

MASTERS Audio Club, April 2019
Monique Coleman
“Acting is my passion, advocacy is my purpose.”



Monique Coleman is an actor, producer, and global youth advocate most recognized as Taylor McKessie in Disney’s *High School Musical* franchise and known to many as the first-ever United Nations Youth Champion.

Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, Monique is clear about her purpose to use her celebrity and influence for causes she is passionate about, including the global water crisis, education for young girls, and much more. Monique’s mantra, “Acting is my passion, advocacy is my purpose,” navigates her MASTERS message about giving a voice to those who are “uncounted.”

Winn: Hi everybody, Winn Claybaugh here, and welcome to this issue of MASTERS. This one’s going to be a fun one, especially because of the person who I’m sitting with right now, but you’re going to be blown away by her message. You’re going to think, *Wait a minute. How does somebody so young—[laughs]*

Mo: *[laughs]*

Winn: —*get so smart and so connected and so on-purpose with the power and the influence that she has?* And this is going to be a wonderful journey. We just barely met five minutes ago, face-to-face, but I’ve been spending some time doing some research on this wonderful woman, as well as talking to a very dear friend of mine—not a stranger to MASTERS—Seth Maxwell, who is the founder of the Thirst Project, which addresses the water crisis. And we’ve been behind his foundation and his cause and so, of course, anything that he says or asks about, I say yes to. And so—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —today was meant to happen.

Mo: Definitely. I feel the same.

Winn: I’m sitting with Monique Coleman. So Monique, thank you so much for doing this.

Mo: Thank you.

Winn: I really, really appreciate it.

Mo: Yeah, it's my pleasure to be here, truly. Thank you.

Winn: Are we allowed to say how old you are?

Mo: Yeah, we can totally say it. I'm 38 years old. *[laughs]*

Winn: Okay, but she looks like she's 14 years old, I swear to God. Which probably works for you because—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —you were in the whole franchise—

Mo: Of the *High School Musical*.

Winn: —of *High School Musical*.

Mo: Yeah. It—

Winn: And you played Taylor McKessie.

Mo: Yes. I did. So I was 24 years old, playing 16.

Winn: Twenty-four playing sixteen.

Mo: Yes.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: So when I graduated *High School* for the last time, I was 28 years old.

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: *[laughs]*

Winn: Graduated for the last time.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: That's hilarious.

Mo: Yeah, and it's interesting because I definitely feel fortunate in having this super-young face because I'm so passionate about young people.

Winn: Right.

Mo: And I remember, you know, doing *High School Musical*, and at the time I felt very fraudulent, believe it or not. I was definitely going through imposter syndrome, where I knew that I looked this way but I was a lot older than everyone else.

Winn: Right.

Mo: I was eight years older than Vanessa. I was four years older than Ashley. I was like kind of their senior—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —and I had this just feeling of like, *Is anybody going to know? Am I going to get found out in some way?* But then I—fast forward to now, I realize that it was all because that was divinely connected to my purpose.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: That it was important for someone who looked like me to play the smartest girl in school. And this was before we had the Obamas. This was just—there was Raven and there was me on the Disney Channel.

Winn: Right.

Mo: And we kind of ushered in this new wave of diversity and inclusion and just seeing things differently and it was really successful and I think has continued to be since.

Winn: You crack me up. We're five minutes into this and you're already onto purpose.

Mo: *[laughs]*

Winn: We haven't even talked about your acting career and anything else but you're already—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —jumping in and leading into why you do what you do.

Mo: Yeah, because I think I was doing it for the wrong reason for a long time.

Winn: You mean the acting part of it?

Mo: Yeah. I think I was lying to myself. I always knew as a kid that I wanted to make a difference. I knew I wanted to make an impact. But what I didn't know was that I deep-down wanted to be validated. I wanted to feel like I was important and I wanted to like myself more than I did, that that's really what I wanted. And—

Winn: Who doesn't want that?

Mo: *[laughs]* Right.

Winn: I mean, who doesn't have to go through that process—

Mo: Absolutely.

Winn: —and follow that path—

Mo: Yeah, and then it was interesting because the more success I attained, the smaller I felt and the more insecure I felt. It was almost like, when I hadn't achieved certain dreams or goals, I had infinite amounts of confidence in myself. I thought, *Oh my gosh, I can do anything. It's going to happen for me. They just haven't met me yet.* And then once I was smack-dab in the center of my dream, suddenly I was questioning whether or not I deserved to be there. I was having all these bouts of insecurity and feelings of unworthiness and self-doubt and was just riddled with this kind of madness that drove me out of the industry, honestly, and headfirst into why. And I think that, at this point, that is probably why I lead with why is because I realized that everything I was going for was never going to make me like myself.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: It was never going to make me feel the love that I thought I was missing. And it wasn't a relationship; it was something that I was giving to. And I had to feed myself and fuel myself, refuel like my soul and my core.

Winn: What a perfect platform, though, that you have to be able to deliver that kind of a message. And listeners, when you start to hear the things that she is involved in, her why and her purpose, you're going to be blown away. But, you know what? Let's talk about your acting career.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: Not that that's what we're here to talk about, but let me just read this. So in addition to the *High School Musicals*, you have also starred in Season 3 of *Guidance*, which is streaming on go90. You appear in the recent indie films, *Broken Star* and *The Outdoorsman*. That's exciting.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: You have a couple of other films coming up.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: You said one is called *Phobias* and the other one is called *The F Happened*.

Mo: Yeah, and then I'm also doing a film for TV One called *Steppin' Back to Love* that should come out sometime this summer.

Winn: Wait, and you have a Lifetime movie, too, right?

Mo: Yeah, that comes out on April 20th. It's interesting that I worked more last year than I had in the previous five years and I don't—I think that it was kind of just swing the pendulum all the way in the other direction. Like I spent so much time, as an artist—which I think we need to—being very self-involved. I was never really selfish. I was always a very generous person. But I was very self-involved and I think that in some ways, it's almost part of the incubation process of being an artist. It's, at times, necessary. You know, I think ultimately you want to get to a place where you are—have a wider lens in where you're able to take in more information and you're able to consume more. But for a period of time, as you're growing in whatever field or skill or talent, you have to put your head down and actually really focus on that thing and then be so developed that, from that place, you can do other things. And so I was so hyper-focused that I got to exactly where I wanted to get only to realize that that was just the first step. That the achievement of the dream was just meant to unlock this other thing so that I could start to understand how and why I was meant to have this part.

Winn: Oh my God, you talk so well.

Mo: *[laughs]*

Winn: But I think what you're talking about is the same for anybody, whether it's acting or learning how to cut hair.

Mo: Yeah, absolutely.

Winn: You have to learn the foundation. You have to be comfortable in the basic skills—

Mo: Yes.

Winn: —to be—you have to own that success for yourself—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —before you can then turn around and turn it into something other than just earning a paycheck.

Mo: Absolutely. And it has to be about more than just you, I think. You know, it has to—like if it is about hair, cutting hair, there's some part of you that knows that you are helping someone to feel better; that you are thinking beyond just kind of the external. I think that that would be so boring if we were just here to just be face-to-face and only deal with what's on the surface. I do think that

we all have a greater purpose and it doesn't matter how you translate that or what path you take, but it does matter that you get there sometime.

Winn: Yeah, I like the word that you use: the incubation process.

Mo: Yeah. I think it's important, right? Like, you know, social media is very scary because it's—we're able to disseminate information very quickly so we, you know, come to something and we can share it with everyone but it's also very dangerous because on the other hand you're constantly comparing yourself to people whose journey you haven't been able to see. You know, I went to an acting conservatory and they—you know, I graduated college in 2002. There was so much that I learned in that period of time that would have been diluted if I was trying to share it as I was learning it. I think it is important that you incubate: that you're not focused on what you're putting out for a season, but you're actually just thinking about what you can take in and how you can truly be the best you can.

Winn: Oh my gosh, what a great message! *[laughs]*

Mo: You know?

Winn: I know. Some people—

Mo: I'm working on it, though.

Winn: —are more focused on putting something out there and they don't even know what their message is.

Mo: I think we all are.

Winn: They don't even know what their purpose is. They don't know what their why is. All they want to know is, "Do I have more followers today—"

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: "—than I did yesterday?"

