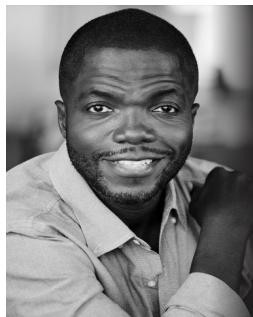


MASTERS by Winn Claybaugh, February 2026

Reno Wilson: Conversations with a Hollywood Actor



Reno Wilson is a dynamic actor best known for his work on *Mike & Molly*, *Good Girls*, the *Transformers* franchise, *Dexter: Original Sin*, *Bolden* as jazz legend Louis Armstrong, and the upcoming Muhammad Ali limited series, *The Greatest*. Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, Reno describes his priority and focus of being a dad and his long-term marriage while balancing a career that can be "feast or famine." This podcast showcases Reno's comedic personality, his love and passion for what he does, and why getting to know him is so much fun.

Winn: Hey everybody, Winn Claybaugh here and we are recording this podcast in January 2026 so I'm just gonna say Happy New Year, everyone. And I'm very excited to be able to start the new year with this amazing, amazing guy. And I keep telling everybody that I stalked him for a very, very long time. Actually, I became a fan of Reno Wilson many years ago watching the TV show, *Mike & Molly*. Of all the characters on that show, you were the one that I zeroed in on. I don't know why it was, but Reno, you brought a lot of joy, a lot of happiness, a lot of laughter in my life, and so, to be sitting here with you right now is, you know, truly, truly a pleasure. So, thanks Reno, for doing this.

Reno: Oh, it's my pleasure, Winn. So, I'm so glad we made this happen. So glad we made it. We made it, Winn!

Winn: You know, I am proud to tell people that the majority of my relationships with celebrities, it's not for personal reasons, although I guess maybe this one is for personal reasons to feature you on my podcast series, but usually it's for philanthropy. So, my relationship with people like—oh my God, here I'm dropping names—Betty White and Dolly Parton and Magic Johnson and Larry King. I mean, that was to raise money for their organizations, for causes that we're passionate about. And that was my intention, too, of getting to know Reno. And so, when—

Reno: Well, I ain't got no money, so it's not gonna happen today.

Winn: Oh, well, I don't know if I believe that.

Reno: [Laughs]

Winn: And once they hear your résumé, they're like, "Yeah, he's got a savings. He's got a nest egg someplace, man. He's not doing bad."

Reno: [Laughs]

Winn: But I reached out to you and asked you if you would help out with our annual FUNaising campaign. And you said yes. And your beautiful wife, Coco, came along with you. And it was just this magical, magical experience. And so,

Reno I'm, just straight up, just so, so grateful that you have become a good friend and an amazing supporter. I'm really, really grateful that we have this friendship now. So, thank you.

Reno: Yeah, same. I've learned it's—to be around you is to be around light. That event was amazing. The way all of the different studios, having them giving back, be a part of having a studio and space just sets a tone. And just to be surrounded by all of those people, it was a really incredible evening. So, thank you for letting me be a part of that.

Winn: Thank you. Well, you know what? You made—'cause a lot of those people have been there for year after year because that's who we are. That's what we do. As you just said, it's a part of the DNA in how we operate business. In fact, every company should be that way. There has to be a leg, there has to be a focus on giving back and making a difference. You know, because we're consuming in that community where we have a business. We're consuming oxygen, we're consuming trees, we're consuming air, we're consuming the paychecks of our customers. We have to be contributors as well. And so again, lot of those people have been there for every single year, 23 years, but you really, really created a lot of magic. And it wasn't just your amazing performance on stage. It was your performance off stage as well. You were just magical. So, thank you for that.

Reno: Yeah, I like people. I really do. And I like being around people and I like sharing energy. And there was a lot of love in the house. Cedric King and, you know, Marie Osmond, which, by the way, was a bucket list for me to meet her and be around her and she exceeded all expectations.

Winn: Yeah, that's her. Well, I'm glad then that I got to provide a bucket list item for you to check off that list.

Reno: You did. Yeah.

Winn: Oh, good. So, I got to do something for you. I appreciate that. Okay. So, I haven't even read your bio here. So, everybody, sit back 'cause this might take a minute. Rena Wilson is a dynamic actor, perhaps best known as Officer Carl McMillan on the hit CBS series *Mike & Molly*, and that's when I took notice of Reno Wilson. And you were on that show with, of course, Melissa McCarthy and Billy Gardell. Reno made his television debut as Theo's best friend, Howard, on *The Cosby Show*. How old were you when that happened?

Reno: I was 19 years old, 19 years old. Rest in peace, Malcolm-Jamal Warner.

Winn: Now that had to be—was that like the first big, big break that, “Oh my gosh, I can't believe that this happened”?

Reno: Yeah. *The Cosby Show* came about—I went to the High School of Performing Arts; you know, the *Fame* school. And after that, I went to SUNY Purchase Conservatory for acting in upstate New York. And it was while I was in my freshman year at SUNY Purchase that I got an audition for *The Cosby Show*. And it was like three or four auditions; I went back and forth from school. I

was very content and happy doing plays and, you know, I was happy. I was a freshman in college. I didn't need to do anything else, but I ended up getting the role of Howard, Theo best friend in college and, yeah, kind of overnight. You know, *The Cosby Show* at that time was the number one show on TV. And I remember it was the one-hour episode. It was the first one-hour episode they ever did. It was their hundredth episode. It was their hundredth episode and it was a one-hour episode. Like everybody was on that episode. I remember being at the table read and just seeing everybody that I had ever seen on that show there. Naomi Campbell was playing my girlfriend and—

Winn: Wait, wait. Who was playing your girlfriend?

Reno: Naomi Campbell.

Winn: Okay.

Reno: The Naomi Campbell. Yeah, for a 19-year-old kid it was—you know what? It was really good to be naive and not know what the heck was going on. When the episode aired, it was called “The Birth.” It was a two-parter. I went to my college to watch the episode with my friends. The next day was a Friday. I got on the train, headed back to the city, and I was recognized on the train. And it freaked me out. So, it was kind of overnight.

Winn: Wow. Wow.

Reno: Yeah. But a really auspicious way to enter the business.

Reno: Wait, did you finish school then, or did you quit to pursue—?

