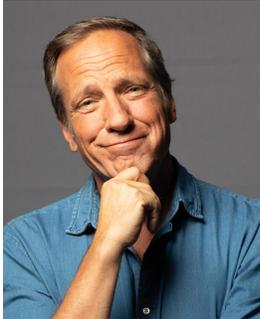


MASTERS by Winn Claybaugh, March 2026

Dirty Job Stories from Mike Rowe



Producer, host, and bestselling author **Mike Rowe** is widely known as the “dirtiest man on TV,” a title he earned on the hit TV series *Dirty Jobs*. He is also CEO of the mikeroweWORKS Foundation, a nonprofit responsible for over \$17 million in technical and vocational education, including Work Ethic scholarships. Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, Mike shares stories about what he learned from hundreds of people doing “dirty jobs,” the value and need for trade schools, and stories about his 80+ year-old mother, a bestselling author and storyteller.

Winn: Hey everybody, Winn Claybaugh here and welcome to another amazing issue of MASTERS with Winn Claybaugh. Thirty years now that I've been doing this and, you know, it just gets better and better and today is a good example of how it's getting better because I'm sitting with an incredible guy who I know many of you already know who he is but of course I've got to give a proper introduction here and I'm going to read this. So, Mike, I'm not sure who wrote this but it sounds good.

Mike: [Laughs]

Winn: From the Baltimore Opera to QVC Shopping Channel, executive producer, host, bestselling author Mike Rowe has had hundreds of jobs. You know, when I read that I was like, Mike, you couldn't keep a job? Hundreds of jobs?

Mike: [Laughs] Maybe more.

Winn: Okay. Relish his role as a chronic freelancer. He's best known—and this is what we know him as—as the dirtiest man on TV, a title he earned on the hit TV show *Dirty Jobs*. He has narrated hundreds of documentaries about space, nature, dinosaurs, and how stuff works. Most recently, Mike is in search of remarkable people making a difference in their communities on Facebook's groundbreaking series, *Returning the Favor*. You can also watch Mike on the TV series *Somebody's Gotta Do It*. Or listen to him on *The Way I Heard It*, America's number one, short form podcast of five-minute mysteries for the curious mind and a short attention span. You were thinking of me in that.

Mike: Mm hmm.

Winn: His book, *The Way I Heard It*, is a companion to his podcast. In addition, Mike is the CEO of mikeroweWORKS Foundation, a 501©3 public charity that debunks myths and misperceptions about the trades and helps close the skills gap. And of course, we're going to talk a lot about that. The foundation has granted or helped facilitate the granting of more than \$5 million in technical and vocational education, including Work Ethic scholarships. And

- just straight up, Mike, I have to thank you because several of my Paul Mitchell Schools have been recipients. They've had students in their schools who have been recipients of scholarships from mikeroweWORKS Foundation, so thank you for that. That's pretty incredible, what you're doing out there.
- Mike: That's my pleasure. And look, things happen fast. Things are changing fast. We just got to \$20 million in scholarships this year.
- Winn: Wow! \$20 million.
- Mike: Yep. And I think we'll double it next year. Things are shifting in the employment space faster than I've ever seen it happen and people are looking at the cost of a four-year degree and they're looking at all the other ways you can make an honest buck by mastering a skill that's in demand. And they're making different choices. And you know, cosmetology has been at the forefront of that, really, if you think about it, for a long, long time. So, it's a privilege to help you guys out.
- Winn: Well, thank you. And obviously you have a lot to do with shifting that perception and the direction of all that, which, again is all very, very good news. We talk about your role, Discovery Channel's show, *Dirty Jobs*. My only experience with doing a dirty job, so to speak, was I was paid to scoop up lion dung from a big barrel to put into little, tiny containers, which was sold as like this animal deterrent to repel cats and deer and rabbit and foxes by mimicking the sense of a predator. That's the only dirty job I ever had. So.
- Mike: Well, it's a good one. And lion dung is notable because the lion's diet is so rooted in protein. So, it's thick, it's heavy, there's a lot of water in it. And as you may recall, it's got a real funk to it, Winn. I wish I had it around here. After the first season of *Dirty Jobs* ended, I was on the cover of *TV Guide* and the headline under my face said, "Mike Rowe Brings You Feces From Every Species." And that's what the first season was.
- Winn: Right.
- Mike: It was just me picking up crap from all creatures great and small, including our own species, by the way.
- Winn: You know, one of the things that you mentioned in listening to your podcast, your TED Talk, some of your shows, something that you brought up that I found was fascinating—not surprising, but fascinating that in working with these people, you were kind of working as an apprentice with them, so to speak. What people would think or consider to be a horrible job, you were commenting like, "These are the happiest people that I've ever met."
- Mike: Well, you know, it was a long road for me. I was a chronic freelancer, as my bio indicated, for many, many years. And in that capacity, I did a pretty good impersonation of a host. You know, I could hit a mark. I could say my line. I could interview people. I could create the illusion of knowledge and competence in short bursts. *Dirty Jobs* was an entirely different proposition. One that I kind of Forrest Gumped my way into. But to your point, the end of

the book that I wrote lands on a realization. And the realization for me was that I was a better guest than I was a host.

Winn: Hmm.

Mike: I was better as an avatar or a cipher or an apprentice. Because as an apprentice, if it's your first day on the job, nobody expects you to be great. What they expect you to do is show up and try. And that was the secret sauce in *Dirty Jobs*. Once I realized that I could occupy a host role but embrace the identity of an apprentice, then that meant the person I was there profiling could be the expert. And that meant I could learn from them on camera. And the thing that I eventually realized that really kept that dynamic on its feet was that people, regular people, Winn, the camera can mess you up. It's a weird set of muscles. And when production comes in, you know, with their lights and with their second takes and with their directors and their clipboards and their stopwatches, it freaks people out. We didn't do any of that on *Dirty Jobs*. We never did a second take. So, all we really tried to do was create an environment where the people could be themselves, where I could learn from them and try my best to do their job, and have a few laughs along the way. And if you earn somebody's trust early in the day when you're filming a show like this and you can get them to really become themselves and to ignore all the production. You know, production sometimes, oftentimes, is the enemy of authenticity.

Winn: Right.

Mike: And I wanted *Dirty Jobs* to be authentic. And I wanted the hero of each episode to be the person we were profiling. And the only way you can do that is, if there's a joke, it's on you. You know, you have to be willing. That show required a lot, but nothing more so than humility. And I was 42 when I finally got that show on the air and I was not humble. I had been used to being in the spotlight and used to having all the information at my disposal and used to being the source of credible information. I had to let all that go. And it took a while, but if picking up crap from every species doesn't make you humble, nothing will.

Winn: So, you did hundreds of these, correct, over the years?

Mike: Yeah, 350.

Winn: Wow. So, I'm thinking that the experience for you was more about what you learned about people and not just the jobs. So, what kind of perhaps surprised you most about the people who do these jobs?

Mike: That's very insightful of you, actually. Most people don't get there. Because the show had such a spectacular element to it, visually. People typically ask me, "What was the dirtiest job?" and "What was the most dangerous job?" because we did a lot of those. And you know, "When were you the most terrified?" and this, that, and the other. And I've got good answers for all those questions, but the truth is, when the show really, really took hold, it's when we realized that it wasn't really about the dirt or the job. It was about the person.

