

Love Meets Joy Podcast
Season 2 Episode 3
An Artist and a TikTok Star: Meet Monica Bachue and Jackson Wright
Transcript

- Ashley Barbour: Hello everyone and welcome back to the Love Meets Joy podcast on the Smile Train podcast network. I'm Ashley Barbour. I was born with a bilateral cleft lip and palate. I'm the creator of Cleft Love where I share my journey of self-acceptance and spread awareness of cleft.
- Iva Ballou: Hey everyone, I'm Iva Ballou. I was born with a bilateral cleft lip and palate, Smile Train's Cleft Community Development Manager, the CEO of Real Sophisticated Joy, and a cleft confidence coach. Today we have a special episode. What's better than one guest? Two. Joining us later in the show will be Jackson Wright, but up first we're going to interview Monica Bachue.
- Ashley: Monica is an artist, fashion designer and cleft advocate. We're so happy to have her here today. Welcome, Monica.
- Monica Bachue: Hi girls. Thank you for having me.
- Ashley: We are like super excited for this. We have so many questions for you. So first of all, I am curious if you have always been an artist because I feel like I started seeing you on social media and I saw that you created a lot of cleft art. And so was that something that you always wanted to do or was it something you discovered later?
- Monica: Not at all. Actually, I'm a lawyer. That's my first career.
- Iva: That's a big contrast there, Monica. That's a big difference. What is going on there?
- Monica: I know. I changed my career and I was able to join my dream, which was going to fashion school and become a fashion designer. And while I was in fashion school I started drawing and I just literally fell in love and art just possesses my life right now.
- Iva: So do you remember the first masterpiece that was like, "Yes, screw this law degree, screw all that. I'm now going to do this," and then also I have to ask this question because I've always got questions. How did your parents feel about that? Because that's a big jump to go from being a lawyer, that's very prestigious to, "I'm now going to go paint and be an artist." Sometimes parents can...
- Monica: I know that my dad, he was not happy. He was not happy from me jumping from my law career to wanting to go into fashion. And it took me

years to be able to save money to go to fashion school. So he wasn't happy for a long time and he always tried to push me into going back, but no matter what, no matter how unhappy he was about it, he was always helping me out.

Iva: Good.

Monica: Helping my project and helping me build my spaces. We always built my stores together, so it was really sweet of him and when I decided to pursue art, so it was another big shock for him. And the funny thing is he's really sweet. He goes to my studio and then he started looking at the art and he's like, "I don't get it, but should we try to find a better material? Should we do this?" So it's always really trying to get involved in whatever I'm doing.

Iva: Any way that he can.

Monica: Now about your other question. So I was taking fashion illustration class, and since I was a kid, I always painted these faces. Funny thing, I only paint one eyebrow, one side of the nose, and one eye.

Iva: Really?

Monica: Yeah. And for me it's because that's the way I see myself. My face is kind of, it's different one side from the other. So I recognize myself in one little side. So most of my paintings are only one side. So I was trying to draw the lips and I couldn't. And my ex-boyfriend, a great architect and he both amazing. He told me, try, try, keep trying, keep trying, keep trying. And it took me a week. I was at home for an entire week drawing the same face. And it got me into that time. It was a great memory. When I was a teen, I was passing by this park where all the popular kids used to hang out and I was walking by myself going to my volleyball training and these two girls that— we were having fights, you know I was a trouble maker, it wasn't for free— but they started yelling at me, "Classmate! Harelip, blah, blah, blah." So right in front of everybody, everybody got really quiet because they all knew me. And I went home and I locked myself in my mom's bathroom, grab a pen, and eyeliner, and I draw with that eyeliner my lips and my scars. And I cried too much that day. Actually, it was the only time that I cried deeply about it. And—

Ashley: Really?

Monica: That's where I got that memory, and I drew my lips.

Iva: Wow, and that's what it is.

Ashley: Fascinating. I feel like, so you almost always were making it into art. And I also just want to say that something cool I didn't know that we talked about recently was that first design that you did where you incorporated cleft into the face, I actually have tattooed on my body.

Monica: Yes, you do.

Ashley: I knew that I had some of your artwork, but I didn't realize it was the very first one.

Monica: And it makes me feel so honored that you have it.