Reno: No, no. I had to take a leave of absence because they kept calling me back to do episodes. So, I was in a conservatory. It was a very intense study and Israel Hicks, who was the chairman of the acting department, I said, “What should I do?” He said, “You better go get that paycheck.” [Laughs]

Winn: Wow.

Reno: So that was my—that continued my education in the business.

Winn: Good for you. Now, Reno can also be seen in a series regular for Paramount and Showtime prequel *Dexter: Original Sin*. I'm sure people are going to be surprised to hear that I watched every episode of that as well.

Reno: [Laughs]

Winn: And a recurring role as the iconic character of Bundini in the Muhammad Ali limited series, *The Greatest*. Reno is also an accomplished voiceover artist who has voiced characters in all of the *Transformers* movies. Now, that's got a cult following right there, right?

Reno: Yeah, yeah, yeah. The first five. The first five.

Winn: Just, you know, here I'm jumping in the middle of your bio here, but I already got questions here.

Reno: Go.

Winn: Now, do you have one that you prefer more than the other, of being a voice actor, a voice character, or I don't know what the opposite would be called.

Reno: On camera?

Winn: On camera, there you go.

Reno: I'm really lucky that I was able to get into the voiceover world. It's a very insular community and world to get in. And, for me, it's kind of a side job. It's a side gig, like the best side gig you can ever get and I love it. I used to always do voices when I was growing up. Watching cartoons, I used to mimic everybody's—you know, it's so funny. I live in Big Bear and *Woody Woodpecker* heh-heh-heh heh-heh-heh [imitates Woody Woodpecker voice]. So, I have these three woodpeckers outside my window and that is what they sound like. [Laughs]

Winn: [Laughs]

Reno: You know, I'm from Brooklyn, I'm a city kid. So, living out here in Big Bear. every morning at 6:30 a.m. there's a woodpecker outside my window going [imitating sound].

Winn: That is funny.

Reno: Yeah, it's a great side gig doing voiceovers.

Winn: Okay. And what other voices? You did Woody Woodpecker. I mean, give us one more before I move on here.

Reno: Oh, no, no. I mean, I did a show, the first series I ever did was called *If Not For You* on CBS. They used to say it was George Clooney, but I think I've done the most pilots. Out of anybody I know. I've done 25 pilots.

Winn: Okay.

Reno: And I think George Clooney did 14 before he got to *ER*. But the first one that I did was a show called *If Not For You*, and Hank Azaria was on that show. Hank Azaria, famous of *The Simpsons*. He gave me advice that I've taken to all the voiceover jobs that I've ever done, which is a lot of the voices that he created were bad impersonations of people. And I said, "Oh, okay. So, you know, if I do like a Frank Sinatra or whatever, whatever in my head is Frank Sinatra, that's how you create voices for different characters." So, yeah.

Winn: That's clever. That's great.

Reno: I do do impersonations but they're only inspired in moments, so I can't just—like, you can't call out somebody and have me do an impersonation. I just have to be inspired by the moment. [Laughs]

Winn: Oh, that's great. That's great. Okay, so Reno has starred and guest starred in dozens of television series, including *Heist*, *Blind Justice*, and the critically acclaimed Showtime series, *The Hoop Life*. Most recently, he played the series regular role of detective Earl Brooker on Paramount's series re-imagining of the classic 1980s thriller film, *Fatal Attraction*. Additionally, Reno

starred in the short film, *Chocolate with Sprinkles*, which will make its world premiere at the American Black Film Festival as one of five films selected for the HBO Short Film Award.

Reno: It actually won that. It happened and it won. *[Laughs]*

Winn: You gave me an old bio of yours to read? It really won? That's awesome, congratulations.

Reno: Yeah, it did. This little film, *Chocolate with Sprinkles*, written and directed by Huriyyah Muhammad, it's so amazing., the eyeballs that have seen it and the opportunities that I've gotten just from being in this short film by this incredible writer and director. There's a project that I'm doing this year that I cannot talk about that is pretty huge. And the reason that I was offered this job was because this person saw *Chocolate with Sprinkles* on an American Airlines flight. Who was that?

Winn: Congratulations.

Reno: Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. As you were.

Winn: I think I fly American Airlines in a week, so are they still showing that film?

Reno: Oh, it's on there. Yeah, it's in, I think the Black Filmmakers Short Film Showcase.

Winn: Well, then I'm going to watch it then. Okay, so Reno recently wrapped shooting—of course, maybe you'll correct me if this is old material that you gave to me to read—independent feature *Above the Line* from writer-director Jeffrey Scott Collins starring Cedric the Entertainer and a leading role in the Fox pilot, *The Last Police*. Previously, Reno was the series regular role of Stan Hill on the hit NBC series *Good Girls*, which I think I binge watched all of that during COVID. That was great.

Reno: Stanimal!

Winn: *[Laughs]* Yes. Do you prefer one over the other, like comedy over drama? I mean, again, I became your fan watching you doing comedy.

Reno: No. I do not. This business is funny, though, because after you do a comedy for six years, people forget the stuff you did before that. And then, for instance, after *Mike & Molly* for 127 episodes, I did *Good Girls* for four years. And then when it's come time to do a comedy, people are like, "Is he funny?" I'm just like, "Wait a minute. I just. Didn't you see?" So, yeah, I don't care. Although I currently have a little hankering to do another comedy, because I've been doing a lot of heavy stuff recently, so I got a little hankering.

Winn: I don't think that we had met yet when I was binge watching *Good Girls*, but I do remember. I remember the thought process like, you know, *Wait, this guy is going to be able to be in this drama series?*

Reno: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Winn: So, Reno stole the screen with this impeccable portrayal of the legendary jazz icon Louis Armstrong in the feature film, *Bolden*. And it's part of my line of questioning and we'll come back to Louis Armstrong and this connection that you have with that incredible guy. Other television credits include a large guest star role in the HBO pilot, *A Lot*, alongside Whitney Cummings; *Officer Downe* with Kim Coates; and *The Taken* parody film, *Tooken*.

Reno: [Laughs]

Winn: Margaret Cho's in that. Has that come out yet?

Reno: Yes. Yes. Yeah. This bio is a lot of work. This a lot of years.

Winn: Yeah, it is. Congratulations. There's a lot in here. So, Reno is a native New Yorker and he currently lives with his wife Coco and two children in Big Bear. Now, I know that that's old news as well. The children are—

Reno: [Laughs]

Winn: They've taken off, too. So, let me rewrite that. Reno lived and he's lonely in Big Bear without his friends and he cries every single night when he falls asleep with Coco. How's that?