Dirty Jobs was a talk show in a sewer. And earlier we were talking about the business of not following your passion, right, but bringing it with you. That was one of hundreds of lessons that I learned just from working with regular people who were very connected. They were very connected to what I would call the fundamentals. Like where our food comes from, where our energy comes from, who we are as a country. Those kinds of things seemed, and I don't want to paint with too broad a brush, but most of the people we profiled in that show, they really knew who they were and they really knew what mattered to them. And they were grounded and they were rooted, you know? And so, if you let people like that do the talking and if you ask them honest questions, yeah, you'll learn. You'll learn more than you can write down or recall.

Winn: Yeah, we were talking about passion earlier and two of my favorite words that are words that a lot of people dislike: one is *hustle*. I love that word. And a lot of people think that that word has some negative connotation, that it means that you'll screw people over to get what you want. And I don't think that it means that at all. It just means that, for a lot of people starting out, you have youth on your side. You need to hustle. It's going to require, you know, lots and lots of dedication and work. And the other word that I love that people don't like is *discipline*. And some of the examples that you were giving were, you gave these examples of people who were very, very successful at what they were doing and you prefaced it, like, "Do you think that this was their passion to choose this as a job?" They were hustling, they were providing for their family, they were doing what they needed to do. And it just turned into something that was absolutely financially successful for them.

Mike: They were also taking an inventory, of sorts, of themselves. How am I doing? How am I feeling? How's the road I'm on? Is it still taking me to a place where I thought I wanted to be? I remember a guy in Wisconsin; his name was Les Swanson. Les Swanson from Wisconsin. He was a septic tank cleaner and he was in his mid-fifties when I met him. It was 20 years ago. Maybe his early 50's. And he took me to a little slice of hell called a pumping station. You've seen them. If you haven't been in them, they're these, like, nondescript bunkers on the side of the road. They don't look like anything and most people wouldn't look at them twice. But inside it's a portal. And below, about 25, 30 feet, it's a pumping station where raw sewage accumulates, right? On its way to the wastewater treatment plant. So, I'm outside of Madison. It's about a hundred degrees and Les Swanson takes me to a pumping station. He owns two or three of these honey wagons, right? And they suck the crap out of these stations every day, among other things. And this one was clogged so we went in and we were wearing sort of rubber suits and standing in the filth.

Winn: Oh my.

Mike: Up to our waist, knocking cholesterol off of the wall. Now, it's not just hot, it's humid. It's unspeakable. It's just so bad that we're laughing. My cameraman's laughing, I'm laughing, as we're working. And at some point I turn to Les, on

camera, and I say, "Hey man, what happened to you?" He said, "What do mean?" I'm like, "Well, you know, you're 52 years old. You're standing here up to your nipples in a river of crap, knocking cholesterol off the wall. And he was whistling as we were—he was literally whistling while he was working. He seemed very happy. And I said, "So, what brought you here?" And he said, "Well, you know, it's a crooked road, right?" And I said, "Yeah, yeah." But I'd be like, "What were you doing before this?" He said, "Oh, well, I spent 15 years as a high school guidance counselor. And then I spent nine years with my own practice." He was a psychiatrist.

Winn: Wow.

Mike: Right! You know? And now here he is, 52 years old doing what he's doing. And I said, "So, what was the inciting incident? I still don't understand why you would leave the air-conditioned environment of, really, higher education." And without missing a beat, he just looked at me and said, "I got tired of dealing with other people's sh**."

Winn: [Laughs]

Mike: Now, Winn, when a grown man covered with other people's sh** tells you he got tired of dealing with other people's sh**, like, that lands. It's not only good TV, it's like a really honest moment. And then we had a good laugh and then we finished doing our job. And then we went back to Les's house and cleaned up and sat by his beautiful pool next to a margarita machine and had a couple of cocktails and talked about all the trouble in the world. Here's a guy, I mean, talk about not following your passion. That guy didn't grow up thinking he wanted to be in a pumping station cleaning it out. It's the last thing in the world he wanted to do. He followed his passion. His passion put him on a road. and 20 years down that road, he thought, "No, man, It's just, I'm tired. I want to do something else." So, he goes where nobody else is going. Now he owns three honey wagons, has a dozen employees, he's making a wonderful living. Is it difficult? Yeah. Is it disgusting? Sure. Does he care? No. No, he does not. He knows that what he's doing is meaningful and that if he and his crew call out sick for a week or two, Madison's got a real problem. It's meaningful work. It's lucrative.

Winn: Wow.

Mike: So, I got 350 stories like that. And you know, when you add them up and you look at them in their totality, it does change you. It does, it does force you to wonder maybe, you know, maybe if you're on the wrong road. Is there time to change? What are you doing and why? And so forth. *Dirty Jobs* was a romp but it also became a pretty interesting rumination on the philosophy of living and making an honest buck.

Winn: And I love the message of the show because that's what it did. Perhaps it gave people insight into what other people do, what other people put up with, or what other people are passionate about. It gives people a healthier perspective on, "Maybe I need to be a little bit more disciplined. Maybe I need

to take a different turn here.” Not to switch gears away from the beautiful story you just told but was there a job that you secretly enjoyed the most?

Mike: Yeah. I mean, it's hard to separate the fun of the job from the thrill. I mean, the actual thrill of making a show that never should have been made, by network standards. That never would have been greenlit today. You know, the fact that we kind of snuck this new format onto the air back in 2003, that was immensely satisfying to me. The fact that we were able to film—I mean, this was one of the first reality shows, before reality was even a category, you know. When I said there were no second takes, you know, I should probably, accentuate just how insane that is for a brand, right? I mean, this is the Discovery Channel. They're the channel of David Attenborough and Jacques Cousteau and Jane Goodall and experts. A very careful, beautiful brand. I was out there saying, “No, we're not going to fake anything and we'll shoot the show in a fairly traditional way with three cameras covering the action, but there's going to be a fourth camera.” I called it the truth cam. It was really just a behind-the-scenes camera and it never stopped rolling. So, I was able to take footage from that camera, not a ton of it, but some, and cut it into a very finished piece. So, what the viewer saw, Winn, was not just me and Les, you know, going into the pumping station and doing the work—all that stuff was shot in a fairly straightforward way. But his offhand comment, “Oh, I got tired of dealing with other people's sh**,” that was captured by the behind-the-scenes camera. And so, when you cut those moments into the show, what you show the viewer is that you're not there to lie to them. You're there to show them what you saw on that day. And that, for me—I mean, after doing 20 years of TV that was careful and deliberate and intentional and heavily edited and so forth—this was a revelation. That became my passion. And so, when you say, which one did I have fun doing? Well, I mean, I had fun puking my guts out on a crab boat in the Bering Sea. I was miserable, but I also knew I was in an environment that most of the audience had never seen before. And I was excited to be able to do that. I didn't have a particularly good time cleaning skulls in Oklahoma City at Skulls Unlimited, but I was thrilled to do it because it had never occurred to me how skeletons were prepared for display in museums and how skulls were prepared for display in teaching hospitals and universities and so forth. So, for me, because I had a pretty healthy sense of curiosity and the freedom to create a show in any way I wanted, I was just a kid in a candy store. So, even in the most challenging, difficult, painful, dangerous shoots, we always had fun. The crew and I were very close and we were all sort of in on the joke. It's just TV, but we knew we were doing something that was different. And then we started winning awards for it. And then *Dirty Jobs* launched 38 other shows, all based on people and jobs that we had profiled in the course of the first few seasons. You just never know. You just never know. That's why, you know, back to the passion thing, if somebody had said, “Oh, you know, I wound up doing exactly what I wanted to do, but I had no idea that such a thing might exist.” In the same way that most people who drive by a pumping station have no idea what's down there.

