

Winn: Right.

Tara: "You haven't done it in so long." Right? And I've just always been—I've had this like—since I was a kid, before I ever put a drink or a drug in my body,

those feelings of, *What's the point? I'm never going to be enough. I'm never going to achieve anything. I'm always going to be this small person who's not worthy of love or affection or consideration.* Like—and I felt that at three years old.

Winn: Right.

Tara: You know? So I—

Winn: That's stuff you can address.

Tara: That I can address.

Winn: But it's the disease. It's the disease of alcoholism, it's a disease of addiction—

Tara: Right.

Winn: —and I think our society, with any kind of mental illness, has such a long way to go.

Tara: Yes.

Winn: There's the stigma of—there's not the stigma with cancer. There's not the stigma with—

Tara: Right.

Winn: —with diabetes.

Tara: Yeah.

Winn: You know, just—you know, “Buck up and get your insulin up there on your own.”

Tara: Right!

Winn: You know, “Just have a good attitude and—”

Tara: Well it's like—

Winn: “—your insulin will, on its own—”

Tara: I've seen my grandfather—who passed away when I was like 14 and I loved this man—I saw him one day where his sugar was way off, right? And he was crawling on the floor, barking like a dog.

Winn: Right.

Tara: To anyone else, you know, it—like if you see that in a grocery store, they're like, "Oh, they must be really messed up on something."

Winn: Right.

Tara: But, no, it was his diabetes.

Winn: Right.

Tara: Right? But if an addict goes in there and is like really just trying to get that booze and their balance is off, it turns into a viral video sensation.

Winn: Right.

Tara: And it's not considered sad. So I'm looking at my grandfather and I'm like, "Oh my gosh. I can't believe he had to go through that." How must—like how was he feeling during that time? But then we watch the dumb addict that's in there like—that can't keep their balance and is just desperate to get that booze and we're just like, "Ha ha ha, idiot."

Winn: Right.

Tara: You know? And so it's—it's a disease! Right?

Winn: Right.

Tara: Like there—people are like, "Well, you know, but they relapse all the time." It's like, well, cancer doesn't always stay in remission.

Winn: Right.

Tara: So we really have to change public perception because—

Winn: I heard you say, again, the public perception, changing it from a health care issue rather than a moral failing.

Tara: Right, right. I—listen, I was already addicted by the time I was 14 years old. I was a child. And—

Winn: Addicted to alcohol.

Tara: Well, it started with alcohol.

Winn: Okay.

Tara: And I definitely put my life on the line for alcohol.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Tara: So I would sneak out with people that, you know, my parents wouldn't know where I was going. I didn't know what was going to happen to me and I didn't know them personally but I knew they had booze.

Winn: Right.

Tara: And I knew that made me feel good. So I went and I got it and I put myself in compromising situations all the time. And I was doing morphine by the end of the year.

Winn: Wow.

Tara: Like in a year my disease progressed but, you know, if you're an adolescent and you take your first drink or drug in adolescence, there's like a one in four chance that you're going to become dependent on whatever you're taking because it affects the part of your mind that's in charge of like decision-making skills, your character, your emotions. Like your brain's not fully developed. So it's like when you see a 15-year-old overdose, that's why it's a tragedy.

Winn: Right.

Tara: It's like you know when your parents are like, "What were you thinking?" They're not!

Winn: Right.

Tara: Their brain is not designed to think properly yet.

Winn: Right.

Tara: They're growing, right? So I know that my disease—listen, drugs and alcohol kicked my ass in like four years. Four years, right? I took like a little two-year break and was like, "Oh my God, this is bad for me. I should never touch it again." And then my disease progressed and the next thing that I picked up was cocaine, which I swore I would never do. But all it took was me having one drink and then it led to—it's progressive.

Winn: Right.

Tara: Right? And that's at 18 years old.

Winn: So you've been sober since what age?

Tara: Since 20.

Winn: Okay.

Tara: A week before I turned 21.

Winn: So you had to feel pretty blessed, then, that your—the span was six years.

Tara: Oh my God, thank God.

Winn: 'Cause some people it's their whole life. It's 20, 30, 40, 50 years—

Tara: Right.

Winn: —of living a life of addiction.

Tara: Right. Well it—you know, it takes what it takes, right?