Reno: Yeah, she's not even here. It's just me.

Winn: Oh my gosh. What have you done?

Reno: She's in LA. She's running the Cycling Pigeon. She's in LA.

Winn: Well, again, Reno, thank you so much for doing this. This is gonna be a lot of fun, so thank you.

Reno: This is already so much fun, Winn, man. You're the best.

Winn: You know, I wanna start with your personal story. Some of it we've already heard, how you got on *The Cosby Show*. Again, you're a native New Yorker, grew up with a blues pianist father. Your mom was an opera singer, so talk to us a little bit about that.

Reno: Yeah, it's been a good life. My dad was a blues singer. My dad had a band named the Roy Wilson Trio. And one of my earliest memories is sitting on my father's lap and he had a cardboard keyboard, Winn, on the piano. And he just used to teach me the notes. And my dad died when I was four years old. He was 50 years old and he died while he was performing on stage at a club in Manhattan. He had a stroke while he was performing. So, I have a few—maybe three memories of my father. And that's the first one, of me sitting on his lap and teaching me the notes on the keyboard. And conversely, that's exactly what I did with both of my kids. I had them both sitting on my lap and teaching them the keys on the piano. So that musical gift that he had definitely was in me. And I have three older sisters. And I grew up in a household where we had a piano living room, we had a drum set, and I thought everybody had a piano and a drum set in their living room. So, when my dad passed away, we lived in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. We were gonna move to Queens, but my mom, now she had four kids and her husband died

suddenly. And she made the move, I don't really know why, but we moved to another neighborhood in Brooklyn called East Flatbush. And that's where I grew up. Those were my formative years. And my mom, who was a nurse, she raised her four kids and when she was about—I guess in her mid 50s, and when she was younger, she was a young opera singer in New York. She sang at Carnegie Hall in the late '50s. And she met—which is rare for a black woman opera singer.

Winn: Wow.

Reno: And she met my dad. My dad was from the South. My dad was from Birmingham, Alabama. And legend has it, he was like, you know, “You gonna raise this family or you gonna sing opera?” And so, she stopped singing. And she always wanted to get back to her craft. She loved opera so much. I mean, she played opera in the house all day. I had scores and scores of opera books. And so, in her 50s, she started auditioning again and she got into the Metropolitan Opera Chorus and she got into all these different other opera groups. And I traveled with her through the tri-state area as she performed all of these operas. You know, I always say people say they're a preacher's kid, but I was an opera kid. And, you know, I've slept through many an opera, Winn.

Winn: [Laughs]

Reno: *La Traviata, Cavalleria Rusticana*, you know. She was in *Porgy and Bess* at the Metropolitan Opera with Simon Estes as Porgy and Grace Bumbry as Bess. Yeah, I mean, she did *Madame Butterfly*, a bunch of times. *Faust*.

Winn: Wow.

Reno: So yes, that was kind of my childhood. I traveled with her while she sang opera and also that's when I started to do plays as well.

Winn: Do you have recordings of your parents performing?

Reno: I have reel to reels of my dad rehearsing at our basement in the first house that we lived in in Brooklyn. And I was a baby in the background and it's kind of cool. My dad kind of sounded like a bluesy Jimi Hendrix singing.

Winn: Oh, wow.

Reno: Yeah, so that's kind of, that's really valuable. We took the reel to reel and we transferred it to digital. So that's kind of a treasure. I do not have any recordings of my mom singing. We have one Calypso song that she recorded with this guy named Lord Melody, who was a famous Calypso artist, at our house. But my mom sang. She was a mezzo and she sang through the house just constantly. But yeah, all my sisters sing.

Winn: You've got a beautiful pedigree there.

Reno: Yeah, I thought it was the Jacksons, the Osmonds, the Silvers, and the Wilsons as the musical family.

Winn: That was the musical family all wrapped up into one family there. The Wilsons.

Reno: Yeah.

Winn: Well, my mom did not perform at Carnegie Hall. She was kicked out of the Palladium in LA twice, by the way.

Reno: Why?

Winn: Because she was too young. At 16, my mom's sneaking into the Palladium. So let me tell you something. I'm very, very proud of that heritage. I want you to know.

Reno: Oh, absolutely!

Winn: Isn't that great?

Reno: She's like, "I got to be in there."

Winn: Is that awesome?

Reno: Twice. *[Laughs]*

Winn: Twice. Twice no less. So, did your parents give you a lot of support and encouragement to enter the world of entertainment?

Reno: Yeah, it all just kind of made sense. Like I said, I grew up in a very musical household. My sisters all sang. My sisters had music groups growing up, so they had rehearsals at the house. I did plays since I was nine years old; that was when I did my first play. And I went to a junior high school for the performing arts. And then I went on to, like I said, the School of Performing Arts in Manhattan. And it was, Winn, upon graduating high school that I realized, "Oh, wait a minute. I'm probably going to need to make money doing something at some point." And I was fortunate enough to get my first commercial in my junior year in high school. I got my first off-Broadway play senior year. I got—I did two commercials junior year and I got my first off-Broadway play when I graduated. But even though it seemed like it was a good beginning, my mom always said, "Have a backup, have a backup." And I thought that was the most ridiculous thing I ever heard.

Reno: So, did you have one?

Reno: No.

Winn: Oh.

Reno: It made absolutely no—it drove me crazy whenever she said that. I was like, why would I have a backup? And I understood, you know, in hindsight. You know, this business is unpredictable. She was in the business and she had a family and she let it go and then she came back. But she would always say, "Be realistic" to me. And that drove me bonkers. Which was also odd because I would go with her to auditions. And I remember when she had her audition for the Metropolitan Opera and she was nervous to go in and I was like, "You got it, Mom." I was like, "You go in there and you, you know, you kill it." And

then she went in and it was really super soundproof, but I kind of heard her singing and she got it. She was so excited. So, it always struck me funny that she was just trying to take—she was nervous for me. But it drove me crazy when she said, “Have a backup.” I was like, “Why would I have a backup?”
[Laughs]

Winn: I listening to a guy and he was giving parental advice of always encourage your kids. Whatever it is that they're interested in, take an interest in it. He said that, you know, growing up, his parents took him to Sea World and so that was his dream at five years old: to be an orca trainer. He was going to train the orca whales and his parents supported him in that, they believed it was going to happen. He says, “Guess what? I'm not an orca trainer. But it was their belief in me that opened up so many other opportunities.”