Winn: Right.

Mike: You gotta go look, you gotta kick the tires.

Winn: So, why do you say that a show like that wouldn't be accepted today, wouldn't get a green light today?

Mike: Well, a couple of things. The industry in general is undergoing a level of turmoil that I've never seen before. The consolidation with streamers. Just the way everything has become compressed financially. It's kind of boring, but it's important because most successful production companies that were making TV five, ten years ago certainly, but even a couple of years ago, they're gone. The shows, there's still an appetite for them, but the budgets are 40 percent of what they used to be. So, on a financial level, it's just not tenable. But mostly it takes a lot of courage for an executive to greenlight a show that doesn't do second takes and that makes heroes out of people who have never been on TV before. It takes real courage to greenlight a concept that doesn't have a script or doesn't rely on too much pre-production. It requires an extraordinary amount of trust from an executive to let a smartass like me crawl through a sewer and make it up as he goes. So, the concept would have never been greenlit because it was disgusting, but the format and the approach would have never been greenlit because it was uncontrollable. The only way this worked: I shot the pilot on my own. I basically wrote a book without a book deal and then took it to a publisher and said, "Here, if you like it," right? "Put it out." That's what I did with the show. And I said, "Here, if you like it, put it on." They didn't like it. They didn't want it. They thought it was puerile and kind of disgusting. But they liked me, so they agreed to put the pilot on the air. And then they sent me to Egypt to host some tomb-raiding special. Well, when I came back, the pilot had generated thousands of letters. You'll love this part. The letters weren't from people saying, "That was disgusting. How dare you Discovery?" Or "My God, that was funny, Mike's so charming, more of that please." It was neither of those. The letters were from regular people saying, "You think that was dirty? Wait till you see what my dad does."

Winn: Oh, wow.

Mike: "My cousin, my brother, my sister, my mom, my dad, wait till you see what they do." And that's when it happened. That's when we knew, good grief, there's a hunger to celebrate work in this country. And nobody has really done that justice on TV before.

Winn: God. I love that. I love that. You know, the dignity of work, which actually kind of takes me to this next topic here. You know, blue collar pride, so to speak, and the idea of undervaluing skilled trades compared to white-collar careers. So, you know, when people hear "trade school," maybe I'm really switching gears here. When people hear "trade school," what do you think that they still misunderstand the most about that?

Mike: Yeah, this is the place where we send the kids who didn't have what it takes to go to college. This is where we send the troubled kid, the ADD kid, the backward kid. This is the vocational consolation prize we've set aside for

those of you who don't have what it takes to get a four-year degree and thrive in the real world. Those stigmas and those stereotypes have been with us for nearly 50 years, ever since we took shop class out of high school, in my view. That's when we really put our thumb on the scale and started to magnify and elevate one form of education, the four-year degree, at the expense of all the others.

Winn: Right.

Mike: And when that happened, you know, a lot of unintended consequences followed. We painted with a very broad brush and we told kids that they would be screwed if they didn't get the four-year degree. And then we opened up a vast pile, a bottomless pit of free money, and encouraged kids to borrow that money to get that degree. And so, the giant push for a university experience came at the expense of all of these other quite necessary jobs. And so today it's \$1.8 trillion in student loans currently on the books. Most of that money is held by people who got a four-year degree and who are not even working in their chosen field. We have 7 million open positions today that don't require a four-year degree but require training like the type your schools provide. Like the type, I mean, we've got, good grief, four to five hundred thousand open roles right now for electricians. Shipbuilders are about the same, welders, plumbers. You can go down the list. So, the skills gap is a very real thing. And we're starting to get the memo. AI has changed the whole conversation. But in general, I think people are starting to realize, you know, AI is not going to cut your hair. It's not going to snake your pipe. It's not going to build your patio. You know, for so long, we were told, oh, these blue-collar jobs, they're kind of doomed. You know, the robots are coming. Well, the robots are coming and AI is here, but they're not coming for the welders or the electricians or the hairdressers. They're coming for the coders. They're coming for the programmers. So, it's a very interesting time to be running a foundation like the one I run. And I'm so lucky to have had 20 years of—*Dirty Jobs* has been on the air for 22 years, Winn, and so that's given me a level of permission, really, to mouth off in a lot of different ways and to answer questions like the one you just asked. I'll be in Congress next week. I'll be in the Pentagon. I'm talking to elected officials and a lot of people in C-suites today about this very thing: how to reinvigorate the trades and what is the definition of a good job and how are we going to equip the next generation with a useful skill? Talk about following your passion. There's no—the way I grew up, the fact that I'm doing what I'm doing today is impossible.

Winn: Right.

Mike: It feels impossible.

Winn: See, I just love that you have that *Dirty Jobs* background because it did make you the spokesmodel, so to speak. I said spokesmodel, didn't I?

Mike: You did.

Winn: Spokesperson.

Mike: [Laughs] Well, Winn, I'm just as God made me. If you see me as a model, so be it.

Winn: We all do. We all do, Mike. You know, talking about that four-year college experience, you know, oftentimes the guidance counselor rarely mentions the trades. People often view the trades as, like you said, something that you pursue only if you fail the SATs or rarely do they say you can learn to fix an air conditioner or become a hairdresser making six figures before your friends finish Intro to What the F Am I Doing With My Life 101? You know, we joke around here. I live in Newport Beach, California, that Newport is filled with, you know, millions of realtors who all graduated from USC and now they're realtors in Newport Beach. You know, they push college as though that's the only golden ticket. What do you think hands-on careers are still framed as backup plans instead of first-choice opportunities?

Mike: Well, in general, virtually any career that doesn't require a four-year degree is still looked at by a lot of Americans as subordinate or some kind of consolation prize in the wide world of work. It's very, very hard to debunk stigmas and stereotypes and myths and misperceptions that are that widely held. It takes time. It takes headlines, it takes proof. But all those things are happening and a lot of those real estate agents down there in Newport Beach, you know, they're starting to get the memo. I'm sure you know a few. Because if you're gonna sell a house, that means somebody had to build the house. And if you're gonna build the house, that means you're either gonna be on time and under budget or you're not. Well, spoiler alert, nobody is. Nobody's on time. Nobody's under budget. Real estate and new home construction and commercial construction right now are in the grip of an existential labor crisis. The people simply aren't there to do the work. And that will trickle up and that will impact those real estate agents with four-year degrees from Southern Cal. And it's happening everywhere. Not a week goes by where somebody doesn't call me. Normally when I'm sitting right at this desk, some leader of some industry who's in a panic because they simply can't find the workers they need. The maritime industrial base, the guys who build our submarines, right? They've got a 10-year contract for the navy. They need to deliver three nuclear-powered subs every year for 10 years. They said, "We're having a hell of a time finding tradespeople." And they said, "Can you help?" I said, "Maybe. How many do you need?" Four hundred thousand.