Winn: *[laughs]*

Tara: So, for me, that's why I said, like God knows what he's doing because, for me, it takes mass humiliation and enough people saying like, "Figure it out kid! Something wrong with ya!" *[laughs]*

Winn: Right.

Tara: You know? And then for other people it's completely losing everything, losing their families, losing their job. For me it was losing face because I was so concerned with how I looked, right? And then I had that stripped away and I was—I hit the bottom of my rabbit hole and I was like, "Oh, there's a bottom. I can crawl my way out of this? This is great!"

Winn: Was that the lowest point for you? Or were there lower points as a teenager?

Tara: I mean, you know, here's the deal: it's all pretty low. I mean, I remember being suicidal by the time I was 12. And that was before I ever put a drink or a drug in my body.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Tara: But I think I also suffered from depression and I know I had an anxiety disorder because the doctors were trying to figure out, "What do we do with her?" So I'm being medicated and I never took my pills right because I'm a kid. I'm not going—I don't like to take my vitamins even if they're chewy Flintstones. I can't be bothered with medication, right? And so I was always just off because I just needed something 'cause I felt the pressures. I'm an adult today. I have dogs that I have to take care of, businesses that I have to help run. Like I am busy, right? I have a workload and pressure.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Tara: But it is nothing compared to what my little 12-year-old body went through.

Winn: Hm.

Tara: You know what I mean?

Winn: Wow.

Tara: And so it was dark. I mean, the whole time it was dark. But I think people think, *Well, then just stop drinking and everything will get better*. But I've had some pretty dark times in sobriety, too. Because the drink and the drug were taken away and then I thought, *Oh, I'm fine*. But then three years later I hit an emotional bottom where I'm feeling suicidal again.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Tara: And I don't have a drink or a drug in my body.

Winn: Hm.

Tara: So, you know, that's the thing. There's a solution but this is like the only—it's like if you have cancer, you'll take your medication, right? You're like, "Well, I want to live so I've got to go to chemo." But for me, it was like, "Do I have to go to chemo today?" You know what I mean? Like, "Do I have to go to a meeting? Do I have to like see a therapist?" Like, "Why?" Like, "I feel good, it's fine." And then it just—the insanity returns. So it's something that I work on every day. But when I'm working on it, there's no struggle.

Winn: Hm.

Tara: None. It's crazy.

Winn: And what is working on it look like for you?

Tara: Well, for me, I work on my sobriety every single day. Like I take my body to a 12-step meeting every day.

Winn: Every day.

Tara: No matter what.

Winn: Okay.

Tara: Like when I flew to Ireland for my boyfriend's sister's wedding—

Winn: Whatever it takes.

Tara: —I went to a meeting every day. I knew that I couldn't make a meeting like when we landed because it would technically be the next day so I got up and I went to a 6:00 a.m. meeting before my flight took off.

Winn: Hm.

Tara: Because I'm very clear what it is that I suffer from, right? And I think that's the thing that people miss when they're trying to self-diagnose, 'cause it's a self-diagnosed disease. Like if you've got a brain that tells you that you don't have a problem, right? And so in your mind or in my mind I was definitely like, "Well, I was just young and I just did some stupid stuff but like, whatever."
[laughs] And my head's like, "Look how successful you are. You did this, you did this, you did this." So I stopped looking at me and I'm not teachable, right?

Winn: Okay.

Tara: And so I had to beat myself into a state of reasonableness. And this actually happened at eight and a half years of sobriety where I was like, "Holy crap." I felt that pain that I did when I was suicidal at 12 and I woke up one day and I realized I have everything that I thought would fix me.

Winn: It's still there.

Tara: It's still there.

Winn: Still there. Still have to work on this.

Tara: I still—yeah. And so I finally actually worked on it because, you know, there's a lot of different ways to get to the path to recovery but there's a specific diligence that needs to happen.

Winn: So you're diligent in you're at a meeting every day. What else?

Tara: I'm at a meeting every day.

Winn: What else—

Tara: I—

Winn: —is your routine?

Tara: I am of service to something or someone every day. I have roles that I—

Winn: What does that mean? What does that look like?

