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Announcer: From CurtCo Media.
(Singing).

00:00:05

Bill Curtis: Welcome to a special edition of Politics: Meet Me in the Middle. I'm Bill Curtis. Joining me for today's discussion, Dr. David Camppt is referred to as The Race Doctor. He is a highly regarded national expert in the areas of inclusion, equity, cultural competence, and intergroup dialogue. David earned his bachelor's from Princeton, his public policy master's from Berkeley, and his doctorate from U. S. Berkeley's Urban Planning Department. David's the author of a number of books, including the Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects.

Well, that's a good descriptor for today's discussion. David, we're honored that you could join us today.

00:00:45

David Camppt: It's great to be here. Thank you so much.

00:00:47

Bill Curtis: Ron Simons, a four-time Tony award-winning producer. Making him the highest African-American Tony award-winning producer of all time so far. Also, Ron is the leading Broadway producer working today to bring diversity to the Broadway stage. As CEO of SimonSays Entertainment, Ron leads the strategic planning and development of theater, television, and film projects. He's also an accomplished actor with many dozens of credits on the big screen, the small screen, and stage. He brings a well thought out perspective on Black Lives Matter.

Ron, thanks so much for joining us today.

00:01:21

Ron Simons: Thanks for having me. Great to be here.

00:01:24

Bill Curtis: Where some of this is new for some of us, you guys have been fighting this battle for many decades. I wonder if you'd be willing to give us each three or four words that would come to mind that best describe your thoughts and emotions during the last few weeks?

00:01:40

David Camppt: So I would say disgusted, horrified, and hopeful. Disgusted by basically a public execution by somebody who knew who he was being filmed and figured it'd be fine. Horrified by the largely white violent protestors making the protest, giving us a whole other view of what those protests are. Although, we could talk about how they did us a favor by having those anarchists and the people doing that. Then hopeful, looking at like the diversity of people out there protesting. That's a new thing.

So I'll say disgusted, horrified, and hopeful.

00:02:17

Ron Simons: I would agree that I was hopeful as well. I had not seen in my lifetime such large numbers of white people who cared enough about racism to actually go out and protest against it. My experience with racism is that horrific things happen and then a lot of people talk about how bad it is, and then a few days, weeks, months later, we're onto the next subject, and racism is no longer the topic of the day.

The other two things were unsurprised, because when I saw George Floyd killed on camera, it's not the first time we've seen a black man killed on camera. We've seen them choked before. We've seen them shot in the back as they were running away. This is my experience. So in some ways, I was horrified at the fact that a white man felt so comfortable in his privilege and power that he said that he could kill a man on camera and either not had any ramifications or could not care about the ramifications because the most important thing at the moment was killing this black man.

00:03:22

Bill Curtis: Ron, when you just answered the question, you said I was hopeful. Does that mean that today you're not as hopeful?

00:03:31

Ron Simons: No, no, no. It may mean that next month I'm not as hopeful. Because when something is disrupted and people are talking en masse about some disparity in justice, the Me Too movement, for example, for a while there the Me Too movement was center stage. People were being called on their shit. There were people out there protesting. There was marching. It was like, wow, really systemic change is going to happen it seems. But in point of fact, it didn't.

The only reason all of this stuff is happening is because COVID-19 happened to be. Because it gave people time to say, you know what, I'm now, A, frustrated, B, home, C, don't have as many things to do, and, D, I'm emotionally open to things where I had to have my head down in other times. There was a perfect storm that happened. Why I'm hopeful now is that I'm hopeful that the window won't pass.

00:04:23

David Camp: We hope that people look at this moment as an opportunity to really move forward. But if we look at the historical arc of history, we have seen that before. So I think that that's a critical thing.

I do think we're in a new moment. So while certainly this thing that happened with George Floyd was a galvanizing influence, but I also wonder whether or not there's been something brewing for a while.

The George Floyd murder was the most egregious of all of these things that we have seen, right, because of the reasons you said, Ronald. He's looking at the camera. As (inaudible) said, this is the first time you get to see the face of the murderer and the murder all at the same time. All the other ones is grainy, it's from a distance. We're

looking at both of their faces at the same time and my man didn't care at all. He knew he was being filmed, it don't matter, right?

He figured he was going to get away with it. That brought this whole thing to a level of egregiousness and it aggravated the whole world.

00:05:15

Ron Simons: I have heard about egregious, racist, deadly force used against black people my entire life.

00:05:23

Bill Curtis: So it's not at all new for you. It's just that I'm waking up to it.

00:05:26

Ron Simons: It's not new to me. Even when I got to college and people would say things to me like, wow, you must be really thankful for Affirmative Action because you got in here. Right? Or they would say, oh, I didn't get into such and such a school because they had these racial quotas.