Reno: [Laughs] Correct. Correct. Those were the voices in your head as you got older that let you know that you could do these things.

Winn: So you went to that famous high school, the performing arts, the *Fame* school, which—I don't know, I remember the film *Fame*, and then the TV show *Fame*. I mean, I don't know how many people nowadays know what the film and the TV show were all about.

Reno: They remade *Fame* a bunch of years ago, so maybe some people don't.

Winn: Well, didn't you say you graduated with Jennifer Aniston?

Reno: Yeah. Yeah. Everybody was in our class. Yeah, name dropping. Yeah, Jennifer Aniston. We were all in the same class. Carl Payne, who was Cockroach on *The Cosby Show* and ended up being on *Martin*. Dondré Whitfield. So, so many people went to—I mean, in the four years that I was there, or three, you know, Marlon Wayans. I auditioned Marlon Wayans to get into the school, him and Omar Epps. I could go on and name-drop the incredible talented people and who are still working today. But obviously Jen is, we know who she is. So, she's the one that everybody comes back to.

Winn: So, were you trained in music? I mean, you said your dad, but that was a cardboard keyboard. I mean, was that—did you take formal lessons in playing the piano? Because I know that piano is your hobby now. I love the Throwback Joint Thursdays that you do on Instagram. Those are pretty cool.

Reno: [Laughs] Yeah, so most of—so I've been playing since I was about three or four years old, I would imagine. So, yes, I would just play in my house and I have perfect pitch, which is a blessing and a curse.

Winn: Yeah, I've heard you say that. Why is that a blessing and a curse?

Reno: Well, because I did end up taking piano lessons and you can really cheat your way through learning pieces. I was classically trained early on. And I wouldn't practice during the week and I would go back to piano lessons, I'd just play. And, you know, when you have classical music, there are numbers, there's fingering and all that stuff. And I'd just be playing and my piano teacher would go, “Stop.” Oh boy. He goes, “You didn't practice.” I was like, ‘I'm playing the

pieces.” Like, “Yeah, but that's not the fingering. That's not—you're just playing that by ear.” So, there's a lot of cheating that can happen when you have perfect pitch. So, yes, I did end up, I started taking piano lessons officially when I was about 11 years old and I would travel from my part of Brooklyn, East Flatbush, to Crown Heights where I would take piano lessons at the Bennett School of Music, which was in a largely Hasidic neighborhood in Brooklyn. And Kenneth Bennett was my first music teacher and his mom owned the school and Ken was a character and his mom was a character and she said to me one day, she goes, she goes, “Reno, you're so good.” She goes, “You should play the accordion. You should play the accordion and go to competitions.” And I said to her, was like 13, I was like, “You trying to get me killed? I live—you think—I have to take a bus. I have to take two buses to come over here to take these piano lessons.”

Winn: With your accordion in tow.

Reno: Right! “How do you think—you think I would survive going back to my neighborhood in Brooklyn with an accordion strapped to my back?” Like Steve Urkel?

Winn: Not sexy, not sexy.

Reno: Not at all. But it was classical for those years until I got a new teacher named Steve Prodo, who was a jazz pianist. And he saw that I was kind of lackadaisical with these classical pieces. He goes, “So, what do you want to play?” I said, “I want to play Lionel Richie!” He was like, “Well, go get some sheet music.” And that's when I started just playing stuff that I wanted to play. My ultimate dream, Winn, is one day you just find me in a hotel bar at a piano with a fake book, just playing anything, any song. Just playing a fake book. So, a fake book, for those who don't know, is just a book with song, it's just chords, not notes. It's just chords.

Winn: Yeah. Yeah.

Reno: So, if you know your music theory, which is—so now at this stage of my life, like I said, because I've cheated so much with my perfect pitch, like everything you see on Throwback Joint Thursdays, that's from ear. That's just me listening to a song and playing. But at this point in my life, I want to study with somebody and really deepen my knowledge of musical theory, the circle of fifths and all that stuff, so I can be in that hotel bar, just playing requests.

Winn: Good for you. Well, watching your Throwback Joint Thursday videos on Instagram inspired me, and I think maybe I even shared that with you, that I finally—and it had been a minute—finally I was in my home by myself for a couple of days and I pulled out some music and sat down and played and sang and I—

Reno: And do you read music?

Winn: I do, but I'm self-taught and what I taught myself was music theory, so I play by chords. Yeah.

Reno: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. That's—if you're not going to be a classical pianist, that's the best way to play. Just grooves and you can play with anybody. If you know what key somebody's playing in, you can play with anyone.

Winn: I will say, before we move on from this, that again, before I met you, one of the episodes of *Mike & Molly*—

Reno: I was playing.

Winn: You are playing the piano, you sit down and you play the piano and you and your grandma character on that show sing a song together. I bet I rewound that and watched it over and over and over and over again.

Reno: It's one of my favorite episodes. That's the episode, Cleo King played my grandmother; the wildly talented Cleo King. That was the episode where Carl, he found out his mother was still alive and he raced to the hospital to see her. He was upset at his grandmother for childhood issues and his mother had died before he got to the hospital. Then he understood why his grandmother was protecting him all those years and what she did for him. So, that song, it was *God Bless the Child*, right?

Winn: Yeah. Oh my gosh.

Reno: And so, yeah, that scene was very emotional because my mom had just passed away. Not long—my mom passed in 2012 so it was not long after she passed away.

Winn: Wow.

Reno: I remember walking into that set and seeing her at the piano and, you know, I'd see my mom at the piano many times like that and I get emotional right now thinking about that. So, the first take we did of that, Chuck was—Chuck Lorre. He was like, "That was great, but it was too teary. It was too sad." He was like, "You need to pull it in just a little bit." So, we found that delicate balance. What you saw, we found that delicate balance of.

Winn: Oh, I think—didn't I recently videotape that scene and send it to you?

Reno: Yeah, yeah, you did. Yeah, you did.

Winn: Wow. That was magical.

Reno: Yeah, it was.

Winn: Do you remember when acting first showed up for you? Not just as something that you did, but something that you genuinely felt like you were called to do this?