Tara: You know, like working with new girls, like trying to take them through the steps. Or, you know, I mean, help putting on like breakfasts, like pancake breakfasts in South Central with like my recovery family, [laughs] you know what I mean? Where we just like feed whoever wants to come in and we're there at four o'clock in the morning. And I do these things all the time, you know? I do sober functions and like just put things on for people. And if it's not just like, you know, working with a person like sitting across the table from me and helping them see what they suffer from. I mean, that's the maximum is watching the light turn on in someone else's life. You know, or—but, you

know, I do service and I have like, you know, a sponsor that I take his direction and I listen and I say, "What do I need to do?"

Winn: How long have you had the same sponsor?

Tara: I had—this one I've had for like a year and a few months.

Winn: Okay.

Tara: And it's been great.

Winn: Hm.

Tara: It's been—I'm seeing a lot of truth about myself that—you know, it's—have you ever had that experience where you're like, "Man!" Like, "I just want to go to the gym. I'm going to go to the gym and I'm going to get on this diet and this is what I'm going to do!" Right? And then you wake up and your mind convinces you reasons why you just don't have to go and that tomorrow's a better option.

Winn: I'm sure nobody here listening to this can relate to that one.

Tara: You know what I mean? So—

Winn: Yeah, we all know what you mean.

Tara: Right!

Winn: Right, right.

Tara: So it's like I started saying like—I was like why can't I be happy? Like why can't I just wake up and say, "Hey brain, be happy today!" You know what I mean? Like why can't I say, "I'm going to do this consistently, every single day," and then for some reason, I can't do it! And then I beat myself up because I'm like, "I'm useless!" I can't will myself to do anything.

Winn: Right.

Tara: And so I really had to like get a clear idea of like, again, what it is that I suffer from. And I just don't have the power to do certain things and I have to try to gain access somehow and look for that, whether it's in meetings or the 12—for me, the 12 steps work. But like someone that you can—that can show you the truth when you can't see it.

Winn: I think that it's just so easy to not do the work.

Tara: Right.

Winn: 'Cause it's so easy to just get busy with—

Tara: Mm-hm.

Winn: —everything else that we have going on. And, by the way, society will pat you on the back, “Wow, you’re such a good provider.” Of course, you’re working 80 hours a week—

Tara: Right.

Winn: —and your family never sees you but—

Tara: Yeah.

Winn: —“Congratulations, you’re a good provider.”

Tara: Yeah. And then you’re miserable.

Winn: So we never have to address it. We never have to get to the core of what’s really going on.

Tara: Right. And I—you know, I think that that’s the struggle is I think a lot of people have great intentions but they just have really bad follow-through.

Winn: *[laughs]*

Tara: And I was one of those people. Like listen, I’m really good at being comfortable, right? Like I’m really good at just like financially getting to a place where I know my bills are paid, my dogs are fed, like I’m fine, right? And so that in my life has like caused me to stay comfortable because I don’t like to feel pain. And change is painful. And growth is painful. And so I basically, you know, my cycle continues to lead me to the exact same place every single time. Until I decided one day—like and I had to make that decision—that the way that I live my life and the way that I think I know how it should go, kills me.

Winn: Surrender.

Tara: So I had to surrender and I had to say, “Okay. Maybe I don’t have all of the right ideas.” And then I had to be willing—

Winn: Hence the right sponsor.

Tara: Right! So I had to be willing to just take direction, just take direction. I was told, “Go to a meeting every day,” so okay.

Winn: Okay.

Tara: I was told, you know, I had my directions and so I take direction.

Winn: I'm going to be all over the place here. How easy was it for you to hide your addictions?

Tara: So easy.

Winn: So easy.

Tara: Yeah.

Winn: I guess I'm asking the question because people listening to this have someone in their life—

Tara: Right.

Winn: They're like, "Well, maybe they're just struggling—"

Tara: Most—

Winn: "—because of this and maybe," you know—

Tara: Most people—

Winn: —when it's, "No, no. This is the issue."

Tara: Right.

Winn: So it's easy to hide.

Tara: Well, for me, it was.

Winn: Oh, for me it was so easy.

Tara: I mean, some people are just—and they are—whoa. Like they'll have a beer, and you're like, [*sings*] "There they go. It's on." Right? But for me, mine was a little more discreet. Like I would take pills and I, you know, oddly enough seemed to function better on pills. But what was happening was I was just self-medicating because, you know, I recently found out that I have an imbalance. Like I've been dealing with depression and I've been dealing with like really bad anxiety. And nothing's wrong. Nothing in my life is wrong right now. You know what I mean? Like—

Winn: Just chemical.