Or the one that I loved and probably heard the most is, you know, Ron? You are so articulate. I'm like, I'm in a freaking Ivy League school. Of course, I'm articulate. Would you say that to some white friend of yours that you just met? Oh, hi, Ted. I really loved your presentation. You are so articulate.

00:06:01

David Camp: A whole other level of this is you've got people saying Affirmative Action played no role in their course, and of course it did. So my SAT scores were such that had I been a white person, I had a 50% chance to get into Princeton. Not bad. As a black person at the time, I had a 90% chance. Why? Because we have whole structural inequities in the educational system that have gone on for years and years and years, as well as biased tests, that produced that result.

So part of the difficulty dilemma I faced when faced with that question of affirmative action is on the one hand I'm just as deserving as you, homie, because if I was white I'd have a 50% chance getting in just like you probably did. On the other hand, affirmative action did play a role.

So how honest do we want to get given that a whole bunch of people are asking these kinds of questions not necessarily from a good heart? They're trying to trip you up. They're trying to make a point to themselves about how you don't really deserve to be here. They're trying to prove that to themselves and prove that to you. So we have to make a decision about how honest of a conversation do we really want to have.

My work has been about how do you create the conditions so people can have an actual, honest conversation. I tell people at my work that trying to get white people to talk is all about trying to make Thanksgiving great again. Because a whole bunch of y'all, every holiday y'all falling apart. You don't want to avoid all these conversations, you want to be able to have these conversations, but people need tools to do that. That's what I'm trying to provide.

00:07:25

Bill Curtis: Tell us a little about how do we be a good ally? How do we check ourselves along the path? Because I want to learn. I want to be better.

00:07:32

Ron Simons: The first step, this is the way people, when you walk into the room, notice that there are no people of color in that room. Recognize that is a problem and something must be done.

In Broadway, I've seen this. There's a league that I belong to, and there were 250 people in the room, and there were two black people in the room. I was astounded. At the coffee break, I said, did you just notice anything unusual about the people in that room? No, not really. Someone else, same thing. Then afterwards, one came to me and said, " Oh my God, I didn't realize that there are no people of color." I said, yes.

So we, as black people, because we live in some level of trauma all the time, are acutely aware when we walk into a room and we're the only black person in that room.

00:08:19

David Camp: To build on what Ron said, I would invite people not just to notice what happened, but to talk about it. Right? So the part of what you do in the setting is to say, you know, I noticed that, oh, this country is about a third of color, this room isn't. Did you notice that? How do we feel about that? But even that is a big step forward.

So I don't want to take these other big tasks off the table, but one thing every white person can do is to start initiating conversations about racial issues with other white people, not pushed by black people to do that.

00:08:54

Ron Simons: Hear hear.

00:08:55

David Camp: People can do something immediate all the time, which is how do I affectively non-judgmentally bring up racial issues with other white people to make it a subject of conversation?

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Bill Curtis: How would someone like me bring up racial issues with someone that I don't think is necessarily on side yet, someone who still believes racial issues against white people are just as powerful as those against black people?

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David Camp: Here's what every white person needs to have. They need to have a racial progress story. They need to have a story about the progress that they have seen over the course of their lives. Now, the easiest one that we can all tap into is

like what we just saw with all these white people protesting. It's useful to have some little stories, something you can convey in terms of a story that is a sign that racial progress has happened.

It's how the kids were in the cafeteria when you were growing up, your kids are the same high school now, and it's different.

00:09:53

Bill Curtis: Why is that a wrench in my toolkit?

00:09:55

David Camp: Because if you're trying to invite somebody to a new understanding, you've got to agree with them first. There's two principles behind effective persuasion. One of them is that stories work better than facts. The second one is ABC, agreed before challenging.

In your bag, you have some other story that embodies that you believe that we've made progress. Then your other thing is your personal unconscious bias story, and you frame it as racially biased. Now, why do you do that? Because you know the best evidence that racism still exists is because you can tell about racism in your own head. It is useful to have a story of racial progress which will make somebody relax and feel agreed with before you tell them some story that is about like racism still exists and I know because I see the racism in my own head.

Am I answering your question?

00:10:43

Bill Curtis: I'm with you, and I'm taking notes. So I feel like I'm in school.

One other thing. Go back to a June 16th edition of the LA Times, I believe. Or maybe the 15th. There's a two page spread that was taken out by Byron Allen, and listen to what he has to say. It is really impressive. I want to send it to you guys because I think that he is incredibly articulate.