Winn: Geez, wow!

Mike: Four hundred thousand, Winn. Now, granted, that's over a five-year period, but they need a hundred thousand right now. "Where are they?" they ask. "Do you know?" And I said, "Well, actually, yeah, man. I know where they are. They're in the eighth grade. You've got to get them now. You've got to start." And you mentioned the guidance counselors. Look, it's true but it's worse than what you said. It's not just that they're ignoring or historically have ignored a long list of really viable careers. Many counselors today are still bonused on their ability to get their kids, the students, into a four-year school. Their comp is tied to their ability to get more kids matriculated in that

direction. So, from an incentive standpoint, we've been upside down for a long time. I just talked to Jim Farley over at Ford. He has 5,000 open positions, 5,000 open bays right now. It's not because cars and trucks don't need to be fixed. These are six-figure mechanic jobs that he can't fill. The energy industry is off the charts, the data centers that are being built. They need hundreds of thousands of electricians and plumbers. They can't find them. So, this thing—for me, mikeroweWORKS just started as a modest PR campaign to help connect kids who wanted to pursue these skills with the companies who were willing to pay to train them. Today, it's more of a national security issue.

Winn: Wow.

Mike: The stakes are that high. Now what's so interesting about you and what you do is that you're kind of one but not the other. With respect, I would say that the country is not facing an existential crisis because of bad haircuts. [Laughs] But look, two things can be true at the same time. Your industry is not fundamentally tied to national defense.

Winn: Right.

Mike: But if you think about the hundreds of thousands of people who prosper as a result of the skill that your schools impart, well, if those people suddenly didn't have that skill, if they were suddenly unemployed, if they were suddenly unable to provide for their families, well, then you would have a national security issue. So, everything, to me, redounds to the dignity of work, the willingness to master a skill that's in demand, work ethic, attitude. Those things are still very much for sale. And I know you talk about that a lot and you probably get a lot of grief for it because nobody wants a lecture.

Winn: Right.

Mike: Nobody wants a sermon. Nobody wants some wealthy middle-aged guy like us to shake their finger and say, "Uh-uh-uh, not that way. This way." Right? So, you know, it's a hard needle to thread because the truth is oftentimes not the thing you want to hear. And there's a lot of pressure coming from a lot of big institutions that would prefer to keep kids on the hamster wheel that led to that \$1.8 trillion in student loans. So, if you want to push back, you've got to be willing to break a few eggs and be a jagged little pill, which I'm good with. And I get the impression you're okay with as well.

Winn: I'm okay with it. And because you threw the pendulum to the professional beauty industry, which I'm very, very grateful for, obviously for maybe selfish reasons, you know, I want to ask you about cosmetology. And you were talking about that skill gap: 89,000 salon positions went unfilled last year and over 80 percent, it's upwards of 87 to 90 percent of people in the professional beauty industry are female or women. Oftentimes they're the breadwinners in their homes. Oftentimes they are single moms or are they're moms that require the flexibility that the professional beauty industry can provide. And so obviously I think it's an incredible industry for people to consider and to

choose. And I have to tell you a really quick story. A good friend of mine, Jordan Toma, who's a great guy and he goes into high schools and, you know, tells his own personal story of having every label from, you know, ADHD to, you know, severe anxiety and just struggled through school. So, he was always in what they called the resource room. You know, the resource room where you're in trouble or you don't have good grades or that's—for whatever, you're in a separate room. And he said that everybody—so he went to his high school reunion and everybody at the high school reunion that was also in the resource room along with him are now very, very successful hairdressers and salon owners. I just loved hearing that story.

Mike: [Laughs] Well, to me, it really comes back to passion and opportunity. Which are you truly going to follow? And, you know, you would know better than I, but I'd wager an awful lot of people who are doing very well, in your industry didn't dream of cutting hair for a living. They got there, you know, and maybe they got there because they had a kid and another kid and they needed a part-time job. So, they learned a skill and they started doing this thing in their spare time. And then maybe the tail wagged the dog and maybe they became Les Swanson and all of a sudden they're doing a new thing. I'm such a fan of what you guys have built. And you know, to be honest, and I know we talked about this when you came on my pod, but it's worth repeating because I was wrong. You know, I had a very clear view of the jobs that I wanted to celebrate in my foundation. And it was welders and steamfitters and pipefitters and mechanics. It was HVAC technicians, electricians. It was the muscular trades.

Winn: Right.

Mike: And it was—where was I? I was in North Carolina in like 2022, I guess, and I needed a haircut. And I was filming something. I had an appearance that night, whatever it was. And I, actually I looked up and saw my reflection in a big plate glass window. And that's what made me go, "Oh dude, you need a haircut." And then a second later, I realized that window was attached to a salon called Cut. So, I just walked right in and I met this young hairdresser, sassy as could be. She knew me. She and her dad used to watch *Dirty Jobs* and I sat down and she cut my hair. And in the course of it, you know, obviously we had a conversation. That's another great thing about your industry. Other than bartenders, I mean, who hears more stories than hairdressers?

Winn: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. That's why you never cheat on your hairdresser. You're loyal to your hairdresser because they know too much.

Mike: Yeah. Well, I told her some things and she told me some things and what she told me was she was working at another salon in Raleigh or wherever I was. And so, she had two jobs and then her family had a restaurant and the hostess had quit so she was being a hostess there as well. Here's this 29-year-old woman with three jobs, working her butt off. Funny, sassy, and she knows who I am. And toward the end of the cut, she says, "So, how come

your program doesn't offer scholarships to people like me? I've got work ethic. I've got dreams." And I had no good answer. I just sat there and said, you know, all I could say was, in a smart-alecky way, is because I, you know, "Our national defense is not crumbling as a result of a bad haircut." And she said, "Yeah, but my whole life is the result of a good one." So, I went back and I talked to my partner and I said, "Look, there's no reason our scholarship program can't include stipends and grants for aspiring cosmetologists." And last year, your industry was the second or third most engaged with my scholarship program. Word went out and we funded, I think, close to \$2 million in scholarships for the cosmetology industry. And I was happy to do it. And I'm not saying any of this to pat myself on the back. Quite the opposite. I wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't have done it but for a completely random encounter with a sassy hairdresser.

Winn: Maybe I had something to do with getting the word out about that, so don't blame me.

Mike: Maybe you did.

Winn: But thanks for that. Because I'm actually on the board for an organization, a nonprofit organization called Beauty Changes Lives. And the mission is to make careers in beauty and wellness a first choice. And we provide educational scholarships and mentorship opportunities. And so, to know that there are, again, people like you with an incredible voice, a wonderful platform, and you're doing good, good things really means a lot.

Mike: Well, thanks.

Winn: I want to ask you, you know, what needs to change. If you were to perhaps provide some advice for students or parents or career counselors, for educators, if you were to redesign high school education, what would you add immediately? What would you change?