Mo: And then what's happening is, instead of transforming the industry, everyone's just kind of conforming to the same kind of idea or look. It's like—and, you know, I'm in media so I'm partly responsible for this sometimes, but I think it's imperative that those of us that are in these industries, that we are looking to change things in some way. And for a period of time, that means you won't get all the likes.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: You may not—you're going to be taking more risks. You will, inevitably, have to fail but I think people are a lot more afraid to fail because everything is so public, it's so out there.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: And I think it's out there way before it should be. It's really premature.

Winn: I read somewhere—and you—it's funny because you—we were texting back and—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —forth and you said, "Let me send you stuff. Don't research about me because it's a lot of lies." So I thought that was kind of—

Mo: *[laughs]*

Winn: —curious. But one of the things that I did read is that you're a pretty private person.

Mo: Yeah. I am very private. I'm private—I could be guarded *[laughs]* but I'm okay with that because, at this stage, I think we let people in deeper than they were ever intended to be. And we are far more accessible than I think we were meant to be. We—I think of being connected as very awesome, you know, having social media, this ability to lose touch with someone that you knew in elementary school and find them again on Facebook. Like that's so cool. For that reason, that's amazing. But outside of that, I don't think that we were meant to be available to people 24 hours a day. I don't think that our television was meant to be on around the clock with hundreds of channels. There really is no way to really unplug unless you forcefully tell yourself to do that. And most of us aren't really doing it. And so I think our message and our identity is kind of becoming a collective identity. How can I stand out just enough to pull—you know, to get attention, but not so much that I can maybe open myself up to criticism.

Winn: That and you have no boundaries.

Mo: No.

Winn: Which start to chip away at the person that you are. Well, how did you—how did you learn those and like what are the boundaries where you maybe went through an experience and you thought, *Ooh, I need to be more guarded. I need to have better boundaries. I need to stay away from that thing—*

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —*or from that person or that behavior because it's affecting my personal life?*

Mo: Well, before social media, I was on *Dancing with the Stars*. And that was more—

Winn: What season were you on?

Mo: I was on Season 4, I think. I was very early on.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: I was on the season that—

Winn: How did you do?

Mo: I came in fourth.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: Yeah. Emmitt Smith was—

Winn: I'm sorry I should know that.

Mo: Oh no!

Winn: But I didn't want to—

Mo: No, no, no.

Winn: I read that but I didn't want to—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —believe anything 'cause you told me not to.

Mo: *[laughs]*

Winn: So.

Mo: Yeah, I was on Season 4, I think, and it was Emmitt Smith, Mario Lopez, Joey Lawrence, myself, and then Jerry Springer.

Winn: Who won?

Mo: Emmitt Smith won that year.

Winn: Thank God it wasn't Jerry Springer.

Mo: *[laughs]*

Winn: Sorry. Sorry. Not a fan. Anyway—

Mo: He came in fifth, yeah.

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: No, I beat him.

Winn: Good. Thank you.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: That makes me happy.

Mo: *[laughs]* But when I was on *Dancing with the Stars*, I would go in these little chat rooms. Like they would just—I don't know what they're called now. I don't know if they still exist. We just didn't have social media.

Winn: Right.

Mo: And I would read these things about myself that were so horrible. You know, "Oh, she's fat," or just different comments, and that was when I realized how dangerous it is to stay that plugged in online. And I still struggle with it. It's impossible not to.

Winn: Well, how do you not get affected by that? And I—so—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —I'm sure that there are still those haters and those naysayers—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —that say those same dangerous—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —things about you.

Mo: But I think, you know, if people aren't talking about you positively and negatively, you're probably not really putting yourself all the way out there. But it's scary. You know, it's—

Winn: Well then, how do you navigate that? How do you not be affected in a negative way to where—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —it's affecting your core and affecting your confidence and—

Mo: Yeah. I guess the main way is to be so clear on yourself and your—like why you're putting things out there. In a way, the Internet is still an adolescent, right? And social media is a toddler. We're on this very young platform, still posting our food. *[laughs]*

Winn: Okay.

Mo: You know? And being—I think just kind of figuring it all out. I think realizing that you can detach from it, doing digital detoxes. I go through periods where I attempted—I am not very successful but I went through a period of time where I made sure to not get on my phone before I got out of bed, for instance.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: Because that's something that a lot of us do. We roll over and we get right on our phones.

Winn: That's the first thing you do, right.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: Yeah.

Mo: Instead of, you know, connecting to yourself, connecting to your higher self, brushing your teeth, taking a shower. I mean, there's a whole lot of things that we used to do in the morning—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —before we ever interacted and now not only are we interacting with one another, but we're interacting at times with hundreds, maybe thousands of people before we've even had our own first original thought in the morning.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: So my goal for myself is to be at a place where I don't immediately reach for my phone. And, I mean, gosh, it's like—I feel like Instagram is attached to my index finger. Like I just—

Winn: Right.

Mo: I tap on Instagram before I tap on anything else. It's like—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —“Oh, what's happening in this universe that isn't real?”

Winn: I work on that all the time. And I have a six-year-old daughter and she's constantly reminding us of the importance of focusing on her and not on our phones.

Mo: Right.

Winn: And it's so funny because I don't want her to want to have social media—

Mo: Right.

Winn: —until she's mature.

Mo: Right, until she's 20. *[laughs]*

Winn: Forty. Forty. I don't want her to want to have an iPhone because I know the dangers of that. But if I'm constantly staring at my phone, she's thinking, *Oh, this is something that's really important to Daddy so I want one, too.*

Mo: Yeah. And every generation has had some version of this whether it was the Walkman or—we've always been—it had—needing to escape in some capacity. It's just now the portal is so much more vast that, especially for young people—with the shifting of marketing and how integrated marketing has become into the posts that people make, I think there's going to be a whole generation that has no idea how much they're being sold to all day long by the people that you look up to, trust, and love; that you don't know that they're wearing that jacket because they're being paid to wear that.

Winn: Right.

Mo: And then now you want it because Kylie has it or someone else has it. And not realizing that that's a part of a business plan—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —for them. That's not a business plan for you.

Winn: And you're not seeing the whole picture.

Mo: Not at all.

Winn: You're—

Mo: You don't know all it takes.

Winn: It's an airbrushed picture. It's an airbrushed illusion of what—

Mo: Yes.

Winn: —that person is really like—

Mo: It's a team. Every photo—

Winn: There you go.

Mo: —that you're seeing, you're seeing a team.

Winn: And you're trying to compare yourself to that.

Mo: Yeah, and it's impossible.

Winn: Okay, what—so you mentioned that about just social media and not comparing yourself to what you're seeing. What was that process like for you? How did you learn—*[laughs]*

Mo: Well—*[laughs]* Thankfully, I'm older. I'm in sort of a sweet spot when it comes to that. You know, I went through the entire *High School Musical* experience without social media.

Winn: Without social media. Okay.

Mo: Which, I think, is a benefit—

Winn: Okay.

Mo: —in many ways. We needed that protection and I think that's also why we're all so close still. I don't know that we were mature enough to have that kind of—I don't know that anyone is really—who's experiencing that kind of fame and growing up in front of people's eyes should have that much access to share themselves out there. But then when I did get onto social media, it changes. It's kind of a marketing tool. It's an instrument to me for inspiration. There's so many negative things. There's so much banter and stuff—

Winn: Do you know how many people say the opposite of that?

Mo: Oh yeah!

Winn: There's not a lot of people who say, "Oh, social media is a source of inspiration for me."

Mo: Well—

Winn: Not too many people say that.

Mo: Right. Well, it's a vehicle to me because—

Winn: Okay.

Mo: —it's like while someone's—I—you have to meet where they are, right? And so if I want to impact young people, if I want to impact girls, if I want to get a message out, I've got to be where people are spending their time.

Winn: Right.

Mo: And as much as, you know, there's a lot of things on there that can be very damaging, my goal is, instead of trying to even judge those things, put more things out there that are pushing the envelope. And for me, it's just another artistic tool because now it's an additional way to be seen outside of your résumé, outside of your *real*, that there was a period of time where I would have only been cast and only been seen for the work that I had done previously. And that would be it. Now I can go on my social media and I can create, literally out of thin air, the image that I see of myself and the image that I want to put out there and do that enough and someone—casting directors, different people that are following me—can go, “Oh, you know what? I never would have seen her that way. But now I can see you—”

Winn: Oh wow.

