



Episode 51- Finding Joy in the Midst of Change

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(Music playing)

Mindy Henderson: Welcome to the Quest Podcast, proudly presented by the Muscular Dystrophy Association as part of the Quest family of content. I'm your host, Mindy Henderson. Together we are here to bring thoughtful conversation to the neuromuscular disease community and beyond about issues affecting those with neuromuscular disease and other disabilities and those who love them. We are here for you to educate and inform, to demystify, to inspire and to entertain. We are here shining a light on all that makes you, you, whether you are one of us, love someone who is or are on another journey altogether. Thanks for joining. Now, let's get started.

With some heaviness in the world right now, I wanted to have a conversation today with a gentleman who always makes me feel a little more joyful after I spend time with him. And I have no doubt that you'll also come away feeling good about life and the world with a little extra pep in your step and motivation. So today I am bringing you a conversation with a gentleman I am proud to call my friend, Jess Westman. He is a 25-year-old actor, disability activist, writer and composer, comedian, and human person. He says in that order. Having grown up on stage just took the leap from West Texas to New York City in 2021 to pursue a professional career in the arts.

Today, he is involved with the Second City Improv, the Grammy Award-winning Brooklyn Tabernacle and hosts the all-new comedy podcast, This Podcast Just Might Change Your Life. I'm counting on it, Jess, which will be streaming everywhere starting on March 31st. He also has many musical projects in the

works, and if that weren't enough, he's working on an upcoming musical comedy album. Holy Cow, Jess, when do you sleep? Let's start with that.

Jess Westman: That was the nicest thing I've ever heard about myself. You're an amazing person. Thank you for having me, Mindy. Wow.

Mindy Henderson: Thank you so much for being here. Clearly you are a busy person and so I really appreciate you having a conversation with me and sharing... No pressure, but sharing some wisdom and wit with our listeners. So I'm going to jump right in and start pummeling you with questions. So like I said, you do all the things. You're a singer, writer, composer, actor, and more. Can you tell us a little bit about just how you got started in the entertainment world? I mentioned in the opening that you grew up on stage, but have you always known you wanted to be a performer?

Jess Westman: Oh, boy. Okay. Well, those are big shoes to fill. You just set up this beautiful episode. I'm going to try to-

Mindy Henderson: You got this.

Jess Westman: Well, I think when it came to performing, it was like... There wasn't really a choice to my parents. I'm really blessed to have had, and still have supportive parents who didn't know much about muscular dystrophy, but they knew that we probably wouldn't have sports late in our teens, so why would they give it to us early on just to deal with that grief of, "Oh, I can't play football ball anymore, but that's all I've known."

So they immediately put us in costumes on stage and I was... Man, there's this tragic home video of me doing Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah in an audition for High School Musical, 2006, and you have my brother singing angelically << zippity-doo-dah >> like just amazing. And then I go, << zippity-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay >>. And I-

Mindy Henderson: As one does, yes.

Jess Westman: As one actually shouldn't do, but I have lot of finger guns as a kid like [inaudible 00:04:27].

Mindy Henderson: Nice.

Jess Westman: And I think I just developed a brand of carefree, fun performance. And so any character I did growing up, it was less about... I think especially growing up, it's less about becoming a character and more about just escaping the realities of life. And I have this disease. I don't know what it's going to mean one day, but I'm just going to go full speed ahead into this stuff and distract myself as healthy people do. We distract ourselves with putting on costumes.

Mindy Henderson: I love that. I think everyone should do that. Not to make light of what you're saying, I think that part of how we get through life, because nobody has, I don't think... At least I haven't met them yet, someone with an easy life. We all have our challenges. And so I think we all find those ways to distract ourselves, like you say, and find the lightness where we can. Is that a word, lightness?

Jess Westman: Lightness. I like lightness. It's good.

Mindy Henderson: Okay. If it's not, it's going to be now. And we should mention also, if you don't mind, you live with Becker muscular dystrophy, correct?