Mike: Well, let me think about the high school beat for a minute and say that beyond that, the thing that I would think real hard about is our relationship with credentialing and licensure. And this is probably potentially inconvenient, right? I mean, you run schools. And so, I'm not sure exactly how your network works or when it's determined that a person has mastered the skill that's necessary. States, as I understand it, have different levels of licensure and different requirements. And this is true in so many different industries. So, you know, maybe you can educate me on the whys and the wherefores in cosmetology. But I'll tell you, in plumbing, it takes eight years to become a master plumber.

Winn: Wow.

Mike: Why? It's not thoracic surgery, you know. Why can't a plumber start working as a licensed plumber when they ace their test and when they prove beyond a shadow of a doubt, through a lens of meritocracy, that they've mastered the skill? They're ready to work? With some of these more muscular trades, I think we're really gonna have to dramatically change the way we think about

qualifications, because that electrician that that data center is desperate to have right now is in the eighth grade. So, what can we do to get he or she fast-tracked? That's the first question. Whether it's the eighth grade or high school or post-secondary, are we on a fast track or are we simply going through the motions of, "Well, this is how much time it takes"? And look, I feel pretty strongly about it because I saw it firsthand. I was in Oklahoma last year at a terrific technical college called Central Tech. And I was there for oil and gas. I was there, we were profiling some guys going through a welding and pipefitting program. But down the hall was a nursing program. And during my lunch break, I went down there to chat with the nurses because, you know, why wouldn't I? And it was amazing. Like eight or nine of them and their instructors were all there. And I asked the instructor, I said, "So, this is a two-year program?" And they all kind of laughed. And one of them said, "Sometimes." You know? "Carol looks like she's going to be here two years and two months. Poor Carol. And then Susan, she's going to finish up next month," and she'd been there less than a year. There'd been people who had gone through in seven months. There had been people who go through in two years because the nursing shortage in Oklahoma is so acute, they can't wait, right?

Winn: Right.

Mike: So, you know, I think that's part of a conversation that's going to need to happen, but mostly I think you hit on it earlier. It's what are our guidance counselors and teachers doing with respect to setting the table? What does the table of your future look like through the lens of vocational possibility? If—look, when we took—the reason taking shop class out of high school was so jacked up isn't just because we denied a whole generation of kids a potential career in these trades. It's because we removed the optical proof of those careers to every kid. So, even if you had no interest in the skilled trades, you're just walking from math class to English class, you might go past a wood shop or a metal shop or an auto shop. And maybe you would look in and maybe you would see this whole world that you hadn't been exposed to that looks an awful lot like work, right? And maybe who knows what synapse fires as a result? Maybe none, but at least you know the jobs are there. The problem today, Winn, is you've got millions of kids who have finished high school and they have no idea that these jobs exist. They have no idea you can start—we've helped 3,500 people through the mikeroweWORKS Foundation. I'd say a third of them are welders. I'd say 80 percent of those welders are making north of six figures a year. Many are making a lot more than that.

Winn: Wow.

Mike: So, just the sheer evidence that demands a verdict, and the success stories that live in your industry and all the industries that I would call them, you know, dirty jobs industries, although many of them aren't dirty; they just require skill. And the fact that those stories don't get told and the fact that those careers are not positioned as aspirational, that's where it starts. And

that does need to change. And I think it will change. I just think sometimes things have to go splat before they get better. And that's hard to watch and difficult to see, but it's happening right now. And hopefully, who was it, Winston Churchill said, when you're marching through hell—

Winn: Keep going.

Mike: Keep marching. That's right.

Winn: You know, just talking about work in general, pride in work and work ethic and all of that, what do you wish more young people or people in general understood about work?

Mike: Well, it's not the enemy. And if you think about it in the way that we're taught to think about it, then what do you do when you're done working? I mean, what's the narrative? You retire, right? And why do we look forward to retirement so much? Well, we're taught to look forward to retirement because the table has been set in a way that would suggest that the reason we're not as happy as we could be is because we're doing something we don't want to do, something we're not passionate about. Or maybe, you know, there's a very popular narrative that says we're being abused. We're caught up in this rigged system where my boss, that rapacious capitalist, is taking all the money and there's none for me and it's not fair and it's broke and what's the point? Like all of these things. I'm not saying that there aren't many examples of abuses. I'm not saying the world is fair, but I am saying that with regard to work, the way forward—there is a measure of personal responsibility in it. And I know nobody wants a lecture. I know nobody wants to hear this. But it's the truth. You know, it's the cold, hard truth that Les Swanson from Wisconsin, making a very nice living, was covered in crap and sweating and happy. All of these things, Winn, are true at the same time. And I guess I would say, you know, maybe I'd do it different if I had to do it over again, but of the many people we featured on *Dirty Jobs*, I know for a fact that at least 40 were multimillionaires. We never made that point because the show wasn't meant to be a polemic. And also because I typically didn't feature the boss. Oftentimes I did because they were entrepreneurs and they had a small business. But either way, nobody that we featured on that show was consistent with the image most of us have in our mind of a successful, prosperous person. They were covered with mud and grime and slime and worse things, you know? And so, the idea of success, the cognitive dissonance that came out of *Dirty Jobs* was huge. And you know, maybe if I were to do it again, I would make a point to say, "Look, this guy is prospering, right? He's prospering." I didn't want to do that because I wanted the viewer to come to their own conclusion. But we are in a different time today. And today I think it's really incumbent on the people who are in charge of the industries that we're talking about to make a more persuasive case for the success stories that live in their own lane. And I know you do that. You have your conventions, you have your rock stars, you celebrate them. But to do it outside of your own industry, that's the trick, right? Anybody can preach to the choir. Anybody can get an amen on a Sunday morning from the pulpit. What

do you do on a Tuesday afternoon when you're out there making a case for those 89,000 open chairs? How do you do that? How do you think about that? You know, what's the case you're going to make? I don't know if that's a good answer because, frankly, I forgot the question, but you see where I'm going. It's okay to say that work is a big part of your identity. I don't know why we're constantly told, "Oh no, no, no, no, no. That's just the thing you got to do so you can get to Disney World and fund your 401(k)." Right? So, you're counting the days so you can—I mean, that's what I would say to a kid. Don't you dare make work the enemy because if you do that, you're going to be fighting an enemy eight hours a day for the rest of your life. You don't want to do that.

Winn: And you lose purpose. You lose your why, the reason to get out of bed. And so, if you choose to love it—I heard a mentor say once, you know, the reason why people die quickly after retirement is, number one, they lose money. I mean, it's expensive to get old. Number two, they lose love. So, how many elderly people are abandoned, so to speak, in retirement communities? The family doesn't visit them. Or three, you lose purpose. You lose that reason of getting out of bed every single morning. And so, like you say, if you choose to love it, you choose to enjoy it, you choose to find fulfillment in that, my gosh, you'll stay with that purpose.