Mo: “—because you've created that for me.” I don't know that a lot of people are taking that risk and doing that. But that's something that, when I realized was an option for me, I didn't need to sit around and just wait for someone to become inspired that I was the person for the job—

Winn: Because they saw you in *High School Musical*—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —or something else. Right.

Mo: Because they would never think that, necessarily.

Winn: Right.

Mo: They would say, “Oh, well she's too young,” or, “She's too this,” or “Oh, she's only done that,” but that's because I haven't been given that opportunity.

Winn: Right.

Mo: And now we live in a world where you don't have to just wait for someone to give you the opportunity, you can actually make that opportunity even if you're doing it just on your phone.

Winn: What a great way to look at it. So what about the haters? How do you distance yourself from that? Do you just not read it or you—it just washes over you? Or—

Mo: Yeah, I think it's both. I mean—

Winn: Talk about that.

Mo: I know that it will change at some point, I imagine. But I do also believe that what you put out is what you get back. And so I make every effort to put things out into the world that are uplifting, positive, and empowering. And I've been very fortunate that that is mostly what I receive in return.

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: Of course, there's going to be people that think it's fake or this, that, or the other, but then I genuinely—at least for now because it hasn't gotten to some massive level—but at least for now, I'm able to really look at that and I go—often go to their page and realize that they have very few followers or they are—this is just something that they do to either get attention or they're just sad at home.

Winn: Right.

Mo: And I don't—I just try not to engage in that or I let them know that I see them. And I just put some sort of emoji next to what they've said. And then it's just that like simple reminder—

Winn: You mean, so they said something negative about you—

Mo: Yeah, and I—

Winn: —and you just attach—

Mo: Yeah, and maybe I just put like a little star beside it or a little heart or a little something—

Winn: So they're like, "Ooh."

Mo: —just so that you know like, "Oh, you've seen—"

Winn: Okay.

Mo: "You saw what I said."

Winn: Okay.

Mo: And I don't have to comment on it.

Winn: Right.

Mo: It's just a subtle way of saying like, "Hey, just so you know, you're not invisible. 'Cause maybe that's why you're putting these things out there, is 'cause you want to be seen."

Winn: Fortunately, I—somebody gave me really good advice and I—obviously, I'm much older than you are and so I didn't grow up with social media. I didn't even start my career with social media. But it does happen today where some key leaders in my organization, I will see the banter—somebody points it out like, "Oh Winn, so-and-so engaged in this really horrific—"

Mo: Right.

Winn: "—online banter," that it was very public about something that was just so—

Mo: Right.

Winn: And I have to get on the phone and say, "What are you doing?" And they're like, "Oh my gosh. You're right. Why did I do that? I got sucked in. I bought it."

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: "I bought it. Why did I do that? I'm better than that?"

Mo: Yeah. Well, I don't think we are realizing how the idea of privacy has shifted entirely. We share our very personal information all the time because we want to log into, you know, Netflix. *[laughs]* Like it's like, "What's your social security number?" and we're like—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —"Well, it's worth it," you know.

Winn: Right.

Mo: "I want to extend my subscription." *[laughs]* Like—

Winn: Right.

Mo: You know, we share this very private information on very public platforms and I think when we're on our devices, we're thinking in a one-to-one sense of like the person that I'm talking to. You're not realizing that it's almost like having a conversation on a stage all the time. That every private conversation—if we were having the same conversation and we were on social media, it wouldn't be private anymore. So—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —wherever we arrive to, there's an entire audience of people that is witnessing. And you remember the people that you want to see your post, but you totally forget about the people that you don't want to see it.

Winn: Right.

Mo: And every time I have a kid say, "Oh my God, I'm following you," it makes me like immediately go, *Oh, right*.

Winn: What did they see?

Mo: Yeah and I don't need to be—

Winn: What were they following?

Mo: —overly—

Winn: Wow.

Mo: —you know—and that's really challenging because, as an artist growing up, there were things that you just didn't see 'cause it wasn't for you.

Winn: Right.

Mo: And now, you know, you do a film and everybody's going to know about it and maybe there's an entire group of people that you wouldn't have necessarily wanted to know about it because as an artist that fulfills a certain part, but now on your social media, you've got an eight-year-old being like, "What's *The F Happened?*" [*laughs*]

Winn: Ahh! [*laughs*]

Mo: You know what I mean? And you're like—

Winn: Have you had to explain that one already?

Mo: Not yet.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: But, yeah.

Winn: It's coming.

Mo: Yeah. Exactly.

Winn: So back to your private life. So what are you very, very private about and you've had to create some really good boundaries? 'Cause I think people listening to this need to have better boundaries. I really do.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: If I weren't a dad, I could have different boundaries.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: But because I'm a dad, because I'm—my gosh, there's like a 24-hour security system around my house *[laughs]*—

Mo: *[laughs]*

Winn: —that wouldn't exist. There wouldn't be cameras everywhere—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —on my alley and everything if I didn't have a daughter. And the same thing about my social media and what I put out there and—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —conversations that I have with people because I need better boundaries as a father to a daughter, which is different than being the father to a little boy.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: There's different boundaries. And so what have you needed to become private about?

Mo: Well, I mean, definitely private about my relationship. Like I'm married. I've been married for seven years now, been together for nine. That's something that I just—I keep it very sacred. I try not to—

Winn: That's a good word.

Mo: Yeah. I try to—

Winn: Sacred.

Mo: It's very sacred.

Winn: Yeah.

Mo: I try not to bring him into the industry any more than he desires to be—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —which is not at all. So—*[laughs]*

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: So—

Winn: Got it.

Mo: —occasionally, because people love love, I curate it. And I know that that may sort of feed into exactly the problem that people have with social media. At the same time, it's your own. And so I'm very transparent. Anyone who talks to me will know that I am very transparent. I will verbally tell you anything but so much can be taken out of context when you don't get to empower it with your words and with your intention, or with your voice behind it. And so unless I am in a position to explain something, I'm very cautious about not just giving people that license into my life.

Winn: Good for you.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: Do you find that you're getting more private as you navigate and—

Mo: I'm actually going the opposite way. I feel like—that's why when we first started talking about it, I said, "Private or maybe even guarded."

Winn: Okay.

Mo: I do think that we do crave reality, as well, very much now and we want to know—we want to see behind the scenes. We want to see people's real existence. And most of what I put out there is a lot more serious than I actually am. I'm actually very silly and—

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: —fun and wild and, you know, I was a theater kid so I was constantly playing characters and there's just such a need for more groundedness in the industry that I think I took that post as mine but, in fact, there's another side of me that I don't think has been creatively nurtured as much. And so—

Winn: The silly side of you?

Mo: The silly, silly, crazy, wild, fun side, I think, is swept up under the rug because I do all these other philanthropic things from, you know, I was the UN Youth Champion, traveled the world, met all these young people, had—like the show that—when I created a show, I created something to do with empowerment but in between takes and in my actual life, I actually don't take myself very seriously at all.

Winn: Got it. Which is probably what makes you very attractive.

Mo: Ah, thanks.

Winn: Right?

Mo: Yeah. Yeah, I don't—even when kids come up to me, I'm often just like—

Winn: Huh.

Mo: Yeah. I'm like, "You guys, I'm right here with you."

Winn: No, that's the greatest compliment that I feel I can get from people is, "You're such a little kid."

Mo: Yeah! Yeah.

Winn: And I'm like, "Yeah! Thank you."

Mo: "Thank you so much." I think we need more of that: more innocence, more vibrance, more creativity, you know?

Winn: I want to get into all of these things that you're involved in. But a little bit more about your career, only because that's the platform that—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —gives you the power and gives you the celebrity and gives you the status to then be able to use that in a way that serves others. So you—you're the founder and CEO of Motivated Productions, which we're going to talk about. You had a series called *Gimme Mo'*.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: Is that currently airing?

Mo: It ended in December.

Winn: Okay. What was that about?