Ashley: I love it so much. It is just so beautiful. And people ask me about it all the time and I feel like it's just a really great talking point. So something I'm wondering about your art, because a lot of what I see is always has a cleft focus, right?

Monica: Yes.

Ashley: Do you consider your art to be happy?

Monica: Yes, of course, it is art. I find out with that first experience that I had a problem communicating feelings. Always did since I was a kid because I come from a traditional family up in the Andes. We are from small towns, cold towns. So we keep it—

Iva: You keep it locked in. Yeah. You keep it locked in.

Monica: Everything to ourselves. Yeah. So I realized that after I, through that experience, I was able to tell, to express it without feeling bad, without feeling sad, without not a bad memory. Just like, “Oh my God, I get the best out of this memory.” So I realized that I have a lot of things that I want to say, and the way it works for me is that if I'm able to paint it, I'm able to heal it and I'm able to talk about it and I'm able to transform every experience into not looking the bad thing, but the good thing about it and why this is important in my life. So I'm mostly rebuilding every memory. So for me, every piece is a successful story. Every piece is something gorgeous. It's telling me this is the beauty that I found on whatever it is, and that's how I've been rebuilding my life structure. And I find it as an unbelievable tool that I share with people in workshops. And that's why I like doing it because it really works for anybody.

Iva: I love Monica, because as I'm listening, you said a couple of things. I know we got to stick to time, so I'm not going to go all down all of the rabbit holes, but you are basically saying that you decided to paint beauty into your cleft.

Monica: Of course it is gorgeous. Being a cleft is absolutely the most beautiful thing I have about me because that is what makes me a human art piece. I'm like a little museum walking on the street. I have some lips that were rebuilt by humans.

Iva: Yes. Okay, I see that.

Monica: And that's unbelievably— That's insane if you really think about it. So it's extremely beautiful. I've been having the great opportunity to go into many surgeries, cleft surgeries, and shape up every step of how these doctors do this beautiful sculpture. A live sculpture. So it's unbelievable.

Iva: I was just going to say, do you think that's what made you decide cleft is going to be the dominant theme of your artwork, not just your artwork, but also your fashion?

Monica: No, no, no, no. My entire life I've been trying to be a cohesive person. This is one of my main goal in life is to be cohesive, to be the same person the way I live, the way I think, the way I speak, the way I love, the way everything the same. So this is the life that I know. I don't know any other life. This is my reality. So I paint my reality and I work and I design my reality because I can't fake any other life. So that's why I do it. I'm not doing it because of a marketing strategy or because of anything. It's my reality. And that's what I do.

Ashley: Yeah. I just really quickly want to jump back to where you were talking about art is that we are pieces of art. And I just have to tell you that that is one of the most profound things that I have heard someone say. And I feel like I preach confidence and I preach self-acceptance and self-love and all of that. But I have never thought to myself that I am a masterpiece walking down the street and you—

Monica: Oh my God, you are.

Ashley: I know. And you literally, you have changed my framework and how I see myself, and I know a lot of what Iva and I have talked about over the last season is, our experience is connected to the story that we tell ourselves. So thank you for helping me to tell myself a different story.

Iva: Like yes, we had these things happen. As you pointed out, Monica, we had these major surgeries, we've had people taunting, bullying, all of these things. But in this very moment right now, today, no one is doing that. And we have to tell ourselves that. And you have to start telling yourself, "I'm in a safe space now and I get to choose to be art, because Monica said so."

Monica: I'm a real big advocate of reality. And life is just life. I don't want to believe that I was chosen. No, no. It happens. It happens. I was conceived because it happened and I was born because it happened. And tomorrow you can go the street and anything can happen. If you are exposed to risk all the time, risk should be your best friend.

Ashley: Yes.

Monica: Fear is nothing good in life. It doesn't matter. We were born with a cleft lip or palate, we've been through surgeries, but you also have to be, if you

decided, you will have to take the risk to be a mom, to be a wife, to be a friend, to be a daughter to be— and everything brings risk. So this is just life. It is.

Ashley: One of my favorite things that you've said before when we've had conversations is that those of us who were born with cleft were born with a condition and not a destiny.

Iva: Exactly.

Ashley: It's just so powerful.