Mike: I would say, too, that part of the trick, I had a scoutmaster years ago who was a former colonel in the army and who ran our troop very much like a troop, like a platoon, you know. And he told me—I thought that character—and the scouts really did help me a lot in a lot of different ways, but I thought for the longest time that the big lesson was you have to be willing to be uncomfortable. You have to be willing to sleep in a bag outside of a tent in the rain. You have to be willing to endure. You have to be willing to be scared and insecure. You have to be willing to sing in front of a big group of people when you don't want to sing or recite a poem or shoot a deer or learn to fight. Whatever it is, you have to be willing to get out of your comfort zone. And he said, "That's a good first step, but that's not the real trick. The real trick is to figure out how to love it." Love your discomfort. Welcome it. Embrace the suck. Not forever but in that moment. Why do you think cold plunges have become such a thing? It's because they're painful but restorative and short. You don't have to endure it for long. And most people can get their head around the fact, okay, short-term pain, long-term gain, that's worth doing. That's what diet is. That's what exercise is. That's what discipline is. Discipline is a drag because it's rooted in obedience and we don't want to obey. We don't want to wait. Delayed gratification. You know, that's a big part of—I have a thing called a sweat pledge. Everybody who applies for a Work Ethic scholarship needs to sign it. One of the tenets in the pledge has to do with delayed gratification and patience. And certainly, gratitude in general. You know, that's the very first thing that people read when they apply for a scholarship from mikeroweWORKS is this sweat pledge. And the top tenet simply says, "I believe I have hit the greatest lottery of all time. I am alive. I

walk the earth. I live in the United States. Above all things, I'm grateful." Now, that probably turns off 30 percent of the people who come looking for money.

Winn: Which is what you're trying to do.

Mike: That's right. I mean, I wouldn't say that out loud to most people, but I know you know where I'm coming from. If you can't agree with that, then the odds of me being able to help you just got wildly diminished. And I'm very stingy with the money people donate to my foundation. That \$20 million I mentioned was, you know, I take that seriously and I hand it out with discretion. But back to your question with work, you know, it's like if you're fundamentally grateful, that's a choice. You're not born grateful. You're born miserable. You're born envious. Look at a two-year-old kid playing with a toy and look at the other two-year-old kid who wants the toy. You know, there's no permission. They just take it and then bash them over the head with it. You've got to be taught a long list of things and then it's up to you. You can choose to have a work ethic or not. You can choose to be grateful or not. You can choose discipline or not. You know? And I've got no judgments for anyone who goes another way, but with regard to my foundation, if we're not on the same page, with respect to those things, then this particular pile of free money is probably not for you.

Winn: You know, I'm sitting here taking notes as you're talking because just in those few short sentences, you threw out words that I love: ethic, gratitude, sweat, pledge, discipline, choice. I mean, those are all, all incredible, incredible things, belief systems to live by.

Mike: When did they become a punchline, you know?

Winn: I have no idea.

Mike: But the first time, back to the Boy Scouts, I was only 11 or 12. But that former colonel in the army, he was serious. And when I raised my hand to give the scout oath, it meant something. On my honor, I'll do my best to do my duty, to God and my country, and so forth. Now, it's easy to make fun of those things. It's easy to make fun of the Pledge of Allegiance. It's easy to make fun of, you know, Future Farmers of America and Skills USA and the 4-H Club. They all have pledges. They all have oaths. They all ask their members to take a stand and to make a promise and to develop a code, you know. To have a thing. That's unpleasant, but it still matters.

Winn: By the way, my scoutmaster was the police chief. So, we got that same really good, good discipline. And as a result, I became an Eagle Scout at 14. I was one of the youngest in my community.

Mike: You're kidding!

Winn: No, no.

Mike: I didn't know that about you. I got mine at the last possible—I was about to turn 17.

Winn: Oh, that's the cutoff, right?

Mike: Yeah, back then it was, anyway. You know, it's funny. I haven't thought about the scouts. I didn't think about them much once I started my career. It wasn't until *Dirty Jobs* blew up that I started hearing from people whose kids were getting their Eagle award. And they asked me, you know, to write a letter of congratulations. I sent out just over 50,000.

Winn: Wow.

Mike: In 10 years.

Winn: Wow.

Mike: Yeah. Yeah. It mattered. I got one from Gerald Ford.

Winn: You know, now I gotta go back because I remember, I think I got some as well. So, I gotta go back and do a little research on who sent me that letter. That's awesome. So, I want to switch gears here a little bit.

Mike: Sure.

Winn: And I want to talk about your podcast. And in your podcast, you've featured people on skilled trades, workforce, entrepreneurship, Hollywood. You've interviewed some actors but you've also put a spotlight on the invisible work, so to speak: plumbers, welders, farmers, veterans, military, first responders, pop culture. You've also featured your producer, Chuck. Great guy, by the way. Loved meeting Chuck. Don't lose Chuck. He's amazing. You also, and this was, I think I brought this up when I was with you, too, that you've had a recurring guest on your podcast and that was your mom. And that was, you know, that stuck out to me. What are the topics that you enjoy the most discussing with your mom?

Mike: Well, my mom and I, every month I would just have her on. I just called it coffee with mom. I didn't think of it as an actual episode of the podcast, but it's two people talking for an hour, having a cup of coffee. And one day I said to Chuck, let's just put it up there. You know, I think everybody has or had a mom. Everybody had a relationship. Everybody—you know, I really treasure my relationship with my mom and I wanted to share her, honestly. So, we just started putting up these. random catchups on a Sunday morning over a cup of coffee. And people loved them. I should tell you, too. My mom, she'll be 88 next week. Because we award Work Ethic scholarships and because *Dirty Jobs* is such a work-centric brand, I talk a lot about my grandfather and my dad and the many men like Les Swanson who I've met along the way, who really do embody the kind of work ethic that I try and elevate. But it was my mom all these years. You know, my mom is a writer. Talk about passion. All she ever wanted to do was be a bestselling author. So, all she did was write every day. Every day she would write an unauthorized biography of somebody she met. Could be a cop on a horse. She's crazy for horses. And I remember as a kid, just, she walks up to a cop, starts asking him questions. She pulls out her yellow legal pad. She starts writing. Half hour later, she goes home. She's got a story. And later that night it's stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet.

Winn: Wow. That's great.

Mike: My dad would pull it down the next morning and read it to us kids. He'd take it to church. He'd read it there. He'd read it to people at the Bob's Big Boy, total strangers. If you're trapped in an elevator, he'd pull out a piece of paper and say, "Hey, have you heard the latest from Peggy Rowe?" And he'd read you a story. So, all I ever saw my mom do for 60 years was write. Every single day, that's what she did. Every single day. Discipline. She wrote and wrote and wrote. Never got published. Local newspaper, magazine, public interest, here and there. Little things but never got a book deal until she was 80. And then her first book, her first book went to number four on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Two years later, she did it again. Two years after that, she did it again. Last year she just did it with this. She's in a retirement home now with my dad. She wrote, *Oh No, Not the Home*. And these are true stories of the shenanigans that go on at the Oak Crest Retirement Community, they're hysterical. So, when I talk about delayed gratification and when I talk about discipline and when I talk about passion and not following it but taking it with you. You know, the truth is my mom gave up on her dream 20 years ago, but she never gave up on the work. She kept doing the work and eventually, you know, the world spun and circumstances changed. And one of her sons became marginally famous. So, I was able to take some of her work and show it off. You know, I read a story she wrote about the time she lost her big blue purse at the Walmart and the hilarity that ensued when my dad, who's hard of hearing, is dumpster diving for the purse and she's calling her phone, trying to find the right trash can. Crazy story. Made me laugh. And I read it. And I posted it on Facebook. Just me sitting at the kitchen table reading a story that my mom had sent me, just because it was her time to write and she wanted to write something funny. So, I really read an email from my mother and then I went out into the world to do whatever. And when I came home, I went on my Facebook page, 71 million people.