Jess Westman: I do. I do.

Mindy Henderson: Okay. How old were you when you were diagnosed?

Jess Westman: I was six months old. So all I knew until I was like five maybe was that I'm different, but they're not going to say to a six month, "Okay, now say muscular..." No, it wasn't like that.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah.

Jess Westman: Just grow up with it and then you learn the medical term as time goes on.

Mindy Henderson: Okay. Fair enough. So back to the fun stuff. One of your most well-known projects and the project that helped us get acquainted is the musical, *Wheels*, which you wrote, composed. I'm in awe of the talent. Can you tell us a little bit more about how that play came about?

Jess Westman: Sure. It's funny to jump from the adolescents figuring it out, stuffing my pain down to then talking about my pain. A lot of people listening might ask, how do you even get there? What was that? What was going through my head? To be honest, nothing really was, other than just jump onto the stage and forget about what's going on. You get to a point; you're jumping onto the stage so much that you actually have... There are physical ramifications with this disease to where you can't not think about it. And I think especially late teens, people know with Becker, late teens, early twenties, that's when it gets real and it's being the psychological demon of like, "This will happen. This will happen." And it starts happening. And I think when that happens, people pendulum swift, like crazy swift. Did I say pendulum swift? Shift, shift?

Mindy Henderson: I don't know. Sure. Yes.

Jess Westman: I don't know what I said, but-

Mindy Henderson: That's fine.

Jess Westman: She's great, the nun who I'm talking about. Okay, pendulum shift. And then just go back and forth between being open about it, not wanting to talk about it. There's just so many places to go with it. But I decided when it became really real, developed a limp when I was around 19 performing all the time. I decided why not talk about it just in a musical? Because I'm not normal. I don't know if you can tell, Mindy, I'm not a normal person.

Mindy Henderson: I don't think I've met many normal people. What is normal really?

Jess Westman: It is normal. That's a good... This episode, what is normal? We're trying to find out. It doesn't exist. But I just decided I love the whimsy behind musicals in general. They elevate life. They dramatize life. And I would always come home in middle school with a story about a teacher, and I always said one more punch line than was actually had that day. There was one more funny thing the teacher did that actually didn't happen. I'm confessing to being a liar. I am a liar. That's what I'm saying. But no, I think growing up in theater you learn to just put more plot behind some [inaudible 00:08:56]

Mindy Henderson: Great. Yes, you dramatize actual events maybe.

Jess Westman: For fun. [inaudible 00:09:01] And so I was like, "Let me translate that to something serious." And I had written a lot of goofy stuff. I had thought, "Okay, I'm going to be a talk show host. I'm going to be community." This is all I'm going to be. But this stuff just felt, it felt like it was put on my heart, so I had to do it. I love that I have five minutes into my answer about Wheels and I haven't talked about Wheels. I'm going to get there. I'll just say it was necessary to talk about. It felt necessary to talk about it.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah.

Jess Westman: So I wrote about it. We put on a tri-collegiate version of Wheels, the first iteration in 2021. I was a senior in college. We got support from the National Theater Organization, the Alpha Psi Omega organization, and we've got support connected. I got connected with MDA.

Mindy Henderson: I have to say I had the incredible pleasure of seeing a... What's the right word for it? It was kind of a preview of Wheels. What's the word I'm looking for?

Jess Westman: Yeah, we had a professional reading at the drama league in 2023.

Mindy Henderson: And I was incredibly honored to be there. I am not going to lie, I was a little put out with you because I watched it and it was the first time that I had ever seen people who look like me on any kind of stage for the purpose of entertainment in a play, in a musical, in a movie. It reduced me to tears because it was beautiful and it was so well done. You sang a couple of songs that touched my heart and looked into my soul and how I've experienced life. It was the first time

that I felt so seen and so understood by someone like yourself who is there to entertain.