Mo: So *Gimme Mo'*—it started about nine years ago as a nonprofit because I wanted to do something to give back. I had this incredible platform with *High School Musical* and I thought, *Gosh*—

Winn: How long did *High School Musical* last? How many years of your life did that take up?

Mo: About four in total. Yeah.

Winn: There was three?

Mo: There were three movies and it happened from like 2005 to 2008–2009.

Winn: How big did that get?

Mo: Very big.

Winn: I'm sure.

Mo: Very big. I mean—

Winn: I can show you a text message that I got five minutes before we met.

Mo: Oh!

Winn: Yeah, from somebody that can't believe I'm interviewing you, so.

Mo: Oh my goodness.

Winn: Yeah.

Mo: Yeah, it was very big, bigger than I think any of us imagined it being. And different. I mean, we traveled to 40 states, you know, with a live concert tour. Never in my life did I imagine myself going on tour. I mean, we did a tour of— in South America and were greeted at the airport with like police escorts. I mean, it was wild.

Winn: That's great.

Mo: Wild. But yeah, that experience was wonderful but really led me to seeing how there was just a need for young people to be supported in a different way.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Mo: And a space for that and so that's when I just kind of was like, *Maybe I'll do a nonprofit*, but quickly learned that I knew nothing about business or nonprofits.

Winn: That's a—

Mo: So. *[laughs]*

Winn: —whole other world. Right, right.

Mo: It's a whole other world.

Winn: So *Gimme Mo'* was a—?

Mo: It started out as a nonprofit.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: But really it was a platform to create content.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: And then I traveled in 2011 to 24 countries on behalf of the UN. And I called it the *Gimme Mo'* tour.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: And I went around listening to young people share their stories and meeting with government officials and trying to understand where the gaps were and how maybe someone can go around and actually connect some of those dots for people and—

Winn: Hm.

Mo: —at least, at minimum, help young people to feel more supported, seen.

Winn: Wow.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: Congratulations.

Mo: Thank you, yeah. And so this past year, in 2018, we went to Discovery Life and that was a really cool experience. I put 21 original episodes on Discovery Life and—

Winn: And those episodes are still available for people to view?

Mo: Yes, they are. They are. They are—I believe they're on like Discovery Life's online platform.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: What are you most proud of from that whole experience of *Gimme Mo'*?

Mo: I'm most proud of my perseverance *[laughs]* because it's come and it's gone and I had to put my own money into it. And, you know, when people see it and they say, "Oh, I'm so proud. That's—congratulations," I'm extremely grateful but I also am very clear on the fact that this was not something that was done to me or for me. This is something that I created and believed in and continue to put my own money behind because you can't always wait for someone to see the vision. Sometimes you have to just create it on your own. And that's what I did and continue to do. And that's hard, you know?

Winn: I think everybody's waiting for the phone to ring and I'm just like—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —you know, the phone doesn't ring.

Mo: The phone doesn't ring.

Winn: No!

Mo: No, it really doesn't.

Winn: You create it yourself.

Mo: Yeah. And when the phone does ring, it's usually completely out of left field and—

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: —something that you never imagined ever; wilder than your imagination. However, it was because of the work that you did in another direction. You have to do the work first. You can't expect that the opportunity's going to come and then you're going to start doing the work.

Winn: Let's talk about your purpose, your why, and the work that you're doing. You said that acting is your passion but advocacy is your purpose.

Mo: Yes. Yeah. I realized that acting is for me. That is the thing that I do that feeds my soul but advocacy is the gift of having a platform to be able to speak up for people who don't have that opportunity yet.

Winn: But I think you said that was always your passion—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —to be able to make a difference and stuff.

Mo: Yeah, definitely. But I think I was getting in my own way of how that was going to happen.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: At the end of the day, I thought like, *Oh, like just because of being famous or if I do this*—and no, in fact, it's just actually caring and using whatever you have, whatever—you don't have to be famous, you don't have to have a huge platform. You literally just have to have a heart and some conviction to pick up the mantle and say, "You know what? There's someone that needs me and I'm going to lend myself to that and that will be my one." And the truth is, is the more you do for others—we talked about this before we started—the more you do for others, the more success you will inevitably have. It is—it's science. Like it just can't happen because—

Winn: It's science. You're—

Mo: You know?

Winn: You're exactly right.

Mo: It really is.

Winn: It's not your opinion.

Mo: Hm-mm. It's science, yeah.

Winn: It's science.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: This is exactly how it works.

Mo: Yeah. And the more people that you are utilizing your gift—I think people think—they're afraid to give because they think that they're going to lose, but when you give the good things, you only get more of those things back in a greater capacity.

Winn: It's the law of the universe.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: Karma, cause and effect.

Mo: That's how it works.

Winn: Law of attraction.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: Whatever you want to call it, it's real.

Mo: But you have to release first. That's the scary part. You have to release without being able to—

Winn: Why is that the scary part? Why do you say that?

Mo: 'Cause you don't know.

Winn: Oh.

Mo: It's—you have to have faith. You have to have absolute faith that, *I'm going to do the same thing I did one other time that didn't work and I'm going to do it again and I'm going to keep doing it because I believe that if there's one other*

person on the other end—'cause, you know, Gimme Mo' is really about amplifying the voices of young people and helping to bring more compassion to the planet. And that means that if somebody has a difficult conversation over breakfast—whether I made revenue off of that episode, whether there were advertising dollars that were made—that person had a conversation that may change the course of their life or their family dynamic that I will never get to see. And I know for myself, I value the wrong things a lot. I, you know, I'm looking and thinking, Oh, but it wasn't successful because we didn't get the numbers, or, It wasn't successful because I'm comparing it to other people's experience. But most real success is probably the one that we can't ever measure 'cause we weren't on the side to be able to see what happened—

Winn: Yeah.

Mo: —from our efforts.

Winn: So you're making a difference, you're raising money, you're raising awareness—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —you're amplifying the voice of young people, as you say.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: And sometimes those people never come around and thank you.

Mo: Yeah, they—

Winn: You—

Mo: You may never know.

Winn: You don't get to meet the people that you're having that impact on.

Mo: You have no idea. And also, you know, these young people are special. They are on—I don't know where they came from but I think the critical state of our environment and our climate and our political climate makes it necessary for kids right now to be very conscious. And unfortunately, the entertainment industry's so shiny that I think a lot of these kids are just going to want to be on YouTube.

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: *[laughs]* And there are so many more meaningful—

Winn: Yeah, "What's your fallback plan?" "I'm going to be YouTube famous and—"

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: “—that’s how I’m going to make my money.” Right.

Mo: Right. And it’s like there’s so many more—and YouTube is wonderful for those who—that is truly where they belong—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —but there’s an entire group of young people that all they’re going to see is the shiny, pretty things to be a part of but they have so much more potential than just that.

Winn: I want to get into that. I like what you were—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —saying, though, that people see a celebrity and they see that as the only vehicle to be able to make a difference.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: They’re like, “Well, if I were famous, like Monique—”

Mo: Right.

Winn: “—then I could make a difference. But I’m not yet.” *[laughs]*

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: “And therefore, I can’t make a difference.” What’s your response to that?

Mo: What you do with a little is what you’ll do with a lot. So it does not matter how little you have, if—

Winn: Say that again.

Mo: What you do with a little is what you will do with a lot.

Winn: So people say, “If I had a million dollars then I could—”

Mo: Right. No, you—

Winn: “—donate a \$100,000.”

Mo: Sure, if you had \$10 and you bought someone lunch, then I would believe you.

Winn: There you go.

Mo: Then I'd believe you. I don't think that we do more because we have more. I think we do what is in our heart to do—

Winn: Hmm.

Mo: —and those of us who have a lot in their heart to do, want to accumulate more. It's funny, interestingly enough, I actually have been someone who's given most things away and now I'm in a season of accumulation and it's very uncomfortable for me.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: Because I've finally given enough away to where I see the dent that it's making in my ability to continue to give. So I've hurt myself by not taking care of myself first—

Winn: Hmm.

Mo: —by giving so much away. And now—

Winn: You're not just talking about physical possessions or money. You're talking about other things—

Mo: Yeah—

Winn: —as well.

Mo: —energy, time, money. Like I don't take care of myself first.

Winn: Huh, right.