00:11:10

Ron Simons: He's brilliant. If you've been sleeping on Byron Allen, wake up because that man has plans for the planet.

00:11:18

David Camp: So, Bill, what I want to tell you is that I know that you meant that in the best spirit about Byron Allen, who's awesome. One of the things that white folks should think about is that when you call a black person articulate, it's a little bit of a triggering thing. Because as Ron said earlier, part of what happens is that we've been called articulate as if that was a surprise to people.

So the reason I'm saying this to you is because it might be useful for people to know that while Byron Allen is of course incredibly articulate, I'm just saying you might want to think about how you say that because of the history of people not of your heart saying it, it's a bit triggering.

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Bill Curtis: What's a better word for me to use.

00:12:02

David Campt: Well, we're in dicey territory. I would say that, like, for example, what Ron did, he called it brilliant.

00:12:08

Ron Simons: There is brilliant. There is insightful. Right? There is groundbreaking. There are a lot of things that that man was doing that if you would just say to yourself, if I was talking about any white politician and they said what he said, how would you describe that white politician?

00:12:28

David Campt: When you're all in the realm of like how well you said it as opposed to what the construction of the idea is, you're in a more dicey territory, because people expects us to sound like ex-slaves and we [inaudible 00:12:40]. You don't want to distract people with that. So just be aware of that.

00:12:44

Bill Curtis: Well, I personally cannot imagine the corporation listening to this and not contacting you and figuring out a way to solve some of their issues. But we'll talk about that. In the meantime, we're going to take a quick break and we'll be right back.

(singing)

00:13:05

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(singing)

00:13:26

Bill Curtis: We're back with Ron Simons and Dr. David Campt. Let's dive into Broadway, Ron. How is Broadway as far as diversity goes?

00:13:35

Ron Simons: Well, I think onstage, Broadway is fairly diverse. I would not say that it is at the same equity of the demographics as represented by the population of the United States, but it is certainly more diverse than every other part of Broadway.

I marvel that for many years I would sit in a room for a Broadway show on which I was a producer and I would be the only person of color in that room and there would

be 35 people. There were no black people who were co-producers like me, there were none in the advertising, none in the marketing, none in the press. It was very, very white.

So I remember having a conversation with one of my lead producers saying, you know, I noticed that there aren't many people of color who are co-producers here. He said, yeah, and I'm really sorry. I wished we could have more. Then I challenged him. So you sound like you're doing something that's not working. What are you doing? That was not in fact the question that he wanted to hear, because he clearly got both aggravated and confused about what to say and what to do. But he said, you know, I'm really frustrated by it. You know, we can't get them there. It implied to me that you must be doing something [inaudible 00:14:50].

So all that is to say, there's a lot of work to do on Broadway. There's a lot of work to do in regional theaters around the country. It is like every other part of our culture, it's systemically racist.

00:15:01

Bill Curtis: Let's talk for a minute about the hashtag, we See You, the letter that's entitled, Dear White American Theater. There's a petition going around. You're familiar with it, I assume.

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Ron Simons: Yeah, I've read it.

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Bill Curtis: Does that well state the challenges and issues that are occurring in Broadway?

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Ron Simons: It talks about many of them, but it is not an exhaustive list, no. What I appreciated about that letter being signed by so many prominent theater artists, it pricked some people to go, oh, wait, what? Because we talk about diversity in the arts just the way we used to talk about diversity in the workplace. We just can't find enough quality black engineers.

I wrote a letter the season before last, I think it was, that I found out that the gentleman playing Otello was white and was performing in blackface. I wrote to them and I said-

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David Camp: You've really got to be kidding.

00:15:54

Ron Simons: Oh no, I'm very serious. Very serious.

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David Campt: This is on Broadway?

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Ron Simons: No, no. This is at the Metropolitan Opera.

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David Campt: Oh, Lord.

00:16:01

Ron Simons: One of the premier opera houses in the world.

00:16:05

David Campt: Oh, Lord.

00:16:07

Ron Simons: I had to write a letter to say, seriously? I'm going to tell you why I think and I'm going to tell you what they said to me.

They said to me that we have the highest standards of excellence at the Metropolitan Opera.

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David Campt: Not the standards argument.

00:16:21

Ron Simons: There are no artists who are at the level of artistry than this person who we have hired to play this role. So that's what they said.

00:16:34

David Campt: He must be the Michael Jordan of opera, if that's the case.

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Ron Simons: So it's my point of view is that the person who was running that place really had a bunch of issues around racism that he was not willing to talk about, and knew that he should not talk about because it would be very detrimental to him and the Metropolitan Opera, even though the number of people go to the Metropolitan Opera are not terribly diverse.