You had done me the honor of asking me to moderate a piano hall afterward, which I was so happy to do. But I was tear-stained and it was such a moving experience. And then to go on to try to ask intelligent questions of yourself and the other panelists after that was a tall order. But I was so grateful and I just wanted to share the power of that moment and that experience for our listeners because you've done all of us such a service by creating something like Wheels.

Jess Westman: I don't even... Okay. God bless you. Thank you. You give me these hefty... I don't even know how to respond. That's so beautiful. It bless me that you were even there.

Mindy Henderson: Thank you.

Jess Westman: Just knowing who you were... I read your stuff. I was just really excited that you would even come. You and Mary Fiance, part of MDA, and Keith Gordon, he's an associate. He works with them. I couldn't believe these incredible... I call you guys fighters because that's what you got to be these days especially... But you are. And you're on the front lines of justice and kindness, and love, and so I was honored. I just want people to feel like they missed out by not being there. I guess that's what we're doing.

Mindy Henderson: I know.

Jess Westman: You guys we're-

Mindy Henderson: I think we've accomplished that for sure. And if they are feeling that way, I'm going to put it out into the ether that I hope they will get the chance to see it. So let's talk a little bit more about that. So as a playwright, is that the right word for... Something that's a musical and a play, is playwright still the right term?

Jess Westman: As long as it's before a human person.

Mindy Henderson: Okay, perfect. So you have been through... You and I have continued to talk and you've kept me up to date, but you've been through some iterations of Wheels. Can you tell me a little bit about how it's evolved?

Jess Westman: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, if you're a writer, you're listening to this, you know, you know. It's like, "I finished it." No, you didn't. No, you didn't.

Mindy Henderson: No.

Jess Westman: You think you did and you finished a version of it. But never say I finished the script because the script... Even when... You could have the most published

thing, you're going to rewrite it. There's always going to be something to fix and change. But to me, that's what has improved the material over time is the willingness to change and adapt. For example, what you saw in 2023, which is exactly two years after the first version, couldn't have been more different.

A through line that was similar was this guy has muscular dystrophy, but nothing, not a single plot point aligned with the initial version besides maybe a character saying hello, which I think did happen. There was not a lot of crossover into me. It's actually, looking back from 2023, I can't pinpoint a lot that is the same from even then, which might sound horrible because you really enjoyed 2023. Not like I'm knocking down those trees that made you cry and gave people life that night. But it's just that I'm finding new trees to plant. I'm going with the plant metaphor.

Mindy Henderson: I like it. It works.

Jess Westman: Just genuinely, every version has gotten closer and more true to my experiences as I age with this disease. Now, if I was just this person who they didn't age and the disease didn't change, then the show probably would change a whole lot less. But as I've grown up and as it's affected me more, I've learned so much more. So I think it's probably going to be prime Wheels much further from right now. But I think I'm also giving myself the space to accept that and be ready for what my life becomes and what the show becomes at the same time.

Mindy Henderson: So I don't know if this is a fair question right this second, but I'm going to ask it anyway and then there are so many other things to talk about. You've got a thousand other projects you're working on, so I definitely want to move on to those. But is there a particular message that's important to you that people who may get to see Wheels at some point that they come away with? Or is it multiple messages? What are your thoughts there?

Jess Westman: I mean, a core message for those individuals with muscular dystrophy watching it, any version they have seen or will see I think is that your pain, your struggle, as people don't like to say, but it's true, it very much can be that as you age is not in vain. These experiences you have, they're not in vain. These will grow you if you let them. Adversity can grow us. I meet people who have this and for some reason they're some of the happiest people I've met, some of the most content people I've met, because I think something about knowing how hard, impossible actually that life can be makes you really enjoy the little things.