Mo: I get an idea or I get excited and passionate about my purpose and I'm like, *Oh my gosh, I've got to go and give everything I have to it, right now!* As opposed to really being thoughtful and taking care of myself, which has been a very challenging thing—

Winn: Huh.

Mo: —for me to do. Every time I get something I want to give it away. Every—you know?

Winn: Right.

Mo: And that's a very dangerous trap, I think, to fall into, as well. You've got to be—you have to find that balance where you can't pour from a half-empty cup.

Winn: Yeah.

Mo: Like you have to give from your overflow. However, you—if it's in your heart to do, I'm the same person with money or without money. If I have a big house or a small house, it's likely that every room is filled because that's what it is. And so the more rooms I have, the more they will be filled. If you are a person who doesn't want people to stay over, it doesn't matter if you have 15 rooms or two rooms, you're not going to—

Winn: Hm.

Mo: That's not necessarily going to change.

Winn: Hm. Wow.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: Those are some major, major lessons.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: That's so simple.

Mo: We think some things are—

Winn: Doesn't mean that it's easy—

Mo: Yeah. It's very simple.

Winn: —but it's very, very simple.

Mo: Nothing's going to change.

Winn: No.

Mo: You know, if I have a difficult time saving, for instance, right? Every time I get money, I'm going to spend it because I don't think to save it or I don't think to invest it. And it wasn't that there wasn't the opportunity, it's that there wasn't the thought.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: So it's not that there isn't the opportunity to give or to help or to contribute in some capacity. I'm sure you passed by a Girl Scout at some point. I'm sure that someone knocked on your door or there was a person that engaged with you and you chose not to. That's fine. But we can't act as though we're walking around and there's just—we have nothing to give until we have everything to give.

Winn: The listeners are going to get tired of me saying this but, oh well. Because I get that a lot. I hear that a lot from people that say, because we do work with Food 4 Africa and the Thirst Project—

Mo: Right.

Winn: —which are overseas, so people are like, “Oh my gosh, Winn, I would love to jump on a plane to go feed the orphans in Africa.”

Mo: Right.

Winn: What about the orphans in your own backyard? We’re looking—

Mo: Right.

Winn: —over the opportunities is the person—

Mo: Right.

Winn: —that’s right in front of you today, right now. You said you skip over the Girl Scout. You skip over—

Mo: Absolutely.

Winn: —the person who needs you right now—

Mo: Right.

Winn: —because we’re thinking that giving back, making a difference, means I have to jump on a plane and—

Mo: And go somewhere far away.

Winn: —fly first-class, by the way—

Mo: Right. And—

Winn: —to Africa to feed the orphans, so yeah.

Mo: Right, to go somewhere far away—

Winn: Right, right.

Mo: —or that your purpose or that you doing something good for someone else is somehow going to diminish your gift.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: Right? And so it’s like hair is hair. *[laughs]*

Winn: Mm-hm.

Mo: You know? Like people are people. At the end of the day, your gifts and talents—if they are pure and true—now if you’re doing something because you want to make money, more power to you. And also, if you’re doing things with good intentions, you tend to make money. So they don’t have to cancel each other out. I think we see, *Oh, I either need to do good or make money*, but it doesn’t have to be an either/or. It can be and/with. You can have a beautiful heart and do great things *and* do your passion and have your passion have a great impact on other people.

Winn: How much did you have to study the whole idea of purpose? And did you have to cancel out the idea that money could not be a part of your purpose?

Mo: Ooh. So I think that is a misconception, right? Those of us, like, bleeding hearts out here are like, *Oh, if I accept money then that means that I don’t care as much*. And I think we sort of perpetuate that, right? Where it’s like, *Oh, they’re doing good*. We give more money to the people *[laughs]* who are just selling us something than the people who are trying to—

Winn: I know. I want Mother Teresa to be a billionaire.

Mo: Yeah!

Winn: You know what I mean? *[laughs]*

Mo: Because of what she would do—

Winn: Exactly.

Mo: —with that billion dollars, right?

Winn: Right.

Mo: Yeah, so now—there was a period of time where I didn’t know that I had made kind of a silent contract with myself to never accumulate a certain amount of wealth because I felt that that disconnected me from the people that I was trying to help in some way.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: Totally subconscious. It wasn’t intentional. It was just what would happen. It was never enough because it isn’t enough. It’s too much for any one person to do.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: And we have to accept that no one can do everything but everyone can do something and if everyone—if my job is to be an influencer to influential people, then that's a valuable job and that's a worthy job. And someone else's job might be to be on the ground in an everyday capacity. But you have to go where you're led and where your heart leads. And so to the people that say, "There's things here," absolutely, get involved in your local community. Get involved—when someone asks, just listen. Open your mind, open your heart, take the same amount of time that you would on Facebook to, you know, research when the concert tickets are coming out, to find out, you know, what's happening in your community and supporting the kids in your community to do good. We could all do that.

Winn: I like what you said about on the ground 'cause we all have different gifts.

Mo: Yes.

Winn: Some people are really, really good at raising money and some people are really, really good at being on the ground.

Mo: Yeah. And I think for myself, because I'm trying to let go of the martyr—I have a little bit of a martyr personality sometimes where I'm just like, *I'll give up everything!*

Winn: That's that whole balance thing you were talking about?

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: Taking care of yourself and giving away too much?

Mo: I know and I really have to learn—

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: —to not do that.

Winn: You're so adorable right now. *[laughs]*

Mo: Well, 'cause I'm like, hello, like you can't not be able to eat 'cause you gave your portion away.

Winn: Right.

Mo: You know, it's like we are in a level of overconsumption as—at least here in America, I know we are just at our capacity and I think we can do some reframing around those—how much we consume and why we consume. But that's all just, I think, our inner work—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —and when you do that work, you don't really have the same desires.

Winn: So let's talk about these things that you're involved in. I mean, what a title: you were the Champion for UN Foundation's Girl Up Campaign.

Mo: Yes.

Winn: Dang!

Mo: I'm still a Champion for them. I have been for eight years.

Winn: So what does that mean? What does that look like? And you traveled to 24 countries. What is—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: What is that all about?

Mo: So it's two things: one was I was the United Nations Youth Champion for the International Year of Youth and that was in 2011 and 2012.

Winn: So what is the International—

Mo: Year of the Youth.

Winn: —Year of the Youth?

Mo: So it was basically one year devoted to youth engagement. The theme was Dialogue and Mutual Understanding and it was about traveling—honestly, I just created it, really. It was words on a piece of paper that really connected to me. And I and my now-husband, we initiated and I funded a six-month trip where I traveled to 24 countries in six months to understand what young people experience and face globally. But then when I came back I realized that there were so many things and there was so much information that it was very overwhelming. And so I came back and realized I needed a focus. And that's when I placed my focus on girls' and women empowerment and specifically girls' education because those were—that's something that's non-negotiable, right? Like the water crisis: obvious. Girls' education: obvious. So those are two things that felt like non-controversial issues: that I can do controversial stuff behind the scenes but these are things that I can—not just lend my money but my voice and my platform to really make a difference in those areas and not become exhausted with it.

Winn: Did you watch the Oscars last night?

Mo: I did. Yeah, I watched most of it.

Winn: Because there was that quote, there was—I don't—can't remember the category—

Mo: Hm.

Winn: I think it was a short documentary film that won and the acceptance speech was, "A period should come at the end of a sentence and not the end of a girl's education."

Mo: Yes!

Winn: Oh my gosh!

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: What a statement.

Mo: What a statement.

Winn: So, 'cause you're saying that girls' education is important to you and that's one of the things that you were passionate about as you're—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —going from country to country. Can you talk about that?

Mo: Yeah, well I just had no idea that—at least at the time it was like 66 million girls around the world that were adolescent girls that were not in school. And I had no idea and it was for various reasons, like not having the access to sanitation, not having reproductive health conversations and getting pregnant, or just boys being chosen to go to school over the girls because the girls and the mothers would go and fetch water, which we also know that there's a water crisis. So it's something that I know I don't exhaust of and in the U.S. we take education for granted. Back-to-school's like, "Ah man, it's time to go back to school."

Winn: Right.