Reno: I feel like I've always been acting. The first—I went to—and you know what? I was born at a time and a neighborhood on this planet where it was very special. And the kids that I came up with, the plays that we did. The first play I did, I went to a school called P.S. 244 in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and a woman named Elaine Zipper, she ran the acting program. And Elaine Zipper was fabulous. Platinum blonde hair, over the top. She was all about

Broadway. And I remember, I did a play. It was just like a variety show on stage. I'm in the third grade, I think. And I was the host of the show.

Winn: Of course you were.

Reno: I mean, apparently, I guess. So, I almost remember the opening, the introduction: "And now, here is our fabulous host who's going to be taking you on a journey through Broadway. He-e-e-e-re's Reno." And I come out to the stage and I pinch a girl on the cheek and I say, "Hiya, cutie!" And I say, "Good evening, everybody. Would you believe I shot an 80 today? That's on one hole, of course." I don't know what that joke meant. It was a golf joke. Anyway.

Winn: I don't know what that joke means either. I'm not old enough to play golf, yet. So.

Reno: If you— *[laughs]* Anyway, yeah. So, the first play I ever did was a play, I think I was nine years old, called *The Glasses Man*. And *The Glasses Man*, I think it was a play that we all created. And he went and he gave rose-colored glasses to the people of the world so that they can change their perspective in life and have everybody live a joyous life. I was like nine years old.

Winn: Wow.

Reno: I think that's a very interesting first play to do because I kind of feel like that's been my mandate for my life. And then the next formative play, Winn, I did was *Oliver* and I played Fagin. I met my best friend on that show, who played Oliver, and we're still best friends to this day. Yeah, I did all these incredible musicals. I went to this junior high school right after the elementary school and we did *Anything Goes*. We did *Good News*. And the play that changed everything for me was when I was 15 and I played—we did *Barnum* and I played Barnum and I trained with the people who trained—it was Jim Dale and Glenn Close on Broadway. I trained at the Big Apple Circus and went to the New York School of Circus Arts. And these two directors, these teachers, Eddie Gentile and Michael Perlman, they created this environment and this program where, you know, East Flatbush was a largely black, West Indian community and these two—oddly enough, Eddie Gentile and Mr. Perlman was Jewish, these two guys. And they were like our surrogate dads. And the three years that I was at this junior high school, we did the most amazing plays. And *Barnum*, we ended up traveling the show because it was a spectacle and it was all done by kids: sets, wardrobes, the musicians. And *Barnum* was a huge show. We traveled it through other schools and we performed it. And after that play, the school got funding and it became a magnet school for the performing arts, so kids from all the other boroughs could audition and go to that school.

Winn: Wow.

Reno: And I started shooting a documentary about what happened to all of the kids that were a part of that program. And 95 percent of all of us went on to do just incredible things. Doctors, PhDs, attorneys, some in the arts. And they all

harkened back to this moment in time of doing these plays as the thing that sparked and changed their lives. And that's why I'm a real strong advocate for arts in school. Yeah.

Winn: God, what a great story. You love hearing those stories when maybe it didn't seem like it was all that significant. You're nine years old and you're young and does this really mean anything? And here you are, this many years later, because you're what? You're like 80 now, right?

Reno: I'm 79. Yes. *[Laughs]*

Winn: Oh, 79. Sorry. For you and for these other people to see that that was a pivotal time, that that was an important time in your life, that it set the stage for lots of wonderful things to come.

Reno: Yeah. Yeah. Arts education. And I just think—I always had something to do after three o'clock.

Winn: Ahhhh. Yeah.

Reno: You know what I mean? If you're from, especially in neighborhoods where there are all kind of other elements, negative elements, I think it's important for all kids to have something to do after three o'clock, be it sports. You know, I'm a sports parent. Both of my kids who are, you know, they're artistic as well, but my kids are athletes. I always had a play that I was rehearsing for or preparing for, since I was very young. So.

Winn: Wow. That's great. Yeah. So, you're drawn to this and this is something that you have passion for and, again, it's part of your legacy with your parents. But maybe to switch gears here a little bit, just because it's something that you enjoy and maybe a lot of it comes natural to you, there's still hard work. There's still the preparation. I know that to be a comedian, the preparation time to be a standup comedian for this huge, big—they sell out these arenas of 20–30,000 people, but they didn't just walk into that stage. There's the writing and the refining material, the performing at open mic nights and the handling rejection and handling hecklers and testing material in front of live audiences and the delivery and the timing. My gosh, so much goes into that before they then eventually, maybe a year or more later, land at a huge, big stadium like that.

Reno: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. You know, the job of any, be it if you're a comedian or an actor or somebody who's in this business, is to make it look really easy. You know, but it's years and years of, like you said, at the beginning of this, of rejection. Years of training. Well, it's a different era now, and when I do speak to a lot of young people who are getting into this business, who are starting to act, I always say, “Go train. Train.” Preparation is key for everything. And like the old Stanislavski book, *An Actor Prepares*. That's everything. You prepare and you prepare and you prepare so that it looks effortless when it's on screen or on stage or whatever the deal is. So, yeah, it's a lot of work.

Winn: I'm a big proponent of that. This interview, do you know how many hours I put into getting ready for this? Do you know how many pages of notes that I

have? I literally don't—I didn't even share this with you, Reno. I've got pages and pages of notes and watching videos of you and talking to other people about you. I mean, I over-over-over prepare everything that I do.

Reno: Just watching all those videos of me. God bless you. That's just—

Winn: Mm. So, let's talk about a show like *Mike & Molly*. So, it's a 30-minute sitcom but there's obviously script memorization and preparation for just one episode. I'm curious to know. Like how many pages of script are you memorizing? How do you do that? How long does that take? I mean, to pull that off, what does that look like?

Reno: To do a show like *Mike & Molly*?

Winn: To do one episode.

Reno: To do one episode, it's five days.

Winn: Okay.