Monica: With my foundation, the Leporinos Foundation in Colombia, which is, all we do is try to use art as a tool to paint your own story. That's what I have to believe. You were born with a condition, not with a destiny. It's on you, not anybody else's. And also, if you are not born with a condition, you are not also born with a destiny. So, we should all get into that peace of mind that is up to you, whatever you want your life to be. There is a point in life where you just jump out of your nest and you get to choose. That's it.

Iva: There's a scientific study about this; people who have a certain level, it has to be a certain level, of exposure of childhood trauma, what they'll call it, that they are predestined to be successful. And I often think about that when I see so many of us and what we are doing in the world from advocacy, modeling, Instagram, TikTok, lawyers... Looking at what we go through, the average person can't fathom it, like when we tell our friends, "Oh, this is my experience." They're like, "You went through all that?" Yeah, as Monica said, I get to choose how I paint with the colors that were given to me.

Monica: Yes, exactly.

Iva: So what are you going to do?

Monica: Yeah.

Iva: You get to decide to paint.

Monica: Yeah

Iva: And so—

Monica: There's nothing you can do.

Ashley: So we've talked a lot about how the story that we tell ourselves sort of becomes our reality. And cleft has been sort of a uniting piece of all of our stories. But something that's a little bit different about your story is that you weren't born in the US, that you were born in Colombia. And so I'm

curious what it was like growing up, having been born with cleft in Colombia, and how was it addressed?

Monica: Yeah, I was born there, raised there. I was born with all the circumstances that cleft foundations try to help in the world. I mean, I was born, I'm 42 years old, so I was born 42 years ago in a third world country in a really, really small town with no access to the treatment, and a really poor family. So it was like a mix of everything, you know?

Iva: Yea. You got everything going on over there.

Monica: Everything at the same time, same recipe you have. It's interesting because I always think about how did I get here? But I always get to same conclusion. I did have a mom and a dad that refused to believe that an answer would be a no. They moved the world. So they found their ways. They talked to whoever was needed to talk. They found their way to get me into a doctor and another doctor and dealing with everything that a person without money have to deal with to be able to get a surgery for their kids. Besides, I went through 13 surgeries. So it was not an easy task. And I have three brothers. And the most unbelievable thing is that my surgeries were extremely successful. What I am trying to say is, sometimes no matter where you're at, there are amazing doctors that really do what they do because they really want to help. And when you jump into that kind of people, you are destined to be a successful story no matter what. So it's not easy. Today, oh my god, I see even when I go to missions, the doctors, the system, everything is amazing. Not for me, it wasn't easy, but my mom made me believe that going to the hospital was an opportunity to help others.

Iva: Really...

Ashley: I love that!

Monica: So she made it like this game, like this happy place to go where you can look at this kid, she's perfect, but—

Iva: She's here.

Monica: She's having a good life. So most of my childhood friends, they died. Most of them, because every time I went to surgery, it's not like today, I used to go to the hospitals for weeks. Weeks, because they didn't know how to deal with things correctly. So they wanted to be really safe. And they kept me for weeks and all of my friends in my same groups, they were only having cancer. So really, really, really bad illness. And I make a bunch of friends and confront it. My parents never make me believe that it was a game or something amazing. He really took the time to show me that life is just what it is and that you should help others. And that if you have the ability to be generous and to have time to enjoy with people you should.

No, it wasn't an easy thing to go through as a kid, but definitely I never took it in a bad way. And—

Iva: Yeah, it's different.

Monica: Yeah, it's different.

Iva: So again, Monica, as we've been talking today, you've kind of hit on it, but I have to ask directly. I have to know. I got to know, which came first, the chicken or the egg? Do you think that you would've always been this ferocious go-getter, or do you think that your cleft and your cleft journey kind of fueled your drive?

Monica: I think I was born with a really, not born, but probably raised in an environment that— in a survival environment. So you do need to figure out your way no matter what, because you need to make it happen. Because life is not easy, but you add the cleft part, you need to be strong. There is no way if you want to make it, you have to. You have a superpower, but you have to train every day to make it happen. There is something really interesting about countries like Colombia. We live more close by with our people and there is always people around. So everybody's talking about you. Everybody has an opinion about you, but also, same community they kind of don't care. In a way they care but at the same time, we are all trying to make it happen, so we try to support each other. So I had everything at the same time. I was bullied, yes. I had amazing friends. I didn't have money, yes. But I have amazing food. Yes. So this is really, it's really interesting,

Ashley: A convalescence of everything, which is also kind of what I feel like you've said about your art as well, like your art imitates life in the way that it represents the gamut of experience and feelings and the highs and the lows and everything all wrapped into one. And just thinking about the story that you told at the beginning when you said that you, after getting made fun of, you kind of outlined your lips with an eyeliner pen and then you eventually turned that into art. Have you found that, through your art, that you've been able to find healing?