If you go to see one of those operas, number one, they are insanely expensive, but number two, they seem to be designed for, and this is probably not fair to say, European people of European extract. That's my sense. I think that's so because rarely is an opera done that invites people such as Porgy and Bess. When you do Porgy and Bess, everybody wants to come out, all right? Because white folks will come out. Black folks is like, oh, this is our story. We definitely should come and support this. Right?

So I say all that to say that systemic racism still exists.

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Bill Curtis: Hold that thought, because I just wanted to say probably the most profound and emotional performance playing George Washington was played by a black man in Hamilton. It was more convincing than any other time that I've seen that character, to your point.

Okay, now, where were you?

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Ron Simons: Then we need to know. We need to go along that. How did that strike you? Tell me more about that.

00:18:01

Bill Curtis: As a white guy, when they first came up on stage, you're surprised. Wow, they've got a black George Washington. About four minutes later, you're totally on board. You're completely absorbed.

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Ron Simons: But why was it so affecting, though? Why was it so affecting?

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Bill Curtis: You're probably taken from a little bit of shock that, hey, there's a black George Washington, to, wow, that was really powerful.

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Ron Simons: I'm wondering if you had seen another actor who was white, who was as equally good at his acting and his singing, if you would have found Hamilton, not having any people of color in it, as effective.

00:18:44

David Camp: Or that, and would you have found that performance as affecting, as well as the overall thing? You tell me.

00:18:51

Bill Curtis: I do think you're right. I think that you learn that all of a sudden, four minutes in when you become color blind and you're just watching the performance, it's a pretty powerful thing. I've got to give it to you, would I have traveled that far and be so profoundly effected if it had been a white guy who played that part, I don't know.

00:19:11

David Camp: I don't think you became colorblind. I think that the fact that they were not white is actually enhancing your experience of what happened. That's why I asked the question of what would have happened had just that performer been white, how

that have been different? I think that them being not white, but performing these iconic historical white figures, is part of like you connect with like how those people lived up to what they said and didn't because of who's performing it.

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Ron Simons: And the level of extraordinary artistry that was exhibited on that stage.

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Bill Curtis: So one of the things that you mentioned the other day when we talked about Broadway, Ron, was the challenge of a black man getting a grant and getting the funding to build a show. Why is that?

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Ron Simons: Well, I think part of the reason that there are so few African American producers on Broadway is multifaceted. One, as a general rule, we don't come from types of families where our Rolodex is as powerful as our white compadres. I couldn't call my cousin who can write me a check for \$250,000. I can't call my friend David who'd write me a check for \$250,000. Because I know very few people who can write that check and do that. Whereas many people I know either come from money themselves or they come from a network of people that are very affluent.

So that's the one thing. So it's a barrier to entry by not having access to the funds that you need to put on a show.

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David Campt: Parenthetically, just to be clear, black wealth/ white wealth, 10 to 1. what Ron is saying is born out by actual stats about wealth among different groups.

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Bill Curtis: It sounds to me like you've got a lot of shows out there that are good at entertaining. Yours accomplished that and also sent a message. I would think that there would be more powerful arts patrons' money for someone like you than otherwise.

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Ron Simons: Yeah, I would agree. The fact of the matter is, however, while that is true, there are a number of people who have told me on even the shows that I am producing today, you know, be it Blue, Thoughts of a Colored Man, or the revival of For Colored Girls, who feel, and I'm just saying this is my perception, they feel it's too risky. For me, that's coded, oh, it's a black show. Okay? That risk, they perceive that investing in a story about African Americans or people of color is too risky because at the end of the day people who come to see Broadway shows don't want to go see a show about black people.

Which is the same thing I ran into when I used to produce films. You know, international sales buyers will often tell me, no, black content just doesn't do very well overseas. Guess what? If that's your mindset, you won't bring any over, and so you'll

never know whether or not it would make money or be successful or not because it becomes a self fulfilling prophecy. You can't make money if it's not out there.

So my job that's challenging for me is to help people understand that just because it's African American does not mean it's more or less risky. In fact, my job as a storyteller is to tell the universal themed stories of redemption, stories of true love, of family love and affair. At SimonSays, we put a different lens on that universal theme so that you can go in.

A lot of artists will tell you that the more specific an art piece is and the more specific of a culture and the people are in that organization, the more universal will be the appeal and the universal adaptation of that story.

If you really want systemic change, there needs to be diverse representation at every level of Broadway. We've done a decent job up here with the people on stage. The producers? Well, they are five black producers out of the hundreds of producers, where when I came on, there were two of us. But it does not represent the 30% that we are in the United States.