Mo: And around the world, there are people who would give anything to have an education because an education equals freedom. And we take that freedom for granted every day and so, for me, that was something that was easy to see like, wow, if you help the economy and you educate—give these girls education—that's only going to feed into their local economy which is only going to make the world better.

Winn: So out of all of the causes—and I want to hear about some of them—water crisis—

Mo: Water, yeah.

Winn: —girls' education.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: What else came up for you?

Mo: Peace building, I think is part of it. You know, that's just—it's inherent in everything, I think. I don't walk around as like a peace advocate or a messenger of peace in that sense but I think that's ultimately what it's about is we're going to fight over natural resources, we're going to fight when we run out of water.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Mo: And we have to be aware of that, that a lot of times conflict zones are also areas that have just been stripped of their resources. And we can do something about that.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: And an educated girl is an empowered girl and for far too long there hasn't been that equity. And hearing from girls and women of how to advance their own communities and those are issues that, for me, I can see myself continuously being a part of. And then I drop in and out of, sort of, the subcategories of those areas so, you know, period positivity or body positivity or different aspects inside of that but ultimately it's all coming down to girls' education and water.

Winn: So between those 24 countries, you say you're there to give a voice to young people—

Mo: Yeah, and to listen—

Winn: —and so what—

Mo: So during that time like I honestly was there just to listen because there was so much that I realized I didn't know. I live in LA. You know, what do I know about the developing world, really? Even, you know, growing up—I didn't grow up with money. I grew up in Columbia, South Carolina, and I often felt fraudulent because I didn't have much money but I went to a private school 'cause I was on scholarships and stuff.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Mo: So, even in my worst, it was far exceeded most of—many of the places that I visited.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Mo: And that helped me change my whole perspective. Like, again, you have more to give than you even realize if your water is on and you have electricity. You have a lot more than you can imagine.

Winn: And you're required to go to school.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: It's not—

Mo: Yeah, it's not something that's stripped from you because—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —of your gender.

Winn: Right.

Mo: You know? Yeah, so when I was traveling during that period it was a lot of listening. It was like seven years ago. It was a lot of listening and a lot of just holding space for these kids to see that some of them knew who I was as an actor, many didn't. And it was cool to just represent America and be like, "Hey guys," you know, "I'm coming from a place really far away to tell you that there are people that care about you but you shouldn't wait for them." So—

Winn: What do you mean you shouldn't wait for them?

Mo: You shouldn't wait for someone to come save you—

Winn: Got it.

Mo: —from your situation. Every great invention started in someone's mind.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: Every great thing happened because someone got an idea. So when you have dreams and visions and ideas, nurture those things and partner up with the people and, you know, get the support to make those things happen.

Winn: Tell us more about the Girl Up campaign, and then you said Allstate Foundation's Good Starts Young Ambassador.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: Yeah, tell us about those.

Mo: So Girl Up is a for-girls, by-girls campaign with the United Nations Foundation and their mission has shifted into more leadership but it's really about uniting girls around the world to ensure that girls are educated, safe, healthy, and counted. And so—

Winn: Say that again.

Mo: To—it's ensuring that girls around the world are educated—

Winn: Educated.

Mo: —healthy—

Winn: Healthy.

Mo: —safe—

Winn: Safe.

Mo: —and counted. Because—

Winn: Counted.

Mo: —in many places around the world, girls are not counted. They're not given a social security number. They're not given the same identification process, so if a girl stops showing up at school, you have no way of identifying that. She's not given a number. She's not counted the way that other—

Winn: Wow.

Mo: —the way that the boys are counted. And so that—

Winn: Oh my gosh. The stuff that we take for granted.

Mo: Yeah and so the visibility of that—imagine, you know, someone gets sick or they go missing or something happens, that's how you can have these terrorists attacks and where you can steal a bunch of girls is these girls are essentially invisible. They don't count.

Winn: Wow.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: When—in this experience that you have, does that make you more passionate as you come back to our country with a message and are you more angry? Are you more passionate? Are you more—what's the feeling that you—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —come back and you see, *Oh my gosh, we take so much for granted?*

Mo: Right.

Winn: And, you know, *Shame on you!* Like what's your—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: What's your message? How do you—

Mo: It's—

Winn: How do you deliver that message and use that experience and the knowledge and experience that you've gained on visiting all these countries?

Mo: Yeah. Do what you can with what you have, you know? I really make a valiant effort to not be judgmental, to the best of my ability. Only because the world that we live in is the world that we want other people to have the option of living in. I would love for people to be able to be absentminded and not think about their survival—

Winn: About water.

Mo: —on a day-to-day basis.

Winn: Right.

Mo: And so, for the person who may be clueless, I believe it part of my responsibility to educate, inform, and share as much as I have because I'm an advocate. But for someone else, their very existence of just growing in their field and being great can be enough for someone to see that in their community and say, "Oh, I didn't know that someone like that could do this thing and now I want to do it." That is enough. The ripple effect is just in being our best self, whatever that means. And ideally, realizing that your life is about more than just you. But I think it—I can't remember if it's a Gandhi quote or Buddha or Dalai Lama but someone says that, "If you're not going to make it better, at least don't make it worse."

Winn: Hm.

Mo: Like some—you know, that that kind of idea, right, of just like—

Winn: That was a popular saying in the '60s, too: "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

Mo: Yeah, just like don't—just don't make it worse.

Winn: Right.

Mo: You know, like if you're going to be here, don't strip us of all of our resources and—

Winn: Well, we're all consumers.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: We consume air. We consume water. We consume trees. We consume—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —all kinds of things. We need to become a contributor. At least—

Mo: Exactly.

Winn: —contribute back what we're consuming and hopefully—

Mo: To the best of our ability.

Winn: —the goal is we deliver more.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: We contribute more than what we're consuming.

Mo: Yeah. And so I try—yeah, when I look around. For a period of time I was grossly overwhelmed. And I do forget that these thoughts are in the back of my head a lot. So when I'm on a set and I'm thinking, *Oh, we should turn this into a green set*. You know—

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: —I'm like—I'm like, *Oh man*, like we're—

Winn: You're like managing everything—

Mo: Yeah, I'm like looking around and I'm—

Winn: —when that's not your—

Mo: —and I'm like, *Oh man*, like, *We really got to get rid of those straws*. Like, you know?

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: Those are some of the thoughts that are—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —going on or—because I also do believe in, you know, Marie Kondo's plan to only have what sparks joy—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —and to get rid of everything that doesn't but—

Winn: I just watched her for the first time—

Mo: Oh, she's—

Winn: —the other day.

Mo: —so cute.

Winn: She—oh, she's adorable. I'm going to marry her.

Mo: I know, she's—

Winn: But she's just so adorable but—

Mo: Yeah, she's so sweet. And—

Winn: I learned—

Mo: But the—

Winn: I learned—

Mo: The respect that she has for your environment.

Winn: For things—

Mo: Things.

Winn: —and what sparks your joy and—

Mo: Right. And I want us to be able to—

Winn: “Here, hold this piece of clothing. Does it spark joy in you?”

Mo: Right.

Winn: “And if not, let it go. Move on.”

Mo: Let it go.

Winn: Oh my gosh.

Mo: But now how are we letting things go?

Winn: Right.

Mo: And are we just dropping them off in droves to the Goodwill or are we being thoughtful, and thoughtful when we purchase, thoughtful how we get rid of things. So until I actually have achieved that in my own life, I don't feel like I can look around at anybody and judge them for where they are—

Winn: Hm.

Mo: —if I'm not doing something to help them be better.

Winn: So what keeps you awake at night? What brings the most grief to your heart, so to speak?

Mo: Yeah. I think living in LA can be challenging because we don't really have a pulse on what's actually real. And I am grateful for that at times because I get to disconnect and be a part of the machine that plays make-believe and helps people to see things through that way. But at the end of the day, there are so many people that are suffering. There are so many children that are suffering in conflict zones currently, in prisons. And these are invisible people who are growing up in a very different world and if we don't find a way to build more bridges instead of walls and actually connect to people, we're only going to continue to perpetuate the same cycles. And so I struggle with how much of the negative I can take in and consume without it putting in such a damper that I can no longer create.

Winn: Right.