Monica: Oh, totally, totally. I have this huge hole inside me and I was trying to find what was, and it was that, and I needed to talk. I needed to express. I needed to have a little compassion for myself. I needed time to accept that you can't always be strong. And art gave me that space. So when I paint, when you see my paintings, sometimes it's really you have this strong feeling, but you can't help staring at it and look at the beauty of it because it's what everything in life, it's just beauty. It's difficult to accomplish.

Ashley: Yes, the highs and the lows are all beautiful.

Iva: You got to have them. You got to have them both.

Monica: I think beauty, real beauty, is the hardest thing to accomplish. And that's why the most beautiful people out there it's because they build their beauty step by step.

Iva: Oh my gosh. Monica, again, thank you so much for joining us. We have absolutely loved it, and I hope that the audience— Not I hope, I know they did. So thanks Monica for joining us. We've really enjoyed it.

Monica: Thank you.

Ashley: For our listeners out there, you can find Monica @MonicaBachue. That's @-M-O-N-I-C-A-B-A-C-H-U-E, and at @Leporinos, which is @-L-E-P-O-R-I-N-O-S.

Iva: Come back after the break for our interview with Jackson Wright from TikTok's @printfairy, you don't want to miss it.

Announcer: We are happy to tell you more about our sponsor, Smile Train. Smile Train pioneered a sustainable model of partnering with local medical professionals in more than 70 countries. Since 1999, it has supported more than 1.5 million safe cleft surgeries, more than all other cleft charities combined. And as many people in our audience know, children born with clefts often need more essential cleft treatments than just surgery. Because their partners provide local year-round care, Smile Train is also able to fund nutritional support, dental care, orthodontic treatment, speech therapy, and psychosocial support for those who need it. Smile Train invests in their partners, providing them with the state-of-the-art equipment and training they need to make safe and quality care possible for those who need it most. But this isn't possible without your support. Go to smiletrain.org/donate/lovemeetsjoy today and donate \$21 a month to make sure that every child with a cleft can receive the care they need whenever they need it. That's smiletrain.org/donate/lovemeetsjoy.

Iva: Hey everyone, welcome back. Our next guest is Jackson Wright. One half of TikTok's @printfairy, which has over 700,000 followers. Wow. Jackson, thank you so much for being here today. I know you make TikTok videos, but you also have a very serious day job. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Jackson Wright: Oh, of course. Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here with you two. But actually, my day job as a family nurse practitioner, I provide primary care for underserved and underrepresented populations.

Ashley: That's super interesting. Are there any specific populations that you work with?

Jackson: So I work for FQHC, which is a Fairly Qualified Healthcare Center. I'm from Charlotte, so we are a sanctuary city. So I see a lot of undocumented

people, homeless people, so we take care of a lot of different groups of people. Minorities.

Iva: You were actually also an ER trauma nurse.

Jackson: I was, when I lived in Tennessee, before I became a nurse practitioner.

Iva: Quite a journey.

Jackson: Right.

Ashley: I feel like both of those career paths working in the medical field really requires a lot of, I don't know, empathy and being caring and all of that. And what I think we haven't talked about already is that you were also born with a bilateral cleft lip and palate like Iva and I were. And I'm just curious if you think that your cleft impacted your going into the medical field at all and how you think those two things might be connected.

Jackson: I think it definitely did. Really, mainly for the empathy part and also for the part of being one of those patients that I felt was underserved or even put aside because of my birth defect, mainly in the dental side of it. But I wanted to be an advocate for patients, like I was.

Iva: It's funny that you say that though, because I know a lot of us who have a cleft get into some type of caring or nurturing field, whether it be servicing someone, advocating for someone. I just think that's really interesting that you too are a part of that story of, "I'm going to now help people of what I went through."

Jackson: Right. I fell right into it and I'm a cancer too, so that's what we do.