Then it becomes the theater owners, where there's not a single person of color at all at any theater that's owned. They tend to be older and they are white. Here's the thing. They are the most powerful in that equation. Because even as I, as a producer, and I have a show that I want to produce, and I'm like, oh my God, this is great. I've got this great cast. I've got these people. The fact of the matter is if some theater owner does not say you can do your show in my theater, it won't be on Broadway.

So if there wants to be real systemic change, if there wants to offer some level of power to (inaudible) someone who does not look like everyone else around the table, there needs to be an invitation to say, we want you to be a part of this. We will do things to help bring that person, or you, or those people, to the table.

00:24:05

David Camp: There's a hunger in the American culture to actually deal with our racial history and our racial reality. I would encourage people in the Broadway realm to reevaluate what is the role of messages about race in the theater? If you're going to do that, it's important that you try to make sure that the levels of the hierarchy that are overly white, change.

So if you're really going to try to diversify your messages, then you might want to also look at the institutions that you have and what needs to happen so that those institutions, top to bottom, reflect the multicultural diversity that America is.

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Ron Simons: I think the reason why more black people or people of color don't come to Broadway is for two reasons. Either, A, they don't see themselves represented in the stories, or, B, they're not invited.

What we tend to do from an advertising and marketing perspective, we spend the vast majority of our money and dollars on advertising in the New York Times, and The New Yorker, and et cetera, et cetera, which really is where the core, early core, audience is. Which is to say white women between the ages of 50 and 70. So I hit it.

Your show must stay open long enough so that the tourists can come and see your show. The ad spending must reflect the fact that you are in fact interested in having a diverse audience to pull.

Now, there are times when you don't even need to do that. If you went to go see *A Raisin in the Sun* with P. Diddy and Sanaa Lathan, I had never seen that many black people in the theater in my life. Why? Because it was perceived as their story. The word of mouth, which is a very powerful tool on Broadway, was ginormous for that piece. Right? So they invited, to a small degree, black people to that, but they told a story by one of the greatest African American playwrights in history. So they felt welcome.

This is where David and I completely overlap, right? Because I know that storytelling is the most effective medium for change on the planet. Because if I can tell you a good story, that means that you can empathize with me and understand what my struggle, challenges, loves, beliefs are, even though you don't look like me, sound like me, eat my food, listen to my music. The storytelling component is critical.

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David Camp: What I'm trying to do is get people to tell their own stories as a (crosstalk) to each other.

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Ron Simons: Yep.

00:26:32

Bill Curtis: Basically, start by communicating, and then take action from there. Don't forget to actually talk to each other.

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Ron Simons: That's right. And this is the thing that's a great benefit of storytelling. Storytelling builds community. We sat in a room and we watched *Hamilton*. That connected us to a whole bunch of other people out there who love *Hamilton* that we can connect with, agree with, want to talk about, want to sing along with. The same thing for if you're dealing with racism-

00:26:57

David Camp: Well, that's interesting.

00:26:58

Ron Simons: And talking about racism, then you have to have you talking about racism. Hey, Ted, come over here. What do you think about such and such? Now we have three people. Soon you have a community of people. It's not just you, the lone voice. It is a community of people who are working together to affect change.

00:27:15

Bill Curtis: We've got a long road ahead. I really appreciate you guys coming and joining us today. Dr. David Campt, I really appreciate you giving us a little taste of the White Ally Toolkit. It's The Dialogue Company, right?

00:27:28

David Campt: Whiteallytoolkit.com. I'm starting a new cohort of people with an online course where people are encouraged to go through this incremental process of learning these methods where the homework is basically talking to people. But also we're trying to get the Facebook likes up, so I would say that people come into our Facebook page at White Ally Toolkit, because no matter what they say, all likes matter.

00:27:54

Bill Curtis: Ron Simons at SimonSays Entertainment. Is there another way, Ron, that you want people to get ahold of you?

00:28:01

Ron Simons: We have a Facebook page. Our website is www.simonsaysentertainment.com. You can see the work, a number of the pieces that we have going on, and just sign up for the newsletter. If you really want to find out what's happening, when it's happening, please visit the website and let us know who you are.

00:28:19

Bill Curtis: Ron Simons and Dr. David Campt, thank you so much for giving us your time and insight. Have a good day, everybody.

If you like what you hear, please tell your friends, and let us know how we're doing by leaving a comment. It really helps if you give us a five star rating, and we really appreciate it. You can also subscribe to the show on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcast.

This episode was produced and edited by Mike Thomas, audio engineering by Michael Kennedy, and the theme music was composed and performed by Celeste and Eric Dick. Thanks for listening.

(singing)

00:29:08

Announcer: From CurtCo Media. Media for your mind.