Oh no, now I'm having five different answers for this. Okay, I got to stay on one track. Maybe just know that your experiences aren't in vain and there are other people that I can relate to you. It's going to sound cliché and it's going to sound very musical theater. Circa 2010, you're not alone.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. I think those are fine answers. I love those answers, and I think that those are good reasons to do what you're doing. And by the way, I think you're

accomplishing those things. So as someone living with a disability, let's just talk about the entertainment industry, which from what I've heard, no matter who you are, I think it's a tough industry to crack. But as someone living with a disability, how do you feel your disability has affected your journey in the entertainment industry? What have the barriers been that you've had to overcome?

Jess Westman: Well, I think we'll definitely get more into this soon, but the subway, that was when you pursue a career in something like this. You move to a big city. You move to a city that probably isn't really set up for someone with a disability. Not just that. Someone who's half and half. A friend of mine jokes, he's also disabled, who I can say it. He jokes that I'm demi-disabled. Like a [inaudible 00:18:42]. Because I am-

Mindy Henderson: For people who don't know you, you're ambulatory. You walk.

Jess Westman: I'm ambulatory.

Mindy Henderson: But yeah,

Jess Westman: Demi-disabled, it might be one of the worst things I could have said. I'm so sorry.

Mindy Henderson: I might have to steal it. I don't know.

Jess Westman: Okay. Yeah, maybe steal it. And so I'll give an example, after a long day rehearsing, paying for the rehearsal space out of pocket with these actors for six hours sheet music, I spent 24 hours with beforehand just getting it perfect to the day that I had set up for everyone to show up whatever. I get on the subway and I just want to sit down. Then I told you this story. I did.

Mindy Henderson: I want to hear it again. I love this story.

Jess Westman: I'll tell it again.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah.

Jess Westman: Sorry to tell it.

Mindy Henderson: I mean, it's going to sound weird that I love this story, but it...

Jess Westman: It's actually kind of messed up that you love this story.

Mindy Henderson: It is a little bit messed up. So now we're equally twisted, I think. But it resonates with me when you tell this story.

Jess Westman: Sure. And I am sure there's many out there who probably had many worse experiences. I count myself. Just, I'm thankful that I have had not too many of these, but when it happens, you never forget it. There's a section of the subway, it says, persons with disabilities. Of course, that's never really honored. And on a lot of cars, there aren't people with disabilities. I'll say that. But on the carts where there are, you walk on or you roll on. And that was one of those days where, I was... I mean, I felt like I could just explode, my legs, my back, my right knee.

You're thinking about all that stuff and so you just want to sit down. And so I was going to take a seat and basically what happens is you have a random stranger assuming that you are not disabled. And so someone says, "Excuse me, you're not disabled." And it's so interesting because... And I think this is actually the point of the story. I didn't yell at them. I didn't scream at them.

I assumed that identity that I'm not disabled. I just accepted it even though it wasn't true. I didn't want to fight it. And I think that's what we had talked about in the talk back is that I didn't want the conflict, any more conflict than there already was with being seen as the guy who's pretending to be disabled, isn't disabled, but actually is disabled.

Mindy Henderson: Right. Well, and to stand there and argue with her about the fact that, "Actually, I am," I can't help but... And I think that... Yeah, I think that's what I like this story is the conundrum that you found yourself in and the strength that you had to find in yourself to stand there. Not that this is right, but to stand there and take the... Not the criticism, what word am I thinking of? To sort of...

Jess Westman: The heat maybe?

Mindy Henderson: The heat, yeah. Rather than do what you needed for yourself, which was probably to defend yourself and find a way to get to sit down. You stood there and you took it. And I think that that's something that all of us can relate to because we've all felt our own form of prejudice and discrimination and judgment and that sort of thing. You made a choice in that moment to stand there and not argue with this woman and face how exhausted your body was and power through it despite the judgment that was being made against you.