Iva: Very caring, very caring.

Jackson: Right.

Iva: Do you think though that looking back at your care that there was one particular doctor, nurse, whoever, that really stood out that was like, "You know what? Yeah, I had a lot of maybe one that weren't so great with their bedside manner, but this one really took me and really showed me care."

Jackson: Yeah. I can't remember everyone's names because you have so many providers, but there was one nurse, I had all my procedures done at UVA in Charlottesville. They're excellent. They're top of the line care. And every nurse I had there was just so caring and made sure that I had everything I needed and really made me want to go to nursing for that reason.

Ashley: I love that. And it's interesting that you were talking that it was specifically a nurse that stuck out to you because I have a memory of

being like, five and I had had a lip revision and I had stitches that needed to be removed, and it was a really traumatic event because I didn't want them taken out and I had to end up, ended up getting held down by my parents and four office staff and it was really awful. But I remember when I was leading, there was one nurse and she blew up a rubber glove and she drew a face on it and made me a little person balloon. And I feel like a lot of the people who had a positive impact on my experience were nurses. So that's really interesting.

Jackson: Exactly.

Ashley: So I also know that Jackson, you and I have talked a little bit about how you've only recently started thinking about how your cleft has impacted you, and I'm just curious what that journey has been like for you. Because I know for all of us, it's kind of different at what point we identify with it as being maybe part of us and all of that. I'm curious what that's been like for you over the last couple of years.

Jackson: Well, I think that you two would agree that you kind of forget that you have it at times and you just kind of blend in with everybody.

Ashley: Yes

Jackson: So once you get on social media, everything gets pointed out pretty quickly what you may have different about yourself. So I really had to come to terms pretty quickly with that. But the positives outweigh the bad so greatly and so many kids and parents have reached out that it really has made it worthwhile. It makes me have fun and makes me want to do even more.

Ashley: What was your life like growing up with cleft? You know? I mean, I think everybody's experience, there are so many unifying experiences, but then I think where you grew up and who you went to school with and all of that can really impact things. I'm curious what your experience growing up was like.

Jackson: I was really, I never met anybody with a cleft other than there was an adult and my brother both had a unilateral without the cleft palate. So it is kind of different. We had the full spectrum, but I remember a lot of times just feeling I was something different for me. I was sick or something different from other kids. I had to go to all these appointments. I had to have these surgeries. The biggest thing I remember is a lot of kids would get perfect attendance and I'd be so jealous of that because it was impossible for me to get, because I had to be out because I was having surgery.

Iva: And was this in Charlotte or did you grow up somewhere else?

Jackson: I grew up in a very small town in southwest Virginia, in the mountains.

Iva: And that's something, because I know that you said that you didn't really have that much representation, and we know that that often happens in rural cities because there's no one else. Was your team there with you or did you have to travel?

Jackson: So we went to, my mother took me to UBA Charlottesville, which is about six or seven hours away because we were told that they were the best and my mom wanted me to have the best care, so she did what she did. So we just packed up the car and went and that was that.

Ashley: Something I just want to point out for people too who might not realize the area that you grew up in is Appalachia. Yeah?

Jackson: Yeah, basically watch coal miner's daughter, and that's exactly where I'm from.

Ashley: And so there isn't a lot of medical opportunities there?

Jackson: Let alone primary care, if anything.

Ashley: Wow. So interesting. And you mentioned earlier that your brother was born with a cleft too. And have you ever talked about your experiences together? Did you have the same type of cleft? Because I always think it would be really nice actually to have someone who looked like me in my family. But I also recognize recently, Iva and I had an episode where we both talked to our brothers and neither of us— Well, I hadn't talked to my brother previously very much about his experience. I'm wondering if you guys talked more about it or not.

Jackson: So he had a unilateral without the palate, cleft palate, but we really never really discussed it because I had had to go through so much more with everything I had going on. So I was probably a little bit jealous of him because he had it a little bit easier than I did. Not bad or anything, but it was just kind hard because he just had to have the one surgery and some braces and he was done. But that had to have the full shebang,

Ashley: The gambit. Is he older or younger?

Jackson: He's older.

Ashley: Oh, interesting.