Mo: And not being so blocked off that I am forgetting that I live in a world where bombs are going off all the—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —time and where children are being, you know, raised where they've lost their parents or raised to kill their parents. I mean—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —there's real things that are going on that just because they're out of sight, they feel out of mind. But—and I don't have solutions for those things right now so I do keep it at an arm's distance. But it does bother me and I do want to be able to do more.

Winn: I hear you. I interviewed a woman who—she lived in the trenches in third-world countries in the fight against sex trafficking.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: But you meet her and you're—you feel like you're talking to a Disney character, like she could play Snow White in the parade. You know what I mean?

Mo: Right, right.

Winn: But she—like—and I'm always amazed like, "How do you—"

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: "How do you still come off this way? How do you live your life knowing what you've seen and knowing what you know?"

Mo: Yeah, you have to be the bearers of hope, though.

Winn: Yeah.

Mo: You—

Winn: Oh my gosh, what a great—

Mo: You're the only one, you know?

Winn: The bearers of hope.

Mo: You have to. You—

Winn: See, I always think that hope is the best commodity.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: 'Cause people can be—their last dime, their last *[pauses]*—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —wish, everything's diminished but if there's just a glimmer of hope and if—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —we can be the bearer of hope.

Mo: Yeah. That's really it, is there's some of us that have to look. We have to choose the choice that may not be as popular at the moment. And that's something I've witnessed with my own career. You know, I watched my peers skyrocket and continue—and I love this industry and I love my peers but I do see a difference. I do see a difference that if you focus on beauty instead of philanthropy, you get further. If you focus on yourself and your work, you get more attention—

Winn: Mm-hm.

Mo: —at the end of the day. And there comes a crossroad where you have to decide which one you're pursuing.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: And which one you will allow to be the result of what you've done. So I chose to pursue purpose—

Winn: Hmmm.

Mo: —and let my passions line up to that. Some people pursue their passions and hope that there's some purpose to it all. But they could take it or leave it.

Winn: Hmm.

Mo: Whereas for me, I can't take it or leave it. I can't take or leave that part and so sometimes I do sacrifice the attention or the moving forward in my career today but, ultimately, my goal is to have a legacy that lives far beyond my actual life and experience.

Winn: Was that innate in you? Were you born that way? Did your mother pound that into you? Was that because of trial and error, a lot of heartache, that you then decided, *Well, I need to become—*

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —*a more purposeful—*

Mo: It was kind of an always thing. So I was hit by a car when I was a kid, when I was five.

Winn: Really?

Mo: Yeah. And I broke my femur and had to relearn how to walk. And—

Winn: How long did that take?

Mo: A while. Like I was in the hospital for months—

Winn: Okay.

Mo: —at least. So yeah, from like five to seven, that was like a big part of my life experience was this accident and then going into dance after that. And so I think from a very, very young age I understood my mortality and I understood that it felt like it was a choice to continue, in a sense, right? Like there has to be a reason for all this pain. So that was one thing. And then at a very young age, my mother did say, you know, "You're going to be an asset. Like you're

going to do great things. You have it.” And the funny thing is I didn’t believe her. It wasn’t like I had a mom that told me these things and I just like, was like, “Oh my God. I’m going to be great ’cause my mom says I’m going to be great.” No, I struggled with that. And then the third piece is that my grandfather, her father, bears a striking resemblance to Martin Luther King and *[laughs]* so I grew up with his photo on a mantle and I just thought that it was him. Like I knew that it wasn’t him ’cause I was a kid—like I knew that it wasn’t him ’cause I knew my grandfather’s name was Eugene but I somehow, it felt like they were the same. And so in my mind—

Winn: Wow.

Mo: —there was this like *I’m connected to that man who’s connected to that spirit and that’s me.*

Winn: Wow.

Mo: Yeah. Very—third grade. Like—

Winn: Wow.

Mo: —third grade, I was like, *I am—there’s something more.*

Winn: Hm.

Mo: Yeah. And I just—it was neurotic at times and, you know, like that overachieving—like, *[speaks in a childish voice]* “These are the things that I need to do to make an impact in the world.” But yeah, every age I felt like life was slipping away and that’s my biggest fear, I think, is to—I think it’s Wayne Dyer says, “Don’t die with your music still in you.”

Winn: Hm.

Mo: And that—if I feared anything, that would be it, like dying with my music still in me. Like there’s so much that we have to give and we give so little of it.

Winn: Give our listeners some marching orders.

Mo: Hm.

Winn: Tell us what to do. You have control, you have power here, you have—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —influence. So what do you want our listeners to do with this information, rather than go watch reruns of your *High School Musicals*?

Mo: Yeah. *[laughs]* Which you can do that, too, ’cause I—

Winn: Which I will, by the way.

Mo: *[sings]* Residuals!

Winn: Well—

Mo: *[laughs]*

Winn: —the person I was texting with who then said, “Oh my God, I just told my daughter you’re interviewing Monique and she’s over the moon about this.” She’s like, “You know, Winn, you’re going to have to watch these movies with your daughter. I’m just telling you, Winn—”

Mo: Oh yeah, you will. That’s a good point.

Winn: “—you’ll have to.” I’m like, “All right, all right, okay.”

Mo: You will. You will.

Winn: *[laughs]* So I’ll become a fan, then I’ll—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —come back around and stalk you for a different reason, right?

Mo: I love it.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: I love it. So for anyone’s who out there listening, *[sighs]* my first thing I would say is to be still. Get very still. I know you’re listening to a podcast right now but even still, you can take a moment to yourself. And I want you to go back to a time in your life where you believed that anything was possible, where you wanted to be something that either you are and you can have gratitude for that thing in a deeper way, or you aren’t and you can have gratitude for this moment of realizing that there’s still time because you’re still breathing. And I want you to just come face-to-face with that part of yourself and I think come up with a mantra, something that you’re going to say to yourself about yourself. Because most of us are operating from limited beliefs or someone else’s idea of who we’re supposed to be instead of who we are innately are. So come up with a mantra for yourself. I’m going to do the same thing right now. So are you. *[laughs]* I think my mantra is going to be, “I am more than enough and my life is unfolding.”

Winn: Hm.

Mo: That is my mantra, “I’m more than enough and my life is unfolding.” So I think by having something that you can tell yourself when those doubts come in,

those feelings of insecurity or struggle or challenge come in, we have to welcome those things because that means that we are charting new territory.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: When we are safe and comfortable then we are not moving forward. And so I challenge everyone that's listening to get still inside yourself, to grab hold of your mantra, and to pursue those little quiet passions that you let go dormant because time is passing. And that is the only thing that we can't get back. We can't get back our time so don't waste yours. Don't waste another moment in "should-ing" on yourself, saying, "I should;" or "could-ing" on yourselves, what you could do. But just take one step today and then take another step tomorrow and trust that where you are is where you're meant to be but that tomorrow you can be in a different place if you make the right choice today.

Winn: Wow. Hm. You have a lot of hope in the youth of today.

Mo: We need to. *[laughs]*

Winn: Right. *[laughs]*

Mo: Yeah 'cause—

Winn: Well, we need to but why else is that? I know that you're enamored with the youth and you're—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —excited because of what you—

Mo: Because I still am a youth.

Winn: —see and experience.

Mo: I—even at 38 years old, I see that I have so much more to gain than to give. And these kids, I think, grow up looking at people, shaking their butts on TV and expressing themselves and I think you want what they have but you don't want the journey to get there.

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: And each of us has our own set of circumstances that we need to go through and our own set of heartbreak. That's what we don't see. That's what you're missing. You're not seeing the hours that I spent in my—on my closet floor last year. All you saw was the billboard in Times Square. But there were hours, *hours* that I spent on my floor, in my closet, praying to God, *Please*, you know, *Am I going to come up with the money to get my show on TV? Please, is—am I making the right decision? All these people need me.*

What—am I the right person? Did I hear you right? You know, those are the things that don't really get shared: those private, quiet moments that really do change your life. That's the secret is to do the right thing when no one's looking.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: That is the secret. When nobody's watching, what choices are you making? 'Cause those are the choices that you're building on. So if you are believing in your dream with every part of you, in quiet, it will show up in public. If you are sabotaging yourself and undermining yourself and polluting your mind with negative thoughts, it doesn't matter how much success you look like you have. You inevitably will lose it all.