Reno: You've got five days. Day one is the table read. You sit down. By the way, the multi-camera sitcom in front of a live audience is one of the best schedules that you can have in this business, especially if you have a family. Day one, you go to the table read at about 10 a.m. You sit down with everybody and you read the episode, which takes about 45 minutes, maybe. Then you go home. The writers rewrite. You come back day two. You sit down at the table. You read again. You probably put it on its feet a little bit, meaning you go and you—with the script, you rehearse it a little bit. See what works, what doesn't work. You're done by one o'clock. You go home. Day three, you come in 10 a.m. This time, you're gonna start seeing the scene. Now you're on the set a little bit, a little longer of a day. At the end, you do a run through of the whole show, just for everybody on the set, then you go home. Day four. Now you come in 10 o'clock. You've got cameras now. Now you're doing camera blocking now. It's a little longer of a day. And at the end of that day, you do a run-through for the network. You're closer to off-book, but you're still on book. The network, they watch the run through, da, da, da, da, da. You go home. It's four o'clock. They give their notes. You come back the next day. And by the way, they're changing the script constantly the whole time. Day five, tape day. Tape day. Come in a little later, you rehearse with cameras again. No wardrobe yet, you're just rehearsing, you're getting hair ready, makeup ready, doing the thing. You do your last little run-through before the audiences are loaded in. Audiences come in at about six maybe, something like that. They start warming up. You're in your dressing room, you put on your wardrobe. For us on *Mike & Molly*, we would do a speed-through before the show. We would get into the makeup room, hair and makeup room, and we would do a speed through. We'd just run through the show, off the top, fast. And you're working with, you know, *Mike & Molly* was a master class in a half-hour sitcom because we were working with Chuck Lorre, one of the most prolific creators, show runners in the history of television, him and Norman Lear, and

we were directed by the legendary James Burrows. The man, the myth, the legend who directs all of your favorite shows: *Friends*, *Cheers*, *Taxi*.

Winn: Yeah.

Reno: *Will & Grace*. You're working with giants. So, it's a master class. Jim Burrows could tell you something like this. He doesn't even look at the cameras, he's just listening. And you'll say a line, like what I just did a little while ago, he'll say, "Well, say that line again and then take a sip." And I'll say a line, take a sip, whatever, and that'll get the laugh. Just little simple things like that. So, we're in the hair and makeup trailer, so we'll do a speed-through of the show. And then after that, we would get into a circle and we would pray. We would pray that we were a blessing to the people that we were about to do this show for. We would remind ourselves that it was a privilege to do what we were doing. And then we would get hyped up like a football team. And then we would blow out onto the stage. And then we would do our show and it would be done probably about 11 o'clock at night.

Winn: Wow.

Reno: That's what a five-day week was like with *Mike & Molly*. They were just the most amazing collection of humans. Thankful people could be around for six years. Amazing.

Winn: I bet, I bet.

Reno: I'm ready to do a comedy again. I'm feeling like I'm ready to do something funny again. So, we'll see.

Winn: I could be your agent, you know, because again, I'm a fan. I open doors. I don't give up.

Reno: My agents will probably be watching this. You could work with them.

Winn: Okay, no, I'm kidding.

Reno: [Laughs]

Winn: So, you had this connection to Louis Armstrong.

Reno: Yes.

Winn: So, when did that start and some interesting facts, some history about Louis Armstrong that you love sharing with people? And by the way, your impression, do you call it an impression—

Reno: I do not. [Laughs]

Winn: —of Louis Armstrong? It's amazing. It's incredible.

Reno: Louis Armstrong. Wow. Amazing. I fell in love with Louis Armstrong many years ago when I read an article about him in *High Times* magazine. *High Times* magazine, he was their person of the century. I opened up this magazine and, you know, when we think of Louis Armstrong, we think of *Hello Dolly*, we think of *What a Wonderful World* and him as an older man. What I didn't know at the time was that in 1926 Louis Armstrong was a part of

a group called the Hot Five. And he was just this young, handsome dude. The things that he was doing on the trumpet were crazy at that time, the notes he was hitting. And him as a vocalist, as a singer, the things that he was doing was, it was groundbreaking. Louis Armstrong in the late '20s was like a combination of Jay-Z, Afrika Bambaataa, and, I don't know, George Clinton. And he was just a spark that changed. There's no modern music without Louis Armstrong. You know, it was almost like when hip hop started, everybody thought hip hop was going to be a fad, that it was going to go away. It was the same thing when jazz started. Know, before Louis Armstrong, music was just like, [sings] "Dinah, is anyone finah, in the state of Carolina." And then when Louis would sing, he was all in between the notes, all in between the timing, syncopation, and it changed everything. So, I was struck by that when I read this article. And I also was struck that I felt that I kind of favored him as a young man. And when I was growing up, funnily enough, I would always sing *Hello Dolly*. When I was a kid, you could always find me going, [sings] "Hello, Dolly." But I was doing the Carol Channing version: [sings] "Hello, Dolly. Well, hello Dolly." But not connecting that it was Louis's song. Once I realized that his impact on culture, his impact on music, socially, economically, and politically, all of those worlds collide with Louis Armstrong. And then when you study him and you see, as he got older and when his audiences became more white and less black and then people started calling him an Uncle Tom and all of these things, it became a really interesting story for me and how he felt about it. And as I did my research and then I got connected with Ricky Riccardi. who runs the Louis Armstrong archives. And Louis Armstrong, he recorded himself incessantly, Winn. He took a reel-to-reel tape recorder with him everywhere. And he recorded conversations and in these conversations, he would rail on society. He would rail on people. And his public persona was very different than who he was privately, and that really intrigued me. So, that started my journey on trying to get a project done about him, be it on stage, be it on film. I've written a play, then I wrote another play with a friend of mine named Tom Langdon. And we created a limited series idea about him. And then, oddly enough, I ended up getting the script for *Bolden*, which was about Buddy Bolden, who they say is the first person to ever play jazz, directed by Dan Pritzker. And Buddy Bolden—Louis Armstrong was a little boy when Buddy Bolden was the big trumpet man in New Orleans. Buddy Bolden, when he was 26 years old, unrecorded, was put into an insane asylum when he was 26 years old and left to die. And I think he died when he was 52 years old. But Buddy Bolden was the spark and Louis Armstrong was the flame. Yeah, Buddy Bolden was just—today, Buddy Bolden would just be an eccentric artist but in the late 1800s, you weren't allowed to be eccentric and weird and talking to yourself and things like that as a black man. And so that's the story in the movie that Dan Pritzker did. And I was fortunate enough. But is it fortune, Winn, when I was already preparing to do this project about Louis Armstrong and then I get a script and when I open it the first person I see speaking in the script is Louis Armstrong?

Winn: Yeah.

Reno: So, I kind of manifested that.

Winn: Of course you did. You prepared, you overprepared, you hustled, you put it out there. That's how things work, whether it's in the entertainment world or any area of life, right?

Reno: Yeah. So, when you see *Bolden*, there's about seven minutes of me performing as Louis.