Iva: Well, first off Jackson, thank you so much for being honest about that because that is true for those other cases out there where it is two siblings; maybe one has a more severe or less severe cleft. That is a feeling like, “Okay, we in this together. Why aren't you going through these surgeries with me?” And so I know that another thing that goes along when you've had so many surgeries, is once you get done or you find your place of being done, whatever that looks like for you, you kind of want to have

control over how you look and how you look to the world. Do you find that— because I did a little snooping on the Instagram and you are very much in fit. She's like, “Okay!” His thing is like, “Hey, arms.” He's like, “Hey, arms!” Is it empowering to be able to have control over your body through exercise and being able to manipulate how you look that way?

Jackson: So I've always been about, I can control what I can control. Other things you can't control. I'm still very insecure. You will not see me take a profile view of myself. I don't know, because of the lip looking so flat. So when we do videos and take pictures, you'll notice I'm always head on. I'm never to the side.

Ashley: Yes, me too. Right?

Jackson: Yeah. It's just my security. Yeah.

Iva: I relate to that. Yeah. Don't do side pictures. I'm with you on that one.

Ashley: In finding the cleft community online, I was able to find a lot of commonality with other people born with cleft. And I was able to realize that I wasn't alone and having some of those insecurities like not liking my side profile still or having a smaller upper lip. And in finding other people born with cleft online, how has that affected you? Have you found things that you share with other people born with cleft that you never realized was a common thing?

Jackson: Yeah, definitely. And I think a lot of your videos is when I found you, you was talking about insecurities that you had that we mutually agreed upon. And I think a lot of them have been common in the fact that the bit being smaller up top was probably the main one. That's for me and Steph, (@stepheintz) who's also on TikTok, really talked and everything, and even orthodontia and stuff is still a big thing to me. And now I'm back in Invisalign now, so I'm constantly trying to improve and change the things that you see. And it's just kind of comforting to know that I'm not alone. I do see other creators and stuff on there. I would've loved to have TikTok or Instagram when I was little just to see other people that when I grow up it'll be okay.

Ashley: Something I just wonder about having a smaller top lip. Something that I'm considering sometimes is having lip filler. Have you ever thought about doing that or looked into it? I feel like for me what would be really important is making sure that somebody knew how to inject when there's scar tissue. So I'm just curious if that's something you've thought about.

Jackson: Everybody I've to has been scared to do so because of the scar tissue, but what I have done is done filler above my lip and the crease there below your nose, and it does help your profile to come out a little bit farther, push it out a little bit at your profile view.

Ashley: That's really interesting.

Jackson: Yeah, it's pretty painful. Because they go pretty deep, but—

Ashley: That's what I've heard. And right there under your nose hurts so bad.

Iva: They say beauty is pain. Beauty is pain. But Dolly Parton said it!

Jackson: Close my eyes and grip the chair.

Iva: You have to do what you have to do because something that, this is kind of off topic, but since we've opened the door, I've thought about getting filler because of this patch right here. So I'm with you in that, Jackson, that's actually the reason why. It's because it might hurt and I'm just like—Everybody's like, "You've done all these other surgeries!" But that's right there.

Ashley: But you're like, "That's why! I don't want to inflict more pain."

Jackson: Right. I laid there and he said, do you want to be numb? I was like, ugh, I've been through it all. I've had teeth removed. I've had wisdom teeth—just put it in there. And literally just tears started streaming down my face.

Ashley: They didn't even give you ice? Oh my gosh. Even when I get Botox, they give me me ice.

Jackson: Yeah, I was actually tough. And then as soon as the needle went in, I started just tearing up.

Ashley: Oh no.

Jackson: Yeah.

Iva: We are going to have to take this offline because I feel like we can go down this for a minute, but we have to talk about— We have to talk about TikTok. And if we talk about TikTok, we got to talk about @printfairy. What is @printfairy for those who do not know or for me? Maybe they think they know. What it's @printfairy?

Jackson: So, I'll start with the name. @printfairy is my husband Dakota's account. So, "print," he loves animal print; zebra, leopard. And he was called a "fairy" growing up because of us being gay. So he goes by the name, "print fairy." He uses that in his online persona and his video games.

Iva: Turned a negative into a positive.