Tara: It's just chemical. But I'm one of those jerks that says, "People who are sober shouldn't be on medication. Like just go to God. Do the steps." Right?

Winn: That's not you. You don't—

Tara: I used to do that.

Winn: Okay.

Tara: But that idea, right? Because we have these ideas that propel our actions forward. That idea was keeping me so sick and beating myself up for, “You shouldn’t be feeling this way.” And then I—under direction—“Maybe you should get an assessment.” Then I get an assessment and they’re like, “Well, you have a panic disorder and you have pretty bad depression.” And I was like, “Oh! Cool, cool, cool, cool, cool.” And—

Winn: But the good news is you didn’t have to take alcohol or drugs for that.

Tara: Right.

Winn: You could take a medication—

Tara: Right.

Winn: Got it.

Tara: I could see that like okay, listen, with my sobriety and my spirit and all of that, I do it a lot, right? So I don’t think that it’s for lack of not doing enough self-work.

Winn: So what’s your advice to people who—maybe, again—who are listening to this who are questioning a loved one in their lives? ‘Cause again, those addicts are really good at hiding it.

Tara: Right. Well—

Winn: Or manipulating the situation, “Yeah, it exists. Yeah, I admit to it *but*—”

Tara: “But.” I mean, anything after “but” is BS, right?

Winn: “I can handle it.”

Tara: I think my advice is that it’s painful, I know, and it’s scary but I think that’s when we, as human beings, try to step in and say, “We know what you need to do.” Sometimes you have to love people from a distance, you know? Because for some people it takes losing everything, right? I had a high bottom. I didn’t lose anything but emotionally I was so beaten up, and spiritually I was dead, and so I was willing. People have to get to the place that they’re willing but sometimes, you know, if it’s someone who’s dealing with like heroin or, you know, crack cocaine or whatever, like one bad hit and you’re done, right?

Winn: Mm-hm.

Tara: But—so I think there—prevention efforts need to start happening, especially in adolescents. Like we don't have a government-funded prevention program that doesn't, you know, just have like an egg on a frying pan saying, "Don't do this," right? But I think that we need to normalize addiction and see it as an illness. And I think public perception is something that can change how it's handled in families, right? Because if you find out that your teenager has cancer—God forbid—or if you find out that, you know, you have a thyroid issue, whatever, you treat it.

Winn: Right.

Tara: And, you know, if it's your child then they have to do what you say and if you need to separate them long enough to where they can listen to something and actually internalize it—

Winn: Is it commonplace, though, for society or for people to call an adolescent an addict? On—

Tara: Yeah.

Winn: It's commonplace?

Tara: Well, yeah.

Winn: Well, I know that it's commonplace that they are—

Tara: Right.

Winn: —but would people say, "Oh, my 15-year-old son is an alcoholic"?

Tara: Well, I mean, I don't really know because I know, for me, you know, they were just troublemakers. Like when I was in a school like I was a troublemaker. You know, I was just a bad kid.

Winn: So you weren't an alcoholic, you were a troublemaker.

Tara: Troublemaker. Or they would throw around words like "druggie." So they don't use like, you know, "They're addicted," you know?

Winn: Right.

Tara: *[laughs]* They just—and which has just added to the stigma. But I think that these days it is becoming more popular. We have recovery high schools that are popping up all over the country where kids that are before 18 are being sent to a treatment facility—

Winn: Hm.

Tara: —getting treated or getting separated from the drug or the drink, whatever. And then they're being placed into a sober high school.

Winn: Wow.

Tara: So they're around a sober community. It's like that—

Winn: Isn't that great? Wow.

Tara: Yeah. And now, you know, there's—I work for an organization called Transforming Youth Recovery.

Winn: Okay.

Tara: And so they give grants to colleges for collegiate recovery programs so that, you know, maybe they'll have a wing of the school where it's just a bunch of sober people because it's a very, like, sobriety-hostile environment, you know what I mean? So, you know, there's different organizations definitely that have been trying to create more of a community. But kids are getting sober all the time now.

Winn: Hm.

Tara: And it works. Like I was 20 and I thought I was doing like a great job. Like ho ho, ahead of the game.

Winn: Right.