Winn: What?

Mike: You can Google this right now. In fact, you should. You'll love it. It's just me sitting at the kitchen table reading my mom's story about her big blue purse. Seventy-one million people read this thing. Right? So, that's when a publisher reached out to me—this is a true story; you can't make it up—and says, "Hey, your mom's pretty funny. If she can give us a couple dozen stories like that, like an Erma Bombeck, Betty White, kind of take. Just make sure you're in them so we have some sort of hook, you know, because, you know, she's first-time author." And I said okay. So, I tell her. I said, "Mom, you know, I just got a call from Simon and Schuster. I think they'll publish a book. Can you write a couple dozen stories like that and put me in them?" My mom says, "Well, Michael, you know, I have two other sons."

Winn: [Laughs]

Mike: I'm like, "Mom, are they famous?" She's like, "Well, let me see what I can do." So, my mother goes away and she writes for like two and a half months and

she comes back with this. It's called *About My Mother*. This is what my mom writes. It's dozens of stories about my grandmother. I'm not in any of them. So, the publisher is like, "What is this? We can't sell this." So, I print 10,000 copies of this book. They sell out in two days. Then the publisher calls and says, "Okay, you didn't tell us she could really write." I'm like, "Well, of course she can write. So, that's how it happens." And then two years later, she writes *About Your Father and Other Celebrities I've Known*. And then she writes *Vacuuming in the Nude and Other Ways to Get Attention*, which goes to number one. So, you know, again, it's very humbling but I just keep learning. Every time I think I've got it figured out, I go get a haircut by some kid who reminds me that I've ignored a whole industry. And every time I go out to talk about work ethic and dirty jobbers and my amazing granddad who built the house I was born in without a blueprint, I forget about my own mother who set the mark for work ethic and discipline and passion and patience. So, you know, I'm very lucky to be surrounded by great examples that prove, I think, everything I'm trying to push up the hill.

Winn: Well, I love this conversation about your mom for so many reasons. And something that you brought up that, I can't remember exactly how you worded it, that maybe the hope of getting published never came to fruition but that didn't stop her from the discipline of still writing. And I like that because I'll have students or I'll have hairdressers that say, "Gosh, I would love to do hair and makeup for fashion shoots." I'm like, "Cool. How many have you done?" "Well, I haven't done any yet." "And why haven't you?" "Cause nobody's paid me." So, you're waiting for somebody to pay you? You're waiting for somebody else to give you permission to do what you love to do? I love that story about your mom.

Mike: Well, look, I hadn't thought of it till just now, but my mom couldn't get published for 60 years. I couldn't get *Dirty Jobs* on the air in a million years. I had to shoot the pilot myself. And then the deal that I made with the network was so bad, it was so onerous, but I had to do it to get the show on the air. And then I just had to say, "Well, you know, if it's any good and people like it, I'll get another bite at the apple later." But you're right. You can't be passionate about a thing, even a thing you're good at, and expect to hit the ground with all the perks, the 401(k), the built-in vacation, the starting salary that is an accurate reflection of your sense of who you are. I mean, back to the lecture thing. Nobody wants to hear this but, you know, every now and then you just got to take a bite of the sh** sandwich. I'm sorry, but it's just—call it dues paying, call it patience. call it whatever it is. If you can find a way to be okay being uncomfortable, you're on your way. If you can find a way to love it and say, "Bring it," you're gonna get there. I don't know exactly when, I don't know precisely how, but the world has a way of rewarding those traits. And I would leave you with this, too, regarding my mom: I asked her a very similar question because now she's kind of a celebrity. And in the writing world, people come to her all the time because she embodies what can happen if you're patient, you know? And I said, "Mom, how do you—I mean, you don't want to be Beyonce. You don't want to be standing on stage telling

somebody you've never met to stick with their passion and follow their dream. You don't know if they're any good. What if they can't write? How do you think about encouraging someone whose desire and whose natural ability don't coincide?" And she said, "Oh, Michael, that's a very annoying question but let me think. Let me think." And then she said, "I think maybe I'd like to think of myself as one of those people in the crowd who shows up to watch a marathon. And I'd like to imagine myself near the 25-mile marker, where the runners are so tired. They've been running all day and they're exhausted. And I like to imagine myself standing there with a cool cup of water, holding it out to them, saying, 'Here, here. You'll feel better if you drink this.' That's all I can do. I don't know if they're going to win the race. I don't know if they have any business running marathons. I just want to be a source of encouragement to people who are in the race." And I thought, *Damn, my mom is smart.*

Winn: She's good. You know, I lost my beautiful mother two years ago at 96 years old. So, I know you already do this. Just, wow. Just take it in and breathe it in.

Mike: I'm a mama's boy. I'm an unapologetic mama's boy. Always have been.

Winn: Good. Good. Proud of that. Very proud of that. You know, and maybe with your mom becoming a bit of a celebrity, maybe she can help you get some gigs. You never know.

Mike: You know, you laugh. It's funny. I'm, flying back early in March. She's quite a celebrity in the retirement community where she lives. It's a big company. They're called Ericsson and they're having their big annual meeting. And the guy who organized it said, "Look, how would you feel about just sitting there with your mom and talking to her for an hour, just like you do on the podcast?"

Winn: Wow.

Mike: And I said, "If it's good with Mom, it's good with me." So, that's what I'm doing next month.

Winn: Well, good for you.

Mike: Oh, and by the way, there'll be no money. [*Laughs*]

Winn: There you go.

Mike: I'll make my money elsewhere.

Winn: So, I want to ask you about this series, *Returning the Favor*. And it's basically, from what I understand, remarkable people making a difference in their communities. And I'm just curious. What have you learned and gained from that?

Mike: Well, a lot. First of all, that show is now called *People You Should Know*. *Returning the Favor* went for 100 episodes. It aired exclusively on Facebook for four years. I won an Emmy. It was so strange. I got it during the lockdown, and we had done 100 episodes. And basically, all *Returning the Favor* did was it was an attempt to celebrate the neighbors you wish you had. We would find people in communities doing something selfless and decent. And we

would show up under the pretense of making a documentary about that topic. Could be foster care, could be, oh, could be skilled trades, could be anything. There were so many people out there doing nice things. Anyhow, I would send a crew in. We'd interview them. They thought they were a part of a documentary, then I would show up and that would surprise them. And then I'd get to know them. And then while I was distracting them, we would do something elaborate for them. And most of these surprises—oh, I mean, \$50,000, \$100,000. We'd build warehouses. We would give them whatever they needed to allow them to do more of what they were already doing.

Winn: Wow.