Winn: Which is awesome, by the way. It's really incredible. I think I rewound and watched that section of the movie quite a few times.

Reno: Yeah. And there's so much more music that I recorded with Wynton Marsalis and his band and I thought that was it but I'm not done. I really think there needs to be a standalone project about Louis Armstrong so I want the world to get the story straight on Louis Armstrong.

Winn: Well, good for you. So, I want to switch directions here a little bit again. So, rejection is such a big, big part of the journey, the career that you have chosen. Not that rejection doesn't exist and happen in every area of life, whether it's in romance or a career or anything else. But when it does, how do you keep it from becoming personal, becoming part of your identity, that rejection?

Reno: Yeah, this is a business where you get to know rejection very intimately, more so than other professions. That's a great question, Winn, and because honestly, to do art is personal. To do craft is personal. But I think the line is business. Somebody told me when I was coming up, business is bigger than the word *show*. You know, ultimately, if you're in the business, the business aspect comes first. Funny story. Bringing it back to *The Cosby Show* and Malcolm-Jamal Warner. Rest in peace again. So, I did my first off-Broadway play. And this goes back to taking something personal. I did my first off-Broadway play in the summer after I graduated high school. Like I said, I was about to go to SUNY Purchase, but in those months between, I did an off-Broadway show with S. Epatha Merkerson and Laurie Metcalf called *Three-Way Song*. Three-person play. Amazing. I was told that we were going to move it to a larger off-Broadway theater. Great. I start going to school at Purchase, having an amazing time. One day I'm in my acting class and for some reason, I don't know why somebody had a *New York Times* newspaper, but I decided to open to the arts section. On the front page of the arts section, Winn, is the play that I did. Huge, plastered, but I was not in the play. It was those two women with who playing my role? Malcolm-Jamal Warner.

Winn: Oh my.

Reno: When I tell you, I lost it. Audible gasp. I left the room and I just ran around the campus because I couldn't contain or process what I was feeling. The anger, the rejection that I was feeling. I felt so—"You guys told me that I was going to be the guy." Of course I go to see the play with Malcolm in it so that I could hate on him. [Laughs] I go see the play and then I go back to school. And

then what happened shortly thereafter, I get *The Cosby Show* playing his best friend. And who was the first person to call me in my dorm room? Malcolm-Jamal Warner to congratulate me on getting this role.

Winn: Wow.

Reno: And we end up just be—we were friends from that moment on, close friends till the day he passed away, July of 2025. So, I took that personally when I didn't get that job. But as time goes on, you learn that our job as actors is not to get the job when you go in. And once a young actor realizes that your job for an audition is not to get the job, your job is to go in there and act. It's to take your time, take your space. And that's your two minutes, three minutes, whatever it is, to do as you see fit for the characters. Not to get the job. It's an opportunity to act. So, once I realized that, then I could be free. And that's when I became the pilot king. And I would just go into these rooms and have a ball and not worry about the outcome. So yeah. And like I said, the mantra that I have—I don't know who told me; maybe Lorraine Toussaint taught me this mantra. But it was, "Ultimately what is for you cannot be un-for you." And once you grasp that in life, what is yours is yours.

Winn: Hmm. So, I'm sure looking back, would you say or have you said, "Oh, that was the best thing that happened to me that I was replaced," because it led to better things or it led to different things?

Reno: Yeah, it wasn't meant to be. If it was meant to be, it would have been. But yeah, but look what happened after that. Isn't that crazy the way things work? Malcolm played that character.

Winn: Wow.

Reno: Then when I met him, we talked about it and he was like, "Whoa, you," he goes, "You were the dude that played?" I was like, "Yeah, man." I said, "I saw you do that character." He was like, "Really?" Life is really amazing and filled with miracles if you open your eyes and look for them.

Winn: I want to switch gears again here. And ask you about balance. How do you balance your love and work for acting and music with other activities, I guess with the rest of your life? And is your career or has your career been like a "feast or famine" or has it been consistent? And what do you do while you're waiting for the next gig, I guess, is the question.

Reno: So good. Great, great question. This business is a rollercoaster. And like the ocean, you really have to flow with what comes. For me, staying grounded is my family. My most, my favorite thing to do is to be a father, is to be a husband, and that's been my paramount focus. And my career has come after that. So, my main focus has always been to raise my children in a loving household, to be there. You know, I guess, you know, when your father dies when you're four years old at 50, your goal becomes to be, first of all, to be older than 50, to have my children have me in their lives past four years old. So that's kind of been the thrust of my life, is to be healthy and fit and to be here for my family. And I've achieved that. So, I feel very successful because

of that. And everything that my career does comes after that, because I'm already successful. So, in between work, I spend time with my family, I work out, I train, I play the piano, and I spend a lot of time, Winn, being grateful, being thankful. And that's just a part of getting older. You realize, and it's cliché but all the clichés—something's cliché because it's true. Life is short, right? And long at the same. But when you start losing friends and people, you realize you really have to be grateful for every moment that you have.

Winn: Good for you. Your wife Coco, she's known for dance and fitness.

Reno: She is.

Winn: How long have you been married?

Reno: So, I'm going to take the two years before we got married as well. So, this year is 30 years.

Winn: Congratulations. Wow.

Reno: January 28th makes 30 years since we went on our first date and it will be 28 years married.

Winn: That's great. Did I read this: that Coco was on an episode of *Mike & Molly*? Did that happen or no?

Reno: She was a yoga consultant. There was a yoga episode of *Mike & Molly* and she was there, a yoga consultant for some of the poses that they were doing. Melissa McCarthy is very flexible, by the way. I think we all know that from, know, *Bridesmaids*, when she put her leg up. She can actually do that. But yeah, Coco was the yoga consultant for that *Mike & Molly*.

Winn: Wow, that's great. So, was there a moment in your career where you said, "I don't want it if it costs me who I am?" Meaning a role or an opportunity came up and you thought, "You know what, I got to turn this one down because it's going to cost me, it's going to jeopardize?"

Reno: No, no. No, I've been really fortunate for all the things that I've been able to do. I've never had any moral discrepancies with projects that I have been offered or I have done. No. It's been mostly positive being in this business. But like you said, there's rejection, there's ups and downs, there's shows that get canceled. Nobody knows that more than me. There are things that people—shows that are supposed to be huge that aren't huge, things that you didn't expect to do something, do something. So, you really have to be flexible and open when you're in this business to all the things. But most importantly, you have to speak to yourself lovingly every day. That way, to bring more of that into your space. I'm a firm believer in speaking to yourself in a loving way so that you can bring more of that into your space. So no, I've worked with incredible people. You know, and also I try not to compare myself with other people's ads. You know, once you can stop comparing yourself to other people's journey, I think that's another thing that frees you up, you know, in this business. And I think that's how you can have longevity in this business as well.