Jess Westman: Right. I've learned that lesson since times of adversity. It can seem like you'll get all the power in the world back if you fight back or if you bully back the bully, whatever scenario it is, whether it's a person or a situation, whatever it is. But I found there's actually no power in that. Vengeance doesn't really have power in it. It has passion. But to me it's not actually anything that'll help you or benefit you. And I've found the best thing I could do in moments like that is either, this is going to sound crazy, pray for that person or write about it and put all of that effort into something that can actually make the world a better place.

In fact, I was thinking about this today, that as opposed to criticizing people we hate or hating people in general, there's something we can do to combat that, which is to spread joy with our lives and spread awareness and educate people that way. Because people aren't going to listen to, "I hate you." People aren't going to listen to, "You're the worst and I will never be in the same room with you."

People are going to listen to, "Well, here's where you're wrong. This is who I am." So to me it's like you're not fighting fire with fire. You're fighting fire, "Oh, it's going to sound like I'm a care bear, fighting fire with love." Like a Care Bear.

Mindy Henderson: I think that that's one of the beautiful things about art and entertainment is that it's a platform to share those pieces of ourselves where maybe people are, in a lot of cases, going to be a little more inclined to listen and to hear it and receive it. They're not always going to hear you in the moment, say, "Actually, you're wrong." Maybe they will. Some people will. And there's a time and a place I'm sure to say those things. But I think what you do, this passion that you're living for art and entertainment, there's a lot of power behind that. And so much opportunity, I think to teach people new things and expose them to things maybe they haven't been exposed to before.

Jess Westman: Prove them wrong with your life, not with [inaudible 00:25:36] with the art you create. And in time you don't have to get the satisfaction of seeing if they changed. You just have to hope that they could and that more people could, and that you're making work that makes people self-reflect. And I would hate to make art that doesn't teach people anything. Even if it's a [inaudible 00:25:56] lesson. I think art should convey some sort of educational value for someone. I feel like it's necessary.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. Could not agree more. So you have also shared with me that some of what you've experienced as someone living with Becker, as well as just life experiences recently have caused you to pivot in your career and focus your energies and your talents on comedy right now, which I love. You're a natural for comedy. What motivated you to make that change?

Jess Westman: Well, one, in middle school I was told I had a face for comedy because girls would laugh. They would just laugh at it. I know. No, it hurts. No, that didn't happen. But... Okay, I-

Mindy Henderson: I didn't think so.

Jess Westman: Yeah, definitely didn't happen. That was an example. I'm the liar. That's the through line. That's the title. Jess is a liar. That's the title.

Mindy Henderson: I'm going to make that the title of the episode.

Jess Westman: Please, and thank you.

Mindy Henderson: Okay.

Jess Westman: What I mentioned before about Wheels, it's a story that's being written as my life unfolds. So that is just a fact that it was a hard pill to swallow, but it was great to accept it because I think in doing so, I'm not going to write about an experience I don't have yet. So the previous iterations, I'll address this. I was writing about a fully disabled man. So I was essentially writing 40-year-old Jess into a 20-year-old character. But I wasn't considering that because that's not my experience, maybe I could be falsely conveying. With inexperience, not really speaking on something I truly understand and fully lived.

Mindy Henderson: That makes so much sense.

Jess Westman: Yeah, thank you. And a lot of people actually didn't. They would disagree and they'd be like, "Jess, it's not that big of a deal." Personally to me, it's a big deal. Not just do I want people with muscular dystrophy to be writing about people with muscular... but also the experiences of how the muscular dystrophy affects you. There's someone that has the same thing but affects them differently. It's hard for me to speak exactly for them. So that's where I put myself in the place of, "Okay. You can have more time for that." Here's when the answer gets kind of funny. I met Conan.

Mindy Henderson: Yes. I was hoping this would come up. Conan O'Brien, right, is who you're referring to.