Mike: And then they would cry and laugh and the whole town would come out. There'd be a parade. I would say it was the ultimate feel-good show, but it really wasn't. It was like *Dirty Jobs* in the sense that it was the making of a feel-good show. We made sure the viewers saw what it took to surprise somebody. Anyway, we put this on Facebook back in 2017, I guess. And yeah, it got 450 million views. It was enormous. But it wasn't TV. It was just a social thing. And once Facebook determined that they didn't really want to be competing with YouTube or Netflix, their whole initial—it was called Watch. The whole Watch platform went away and so did *Returning the Favor*. So, my partner and I, Mary, we changed the name to *People You Should Know*, and we're still doing that show. I put it on YouTube now. Some of them air, I think on the Angel platform, which is a streaming service. But mostly, if *Dirty Jobs* was a rumination on work, *Returning the Favor* and *People You Should Know* were just kind of a rumination on kindness and just basic nonpartisan decency. You know, this all happened—I read a story about a kid who worked in an Ace Hardware store back in, I guess it was 2017 when this all started. And an old man came in, probably 85, 90 years old, and he asked for a shovel. And the kid said, "Yeah, we got shovels. Here, I'll walk you back." And he took him to the aisle where the shovels were. And the old man is looking at big ones and small ones. He says, "I guess this one will work," and he takes a shovel off the thing. And finally, the kid says, "Can I ask, what do you need the shovel for?" And the old man says, "Ah, it's a tough day. My dog died this morning. My best friend. And, you know, I'm all alone now and I just, God, I miss him so much, but I've got to bury my dog." And the kid says, "Come with me." Walks him up front, gets him through the checkout, and says, "If you give me your address, I'll come by after work and I'll dig the hole for you." And the old man says, "God, that would be a godsend," and he gives him the address and the kid stops by and buries the old man's dog. Now, what do you do if you're me and you hear a story like that? I really wasn't sure what to do, but I thought what would be nice is to show up and surprise that kid, you know. And ultimately, I don't know, maybe get Ace Hardware to pay off his student debt or, you know, help him with a mortgage, you know. But find a way to tell that story and then celebrate it. That's what *Returning the Favor* was. That's kind of how it started. That was just the idea, you know. What do you do for the kid who mows the lawn of the shut-in and refuses to be paid? Who just does it, you know? If you want to encourage more behavior like that,

how do you do it? You know, how can you use TV or social media or basic storytelling? So, yeah, that was the impetus for the show and that's why I still do it.

Winn: I love it. First of all, I love storytelling. I think that the best teachers, the best parents, the best mentors are storytellers. And sometimes the stories that we tell are our own stories and sometimes they're the stories of other people. And when we can put a spotlight on those types of stories, it just brings hope. And you know, what you focus on starts to grow. And so, I love that that's what you have decided to focus on and put a spotlight on.

Mike: The four greatest words of all time, I think: once upon a time. Tough to beat them.

Winn: Reminds me of a story. I love telling this story. Many, many, many years ago, you know, I have this beauty school and oftentimes the typical clientele that can go into a beauty school are shampoo set old ladies. You know, old ladies that come on a weekly basis and they go in there to get their shampoo sets and it's, you know, discounted. Maybe it's \$2 and 50 cents, you know, or maybe \$5. I don't know. So, we had this one woman named Gladys who came in on a regular basis. Every week, there's Gladys getting her hair done. getting her shampoo set. And one day she came in and she says, "How much hair color could I get for \$4?" I'm like, "Gladys, you want to color your hair? You've been coming here for years. Now why all of a sudden do you want your hair colored?" She says, "Because it's my husband's funeral next week." And, like I'm doing right now, of course, I break down and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, Gladys, you're not going to pay for this hair color. In fact, Gladys, you will never pay for any service, ever again. In fact, no senior citizen will ever pay money in this school ever again. It's always going to be for free." You know, one of those stupid decisions that you make based on pure emotion. Let me tell you something. My school became the hub. All of a sudden, they all went back to their retirement communities and said, "Free services at Winn's school!" I mean, there was—

Mike: [*Laughs*] No good deed.

Winn: Oh, I got cookies. I got quilts, I got marriage proposals from these old ladies. You know? Was it a smart business decision? No. Was it one of the best things I ever did? Yeah.

Mike: Yeah. Look, it makes very little sense to try and separate a business decision from a life decision. We're constantly told we need to, we're constantly told, "Oh no, that's just business over there." As if that's excuse to be, you know, a dick. Right? I mean, "Oh, it's just business so it's okay." Come on. You know?

Winn: Right.

Mike: It's just—sometimes I think we draw lines too brightly and too deliberately, you know. Even with my own foundation, you know. I was told early on, "No, no, no, your, foundation lives over here. Your business lives over here. That's your mercenary position. This is your missionary position. You can never

combine the two.” Two positions, by the way, vastly underrated in my opinion. But what is life really? I mean, why would you want to separate the good that you do from the money that you make? You know? There’s some legal considerations, I suppose, but I’ve always, you know, anything I’ve ever done to try and build my business, I’ve made sure the foundation is involved. And whenever the foundation is involved in the thing, especially because my foundation is centered on work, then I’m always open to opportunities to help elevate that job or that industry. And I make no apology for it. You know, I want to live in a world where that kid is rewarded, you know, for burying a stranger’s dog. And you know what? I want to tell that story. I want to bring it to life. And then I want to put it on YouTube and then, you know what I want to do? I want a sponsor. I want a couple sponsors for that story because I need to eat, too. And so I—that’s how I want my life to work. You know, I want to find a story that’s worth telling. I want to find a sponsor who wants it told. And then I want to put it out there to an audience that appreciates it. And as the backs of your shampoo bottles so aptly say: rinse and repeat. Rinse and repeat. That’s the trick, man.

Winn: God, you’ve had me emotional.

Mike: Yeah.

Winn: A lot through all of this. So thanks for that.

Mike: Look, man, as I said to the audience, and I hope your audience will check out our interview on *The Way I Heard It*, because you were terrific. And as I told you, you’re the perfect subject of interest for someone like me, because I can talk to famous people and I can talk to very, very wealthy people and I can talk to completely anonymous people. But the best people are the ones who I meet by accident, who are on a parallel path, who care deeply and feel deeply about the things that matter to them. Whether it is a series of new careers that your schools will help launch in the coming year, or the memory of your beloved mom, or your own code, which you clearly possess and are eager to share. You know, you’re an interesting cat, man. And stumbling across you the way I did is not scriptable. Neither is *Dirty Jobs*. Neither is *Deadliest Catch*. My favorite shows can’t be scripted. My favorite people would never agree to be scripted. So.

Winn: Thank you, Mike.

Mike: You check that box. You’re a great interview and a fine host and I’m happy to know you.

Winn: Thank you. And by the way, it wasn’t by accident. I stalked you. You remember that. I made it happen.

Mike: Well, you know what? From my perspective, you’re just, you know, another comet burning through the solar system. But that’s a—you know, I actually really do mean that as a compliment. Not to belabor the metaphor, but a solar system is—what is it? There’s a sun, there’s some planets and they’re all in their orbits, they all do their things. But then every now and then these other

objects enter and leave. Comets and asteroids and all sorts of things, you know, come burning through your little world and hopefully make it more interesting than it was.

Winn: Thanks Mike. Man, this turned out to be exactly what I, what I knew it would be and more. So, I'm just so, so grateful for the time.

Mike: Anytime. I appreciate it a lot.

Winn: You're a good man.

Mike: Likewise.

Winn: Thanks, Mike.