Winn: I want to ask you about the other activities, the other things that you have an interest in. You mentioned it earlier, and I think that you were part of creating a scholarship for the performing arts that I think you—what'd you call it? The Pearl-Gen Award?

Reno: Yeah. So, yeah, my two—

Winn: Were those the two teachers that you mentioned earlier that were—

Reno: Yeah. Yeah. Michael Pearl.

Winn: —a mentor to you and you said even a father figure, right?

Reno: Yeah. Yeah, for sure. My junior high school that I went to, it's called Meyer Levin Junior High School for the Performing Arts now. Michael Pearlman, Eddie Gentile, they created this at the junior high school performing arts program, PAC, the Performing Arts Center, and did so much good for so many people. And yeah, it was just a way for me to acknowledge them. They're still here with us. They're still alive and kicking. And I still am in touch with both of them. And I wanted to give back, like you said, and support. M]I mean, the things they're doing at my old junior high school is incredible. Like there's the steel pan. They have a steel—because you know, East Flatbush is a very Caribbean, West Indian neighborhood. So, you have people from all over. You have Jamaicans and Trinidadians and Bajans and all sorts of people. Haitians and all that. It's very Caribbean. So, the school, they have like a steel pan club and group, and they travel, playing the steel pan. So, I just created a little scholarship program called the Pearl-Gen Award, named after Michael Perlman and Eddie Gentile. And it rewards two students every year who excel in the performing arts and academically. And yeah, it's been our seventh year or eighth year. Yeah. Thank you.

Winn: Good for you. And I know you also are passionate about music for therapy.

Reno: Yeah. Yeah. You know, my mom, before she passed away, she had a bit of dementia and she was an opera singer, as I've spoken about. And I noticed when I would play some of her favorite opera singers—you know, I would play Leontyne Price and even Kathleen Battle, who she really liked, and Beverly Sills. I would play her favorite opera singers and she would just come alive after maybe perhaps feeling a little foggy prior to then. And then I got involved with a musical therapy group at North State—Northridge, Cal State. They have a musical therapy program there and I was involved with that for a while. Yeah, music heals. I mean, now you see videos all the time of people who were performers back in the day and they might not remember who the hell you are, but you play a song, they'll be like, "Oh," you know, they'll pop right back into the lyrics. Yeah, music therapy is something that I believe in, for sure.

Winn: That's great.

Reno: Yeah.

Winn: And through, maybe it's the influence of your amazing wife, you have a passion for fitness as well.

Reno: Yeah, yeah, we have our studio, it's called the Cycling Pigeon in Los Angeles, and we've been—she's been running that for eight years. It's our studio that we own together and she's the master spin and yoga instructor.

Winn: I know she could kick my ass. I know, I know that. I'll piss you off. I'm not gonna piss her off.

Reno: *[Laughs]* But as strong as she is in her spin class is as soft as she is in her yoga class.

Winn: She's lovely.

Reno: She's absolutely lovely. There's nobody like Coco. She's unique, the way she looks—I love the way that she looks at the world, her perspective of the world. I love the way she sees the world. And her studio reflects that. The community that she's brought together, the success stories that she's had, people who have transformed their bodies, transformed their lives, is really inspiring. Yeah, the Cycling Pigeon, I love the Cycling Pigeon community. You gotta come take a class, Winn.

Winn: See, there you go. You could kick my ass.

Reno: *[Laughs]*

Winn: So, when you strip away the roles, the credits, the industry, noise, everything, who are you really at your core today?

Reno: At my core today, I am a spiritual being having a physical experience. I tap into love mostly and I try to give out love, and I think that's who I am at my core.

Winn: Hmm. Because you are passionate about youth, the scholarship that you've created, as well as during this interview you've mentioned it multiple times, the youth and the influence that you have had and want to have. So, if your younger self were listening to this conversation right now, what's the one thing that—the one truth that you'd want him to really hear and really believe?

Reno: Well, you didn't tell me I was gonna get emotional, Winn. You didn't tell me that. Wait, what's the question? What did you say?

Winn: If your younger self were listening to this conversation right now, what's the one truth you would want your younger self to really hear and to truly believe coming from you, your older self to your younger self. What would you want that younger self to really believe?

Reno: I would want my younger self to believe you can do absolutely everything that you think you can do and more. You can do everything you think you can do. And more.

Winn: You can become an orca trainer.

Reno: And more. *[Laughs]* Yeah.

Winn: You know what? You just said a minute ago about who you are: that you're this spiritual being and you operate on love and receiving it and giving it out. That's what I've experienced with you. Whether it's just through some fun, clever, silly text messaging back and forth or it was getting ready for the event that you just walked into and were instantly magical for a whole bunch of people. And during this interview today.

Reno: Yeah.

Winn: It's really—

Reno: Thank you.

Winn: It's a pleasure.

Reno: Yeah, thank you, Winn. It's been—it's nice to know you, my friend. It's really nice to know you.

Winn: Not that you needed me to be your publicist and spread the word, but if I have some influence in spreading the incredible life experience that you have and who you are as a person, I consider that a privilege. So, thanks. Thanks, Reno.

Reno: Thank you. Thank you so much, Winn. We're not done, baby. We're still going.

Winn: Oh, we're not done.

Reno: We're still going.

Winn: In fact, earlier—maybe I should put this on camera. Earlier today. Today, Somebody has asked me, “So, have you asked Reno to co-host the event again in 2026?” I said, “I haven't, but I'm planning to.” So I'm asking, Reno, I'm asking.

Reno: [*Laughs*] That would be amazing.

Winn: Okay, I'm getting you the date, then. Hmm. Well, thanks again for this Reno. Truly, truly a pleasure.

Reno: Pleasure is all mine. Thank you for even having me and even wanting to talk to a brother. I appreciate it. [*Laughs*] I hope people enjoyed it. I hope people received some love from it. Maybe some tidbits that could be useful in their own lives.

Winn: That was fun.

Reno: Thank you, brother.

Winn: Thank you so much.

Reno: That was amazing.