Tara: But I'm seeing kids that are 14, 15 years old—

Winn: Wow.

Tara: —getting sober and staying sober.

Winn: Wow.

Tara: So.

Winn: So what's your mission? Again, our introduction to each other was, "She wants to change the face of addiction."

Tara: Right.

Winn: Addiction isn't always the guy living under the bridge.

Tara: Right. I think—I've been doing this work for eight years now and it's hard. It's really hard because—

Winn: What makes it hard? What's the resistance?

Tara: The resistance is I think people are so concerned with what it looks like on the outside and also like being shamed. I mean, me for instance: I'm being interviewed and this guy says, "Do you think you tarnished the crown?" And here I am talking about recovery. I'm talking about a treatment, a solution to what I was suffering from and all I could see was that 14-year-old version of myself watching this man shame me on national television.

Winn: Right.

Tara: And he put a muzzle on her mouth.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Tara: And so it needs to be treated like a health care issue. There's more than 10 percent of the, you know, people that want to get treatment that get it. There should be more. I mean, 10 percent of the people that actually want it actually get it.

Winn: Hm.

Tara: And it's just—there's not resources or people don't know enough or they don't know who to call. Like I work for an amazing organization called the National Assessment Foundation right now. And I think the hardest thing is people are like, "What do I do?" Like, "I have this kid," or, "I have my dad," or, "I have my wife," or whatever, "and I don't know what to do with them."

Winn: So it's a hotline.

Tara: It's kind of like a hotline but that's one of the things that even I've struggled with when I've had people say, "Hey, I'm in Texas and I don't know where to go." I mean, I know a few organizations but I don't know all of them. I don't know what their insurance looks like. I don't know—I don't know! You know? But, so there—it's been a thing that's been very needed for a long time now. And so what I love about the National Assessment Foundation is if you are one of those people, you can call for yourself. Or if you're a loved one, you can call and you can just try to come up with a game plan.

Winn: Hm.

Tara: And have some—that support because—

Winn: Right.

Tara: —it's so scary and people don't—they feel so alone. Like this disease is like being chronically alone, you know? And so you can speak to someone without judgement, without shame, that's not going to say that, "[*laughs*] Look at that mess." They're going to be like, "Oh my gosh. I know that you're struggling. Let me see how I can help you."

Winn: What's your best story that you can share with us? A good story, a victory story of—'cause I know that you're really focused on early age recovery.

Tara: I'm focused on prevention for early age but I'm also very focused on recovery for—I'm 30 almost 31 now so, you know, my peers—I'm seeing people that I care about who are, you know, getting into the like mid stages, late stages of their lives, and they're still suffering and they have no clue—*no idea*—and they think they're *fine*. Right?

Winn: Right.

Tara: It's scary. So I think, you know, my mission is just to recover out loud and show that no matter what—like you can come up to me all day long and call me a coke-head whore, which is what they called me—

Winn: Mm-hm.

Tara: —and I'll say, "Well, what else you got?"

Winn: *[laughs]*

Tara: I've been, you know, tied to that stake like a witch. Like I know what that looks like. That didn't kill me.

Winn: *[laughs]*

Tara: So—

Winn: Wow.

Tara: —you know, I walked through my nightmare, like my biggest fear, and I survived it, right? So if I can do that then there's hope for everyone. I've seen people come off of Skid Row that were hopeless. They were seemingly hopeless, and today they're helping so many people and their lives are full and productive. They're taxpayers. You know what I mean? Like—

Winn: Wow.

Tara: So there's hope and it doesn't matter how bad it gets. If we can reach more people and we can get more people treated and get them into the solution, then our economy's going to be better, lives are going to be changed. And if this is seen as the health care crisis that it is, we'll have more compassion for each other and more empathy.

Winn: Hm.

Tara: And for me, that's the goal.

Winn: Hm.

Tara: You know what I mean? I want that for—

Winn: That's amazing.

Tara: —everyone 'cause we all deserve it.

Winn: Do you have a final message for our listeners?

Tara: My message would be that recovery works and that you're not alone and you're not unique and there are people out there that are willing to help. Just make the call.

Winn: Hm. Beautiful.

Tara: Thank you.

Winn: Beautiful person, beautiful message.

Tara: Thanks, Winn.

Winn: Great purpose.

Tara: Thank you.

Winn: Thanks, sweetheart.