Jackson: Yeah, there you go. So we just started off a couple of years ago, we saw a video of some college or high school girls do a video of them at a restaurant seeing what they got and he said, "Let's just go do that." I was like, "Why do you want to do that? That's dumb." We did one at a local

restaurant that I think shifts in North Carolina and Tennessee called Cookout.

Iva: I love it.

Jackson: We did that and then within three hours it had a million views. And then each week we just did a different restaurant and just built from there.

Ashley: So crazy.

Iva: That does not happen. Your very first video just went viral.

Jackson: Yeah, I mean he had done some off the wall things before that. Nothing anywhere near that, but—

Ashley: It's sometimes just luck.

Iva: But you had to have been shocked. Were you not, like, really? Were you?

Jackson: Yeah, I was like, yeah. I was like, why does anybody care? I got a hamburger and onion rings.

Ashley: So what is the process for creating those videos and has it evolved over time? Do you have record on a regular schedule? What's the process like now that you're deep in it?

Jackson: So typically we'll film one a week, usually Thursday afternoons because that's when I have a half day and it's less busy in restaurants and like mid-afternoon. So we'll decide where we're going to go and then we'll be thinking about little puns or little things we want to say and we just share what we eat and we do eat everything that we get. That's a big question that we do get. We don't eat like that every day. We just, that's our cheat day as we call it.

Ashley: Of course. And do you ever feel like it's a burden after time? Are you ever just like, "I just want to go to the Olive Garden. I don't want to talk about it"? Or do you have fun and how many takes do you do? Right? Do you just do your first take?

Jackson: It's usually one take.

Ashley: Very impressive.

Iva: Wow. But you know what? I like that. It just makes the fun of it.

Jackson: And I think that's what a lot of people have been drawn to. It's just for real. And you could see a lot of, especially gay couples from New York, LA, very posh, very put together. And we're just country bumpkins just going to Olive Garden.

Iva: So can we get a Love Meets Joy exclusive? Today is Thursday. What's on the menu?

Jackson: Well, I'll see if you can guess. I don't know how to say it without giving it away, but I'll just say it has a very, very, very big menu.

Iva: Oh, Cheesecake Factory?

Jackson: Yes.

Ashley: Oh dang. How did you know that?

Jackson: She knows it like me.

Iva: Because dessert menu alone is like—

Ashley: And what are you getting? Do you know what you're getting?

Jackson: Well, I don't know exactly what I'll get, but I know I'll be either getting the pineapple upside down cheesecake or the carrot cake. Because they got rid of my carrot cake cheesecake and I'm very, very, very, very upset about that.

Iva: Mine is the Snickers. Mine is the Snickers cheesecake.

Ashley: I do love Snickers. That is very true. All of those sound really good, actually.

Iva: So, when you're out eating, do you ever get noticed or did you ever think that you were going to be this huge social media sensation?

Jackson: Well, if you've seen our videos, you know we do show up in a very glittery pink 4Runner, so it's hard to miss us. But we do get recognized quite a bit. But we're recognized when we travel, especially when we go to Charleston, South Carolina a lot. For some reason, these southern ladies love us more than anybody. So we go to Target and it's just nonstop sometimes.

Ashley: It's so funny. It's also been interesting, I think for me this season is continuing to interview people born with cleft and to figure out how that has informed various aspects of their lives. I know for me, I feel like I really leaned into trying to be really good at things and sort of camouflage and hide myself into the general population. I'm curious how, if at all, you find your cleft might inform your character, your social media character.

Jackson: So, it definitely does. I've always tried to be the comedic one, the funny one, because I thought, hey, if I'm funny, they'll think of me as the funny one, not the one with the scars on his face or anything like that. That, and I've always been very successful in schoolwork; I always was one of the teacher's pet, I guess you could say, I always was volunteering.

Ashley: Me too. Me too.

Jackson: I wanted to fit in. I wanted to be everybody's favorite. So I think you really kind of become a people pleaser without meaning to be, because you don't want to stand out in a negative way.

Iva: Being with a people pleaser, do you feel like that is your true self? Because your persona online is very... We love it.

Ashley: It's loud! Yes, it's loud and fun and sassy and it, it's quite different!

Iva: Yeah, it's very different. So Jackson, online, is not a people pleaser?

Jackson: No, that is my online persona. That's my Sasha Fierce.

Iva: Okay, okay. I get it.