Jess Westman: Comedian Conan O'Brien who just won the Mark Twain award for American humor. He's like a dad to me. Okay, I do have a dad, by the way. By the way, dad, if you're listening, you are my dad. And I acknowledge that. But I met Conan and spur of the moment.... Okay, so there was a person next to me and they were like, "Bro, when Conan comes out, don't ask him a question and don't make it about you." So as soon as Conan comes out, I said, "Conan, will you adopt me?"

Mindy Henderson: It felt great.

Jess Westman: So I asked him a question and I made it about me.

Mindy Henderson: Perfect.

Jess Westman: I was like, "Let's see what happens." Thankfully, we riffed. He said something about he'd have to talk to his lawyer and his kids, but it should be all right. In that moment, I was like... It wasn't like a flip switch, but I was like, my mouth was dry as it is when you meet your hero. Your mouth is dry, your hands are shaking, you're like, "My neck hurts. Did that just happen?" And then someone afterward came up to me and was just asking me if I do stand up.

I expressed reluctance for that because it's scary. But also so was that, and it happened. It could have gone worse. And so I looked into it and I look into it. I mean, I did stand up. As soon as I got back home from that, I did stand up.

Mindy Henderson: What?

Jess Westman: 18 in a row. 18 days in a row.

Mindy Henderson: I didn't know that.

Jess Westman: Twice a day almost, sometimes.

Mindy Henderson: Oh my gosh.

Jess Westman: So much that I got a headliner spot in July at this place. I bombed that. I got another one, I succeeded. I got another one, half succeeded. And I just kept going and going, and going. And then I stopped. I was just like, "Okay, I think I've learned a lot from this. Let me take a breather because this is not healthy." I was [inaudible 00:30:36] 2:00 AM you socializing with these comedians and I have work in the morning. What am I doing?

So I took a step back. But from that I learned, "Wait a second, while I have this hesitancy of the timeline of Wheels, not really knowing what that looks like." In the meantime, I'm like, I love banter. I love making people laugh. I love tech being laughed at. I don't care. If you're laughing at me or with me, we're having fun." And so I was like, "Is there an element of that that I can more so incorporate into my personal journey?" And that's where happenstance, which I'll talk about comes in. That's where this podcast comes in.

But I think it was also, I had this moment in January that was sort of this life or death moment. My heart was enlarged. I was in the hospital. I didn't think I'd make it through the night. Literally, I believe that God performed a miracle and just me seeing the next day and what that looked like. I knew I had a second chance for a reason. I didn't really understand what for. And for me it's like, "What is joy, if not just laughter with the people you love."

I mean, that's pure joy. And so I thought this is an opportunity to go that direction. And I'll say this, as a huge disclaimer, not abandon Wheels, but take the time to understand it looks like as I grow as a human person.

Mindy Henderson: I love that. I love that. Which kind of dovetails into this next question, which I think you've partially answered, if not fully answered, but I'm going to ask it anyway. Why do you think that comedy is good for the soul?

Jess Westman: Do we have three hours to unpack this?

Mindy Henderson: We have two hours and 59 minutes, not quite three hours.

Jess Westman: I can make that work.

Mindy Henderson: Okay.

Jess Westman: I can do this. Why is comedy good for the soul? Was it why or how?

Mindy Henderson: Why, but how is also good?

Jess Westman: How would be three more hours?

Mindy Henderson: Okay. You go with whichever one you're feeling drawn to.

Jess Westman: Why? Because life is short, man. I don't know. I mean wouldn't it be devastating if we just all sat here crying the whole time? I don't know.

Mindy Henderson: Yes.

Jess Westman: Why is comedy so important? Because it's priceless. Because it can't be traded for anything in the world. A good laugh with your mom, a good laugh with your best friend that's known you for 10 years, you're roasting each other because that's how you express your love for each other. I mean, come on. I can't even put to words how important to me comedy is. And if people were looking for a funny answer in that, I think a funny answer would not do it justice.