Winn: There's a couple of charities that you are standing behind. You've talked about some of them.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: Why the Thirst Project?

Mo: Thirst—

Winn: Which we have to talk about because—

Mo: Yeah!

Winn: —our good friend, Seth—

Mo: Our dear friend.

Winn: —brought us together, so.

Mo: Thirst Project is the future, to me, of humanity. Thirst Project is working to end the water crisis and is utilizing young people to do it. Why young people? Because they have time, they have energy, and they have passion. And while you're on the fence and you don't know which way to go or what to do, it is so easy to learn that we have the power and the ability to give a birthday, to give of ourselves in a way that we already would to make a difference for someone around the world. And these are our brothers and sisters and ultimately our whole world will be crippled if we do not make sure that people have access to clean water. And a lot of the diseases, a lot of waterborne diseases are actually preventable. And most of this happens in kids before the age of five.

Winn: Hm. I like to describe it as beginner's luck.

Mo: Hm.

Winn: Beginner's luck basically means that they don't know it won't work.

Mo: Yes. Yeah.

Winn: You can walk into a room full of a bunch of young people and say—

Mo: Yes.

Winn: —“Hey, let's—let's—” *[laughs]*

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: “—save the world.”

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: “Let's end the water crisis.”

Mo: Yes.

Winn: And they're like, “Yeah! We can do this!”

Mo: Yeah, and then you look up—

Winn: But I love that pattern.

Mo: —and \$8 million later—

Winn: Exactly.

Mo: —they've made a huge dent—

Winn: Yeah.

Mo: —and have no intention of stopping anytime soon.

Winn: Wow.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: What other charities are you passionate about?

Mo: So Thirst Project, Girl Up.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: Which is the UN Foundation.

Winn: Mm-hm.

Mo: She's the First, which helps girls be the first in their family to graduate high school.

Winn: Wow.

Mo: And they're—it's funny 'cause they're both girl organizations but they're very different in their approach. And—

Winn: She's the First, is that here in the U.S. or—

Mo: Yep.

Winn: —is that globally?

Mo: It's both. Both.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: They all—they have campus chapters here in the U.S. as well.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: And then Allstate Foundation Good Starts Young. I am their Good Starts Young Ambassador, which basically means I support their efforts for youth empowerment, I attend WE Days. which are put on by this organization called WE Movement, where anywhere from 8,000 to 15,000 kids are gathered in a room for a free concert based on the year of service that they have committed to. So—

Winn: Wow.

Mo: —it's really cool. And working with them has been great because where I'm limited, in terms of my resources and reach and ability, Allstate Foundation is able to help me to get so much further and to meet so many more people—

Winn: Hm.

Mo: —than I would be able to on my own. So I'm incredibly grateful to them for that.

Winn: Dang girl, you're busy.

Mo: *[laughs]* Yeah, I know.

Winn: You have about 20 jobs.

Mo: I know! And it's so funny 'cause I don't feel like I'm doing anything most of the time. *[laughs]*

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: Yeah, isn't that how it goes, right?

Winn: I think, though, that that's the flipside to the fact that you are able to make a difference and that you are relative and people can relate to you—

Mo: Hm.

Winn: —that—because if you believed that you were all of that and more—

Mo: True.

Winn: —then that's—

Mo: True.

Winn: —not very attractive.

Mo: True. That's true.

Winn: So why do I care what Mo has to say because—

Mo: —Yeah.

Winn: —Mo's just full of herself?

Mo: Yeah, I know.

Winn: It's the fact that you do—you said that you do still struggle with self-doubt and unworthiness.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: But I think that that's the part that makes you vulnerable and makes you—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —attractive. So.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: There's a good side of that.

Mo: Whew. It's not easy being vulnerable. I've discovered this recently because, at least for myself, I find that vulnerability and embarrassment live in a very similar place in my body.

Winn: Really?

Mo: That when I feel vulnerable, sometimes I think I'm embarrassed but in actuality, no it's not that I was embarrassed, I was just open. And we're not used to being so open with each other because if any of us have ever been embarrassed, we never want to feel that way again.

Winn: Wow.

Mo: You never want to be picked on. You never want to be teased for a moment that you were vulnerable in. However, vulnerability is that moment where people say, "I get it. I relate to you. I connect to you. You've made me feel better about my hard experience because you were willing to look at yours." And I think the world could use a lot more vulnerability.

Winn: Have you written a book?

Mo: I have not!

Winn: What are you waiting on? Girl, my gosh, this—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: How do people learn more about you?

Mo: Right now, social media's probably the best place. I live on Instagram at _moniquecoleman. I do read my own messages and respond there. And outside of that, I'm building behind the scenes right now.

Winn: Okay.

Mo: I'm rebuilding Gimme Mo'. I'm looking to put it on a different platform. Motivated Productions, looking at what our slate's going to be this year. And, yeah, I'll be around. But for now _moniquecoleman—

Winn: Okay.

Mo: —on Instagram is the best place to find me.

Winn: Wow. Congratulations.

Mo: Thank you.

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

Mo: You can't get it wrong. *[laughs]* And by "it" I mean life. I think I—for a long time, I thought I could get it wrong. And you really can't. You know, the only thing that you can do wrong is just to stop moving, you know? For a long time I used to think my life was going to start *when*, you know? And I imagine a lot of people are, you know, are currently in school—

Winn: When I get the promotion. When—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —I get the relationship—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: When I get the—

Mo: When I finish school. When—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —I get to this level. When I—yeah. When I get married. When this thing happens, then my life is going to begin. It's not. It's already happening and it's unfolding exactly as it should. So, focus more on how you want to feel in your life and not what you want to do with your life.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: I'll say that again: focus on how you want to feel *in* your life, not what you want to do *with* your life. Because you are a human being, not a human doing. So who you are becoming is by far more important than anything you'll ever accomplish in your lifetime.

Winn: How much of this do you have to remind yourself of?

Mo: All day. *[laughs]*

Winn: *[laughs]* Okay.

Mo: This conversation—

Winn: I knew that was the answer.

Mo: This conversation is the fuel that I need to go home and know that, okay, that's why—you know, as I told you before, I'm kind of in a weird—just kind of transition where I'm—

Winn: Right.

Mo: —needing to reclaim my time and really evaluate every single thing that I do, *Is this worth my time*, you know? 'Cause it's such a precious commodity and what am I—because I so rarely look at what I'm getting out of something, but I really wanted to be here, I think, for this reason also because—

Winn: Huh.

Mo: —I know that when you take that moment to share what you already know and to hope that your life is connecting to someone else's heart—

Winn: Mm-hm.

Mo: —that gives so much back to you and that's what I need to be like, *Okay, you know what? I can face this day, this week, this month, this year, the disappointments that are inevitably around the corner and the triumphs that I know are coming. I will get to share with the people that have known that I struggle.*

Winn: I can sit down with this total stranger and—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —share all of this *[laughs]*—

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: —for others to listen to.

Mo: And connect to each other.

Winn: Wow.

Mo: That's what we're trying to do—

Winn: And this is—

Mo: —I think, all the time.

Winn: This interview is going to connect with so many people. I—you're going to be bombarded, I guarantee it. I've been doing—

Mo: Ahh.

Winn: —this a very, very long time and I know when it's a *really* good interview.

Mo: Cool.

Winn: This was a *really good*—

Mo: Thank you.

Winn: —interview.

Mo: Thank you.

Winn: You're adorable.

Mo: Thanks.

Winn: Thank you so much for this.

Mo: Yeah. I appreciate—I appreciate the opportunity. Any chance to share, right? Like I do so many interviews on red carpets and in this industry, but at the end of the day, we all just want to know if our dreams are possible.

Winn: Hm.

Mo: That's it. Are my dreams possible? And am I doing okay? And the answer is yes. Your dreams are possible and you're doing great. *[laughs]*

Winn: And it doesn't matter whose gown you're wearing.

Mo: No, it doesn't matter what you're wearing.

Winn: *[laughs]*

Mo: It doesn't.

Winn: Wow.

Mo: Yeah.

Winn: Well thanks, Monique, and thanks, Seth, for making this happen.

Mo: Yeah! Thank you, we love you. *[laughs]*

Winn: Thanks, sweetheart.

Mo: Thank you.