Jackson: In real life, if we didn't have this, I'm very much a homebody. I'm very introvert, like introverted extrovert, I guess you could say. I'm on when I need to be, but I'll be at home watching Gilmore Girls or something at home.

Ashley: Get your energy from being at home. That's what I always say. I enjoy being social and being out, but I don't get my energy from other people. I get it from—

Iva: You recharge. Yeah, you recharge internally.

Ashley: Do you ever feel like, because I just was thinking about the difference in an online persona versus who you are in real life, because I know Iva, you and I have talked about this a little bit too, where who you are online is a character. It's just an example, a snapshot of who you are.

Iva: Again, you're nine to five as a nurse practitioner, this is what you are during the—

Ashley: I was going to ask you if you ever feel like people, when you run into them on the street, if you ever feel like you need to bring that character to meet people when you see them at Target,

Jackson: That is a big stressor for me. Trying to think, oh gosh, they're probably thinking I'm being rude or I'm being too quiet or shy. But I do explain to people that I'm not like that all the time.

Ashley: It would be exhausting.

Jackson: It's kind of almost like therapy for me just to have fun, let loose. And a lot of it is growing up, I loved SNL, I loved the Mad TV. I loved Will and Grace and it's just—

Ashley: Will and Grace. So good.

Jackson: Kind of a mixture of different characters and stuff that I see that I draw from.

Ashley: And since your videos have gone so viral so many times, do you remember the first comment that somebody made that was negative about your cleft that you saw?

Jackson: I think a lot of it, the first was, “What's wrong with his lip? Was he bit by a dog?” is a big one, but I've always heard that. And Dakota is my protector, so he's like, “I'm going to message him back. I want to make a video.” But I was like, “Dakota don't. It's not—“

Iva: Don't do it. We always feel that way.

Jackson: They're the problem, not us.

Ashley: Yes. That's how I've always felt growing up. I feel like your friends always want to say something or your loved ones always want to say something and you're like, just—

Iva: Just let it go. Let it go. Because it just feels like, you can't go fight the whole world. And it's their ignorance. I don't have time for that.

Ashley: Did you feel like you were emotionally prepared for that kind of scale of however many comments that you get? Or are you able to just totally ignore them?

Jackson: I'm pretty good at ignoring it. I do do my regular therapy sessions anyway, so I'm very good at that. And I do remind myself of where I'm at. I have a doctorate degree, I have a husband. I have basically two jobs, TikTok and nine to five. I'm doing pretty good for myself. So, whatever you think's on you.

Ashley: Yes. So true.

Iva: You're doing pretty good. I think so. And I think that's our time. Jackson, it has been great talking to you, but before you go, we got to know one last thing. I know that you had jaw surgery growing up. Do you remember what your favorite or least favorite jaw surgery meal was?

Jackson: Any, oh gosh. Probably anything with Ensure, because my mom would try to push it.

Ashley: Like, the worst? I hope you were going to say the worst. I was like it was the worst. It better not have been the best.

Jackson: It's the worst. Yes.

Iva: It's chalky...

Jackson: "You need protein-y calories," my mom would say. I'm like, "Mom, please." Just give me some mashed potatoes.

Iva: And then they would try to slip it in. Yeah, they would try to slip it in. Mashed potato with gravy's always worked. They would try to slip it in and it's like, "I can taste this. I can definitely take this."

Ashley: I know. I feel like my favorite one, I would go to A&W and they would blend root beer and a vanilla ice cream.

Jackson: That's good.

Ashley: So good. But no Ensure. Thank you so much, Jackson for being here. We really, really appreciate it. And that's our show for today. Don't forget, we'd love to hear from you, and Jackson if people are interested in connecting with you after the show, where can they find you?

Jackson: So you could find me on TikTok under @printfairy, and then Instagram, just follow my husband's account because I'm on there mainly anyway @dakotawright

Ashley: Perfect. And then you can find me Ashley on Instagram @cleftloveig and on TikTok @CleftLove.

Iva: And you can find me on Instagram and TikTok @realsophisticatedjoy. And don't forget to go to smiletrain.org to learn more about all the wonderful things Smile Train is doing for the cleft community around the world. You can find us on your favorite podcast streaming site. While you're there, don't forget to leave us a five-star review. Bye!

Ashley: Thanks so much for listening!

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