Comedy is so necessary. Okay, fine. I'll bring it back to Conan. He was talking about Mark Twain, and he was talking about just the importance of comedy. And Mark Twain didn't punch down. He wasn't a bully. There's so much about who he was. And the point of comedy, I don't think is to punch down. I think it's to people an escape. Not to remind people of what is broken within them, what's wrong with them, but to maybe just have a good time. That's it. There's my three-hour answer.

Mindy Henderson: I love that answer. And I think that you nailed it because so much... I mean, I said it at the top of the show, there's so much about life that's just heavy. I'm not a doctor, I just play one on my podcast. But I think that there are physiological things also that happen within us when we laugh. And I feel like... I don't know. This may be a negative attitude, but I feel like it's easier to look around you and find things to pick apart. And you can always find something to feel bad about and to get hung up on. And I think you have to work a little bit harder.

Correct me if you think I'm wrong, but I think you have to work a little bit harder to find the light spots and the things to laugh at and the things to smile about. And if there's someone like you with a gift who can give us those things, I think it's really important.

Jess Westman: Yeah. I mean, I echo what you said. I actually don't know how much I could add to that. I know you have more wisdom and experience, but I have learned that the brightest days come after the darkest ones. And it's only once we're able to laugh at the situation, laugh at ourselves. Laugh through the pain, I guess. Why was Conan my hero? Actually, maybe the title will be about Conan in some way. It was because I would have a hard day getting bullied when I was 15 and home, and see this guy doing a weird string dance and had this confidence, and he had a goofy haircut. He was tall and he had technically every reason to get made fun of in my school, but he was a hero to them. And he was the guy.

So I saw that and I thought, I'd love to have that reckless abandon. I'd love to walk into a room and not care so much of the way I'm coming off to just spread joy. And if it's perceived in a negative way, if it's perceived in a, "Oh, he's not as good as he thinks..." Who cares? I don't live for you. I used to, but I can't anymore. I don't think I'd have a reason to live if I just lived for the approval of others anymore.

Mindy Henderson: Well, and I think that's where your wisdom is showing a little bit. And as you grow and get older, and wiser, and all of that, I think that that's what's going to make Wheels. It's going to take it from great to mind-bogglingly astonishing because you're going to be able to incorporate wisdom like this. I mentioned earlier that you're taking improv classes at the esteemed Second City Improv, which is notorious for training actors who have gone on to perform on Saturday Night Live, a little show people may have heard of. Can you tell us a little bit about the school, the classes you're taking, and what your comedy and acting goals are?

Jess Westman: Of course, of course. Mindy with the loaded questions. I can do this. Okay, Second City, I always wanted to do it. Of course, I knew that's what started Steve Carrel's career, Tina Faye, so many of my heroes.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah.

Jess Westman: So I'd always had interests. I always knew what it was. I also never wanted to move to Chicago or Toronto, or LA. Those were financial impracticalities. Then I moved to New York for the musical, still not thinking comedy is going to play a relevant part in my life. And then stuff transpires this past year. And I really just felt like, "Why would I not? Why would I not? Because I'm scared? Because I'm a little coward? Because the same guy who wouldn't do this is the same guy who wouldn't ask Conan to be his father."

Mindy Henderson: There you go.

Jess Westman: And I think I've proven to myself and to God, as God is my witness, that I can be that guy. So why would I not? Just take the leap? Just go for it. Just take a jump. So I did. I signed up and I have... I can't say this enough, and I found that it's possible. One, yes, mom, I do believe that there are people funnier than me. I

have my big head and I'm like, "No, no, I'm not that great." These people, they... I cry. I cry laughing. They hurt my sides. I think I need surgery after I'm done laughing.

Mindy Henderson: Wow.

Jess Westman: These people I've been in classes with are so funny. I mean, I'm looking at literally in class with the next Lisa Kudrow, the next Jason Sudeikis. I'm not even joking. And some of them, they go right from that to the comedy club to pitch new material that they tried out in a scene. And so I can very clearly say, I don't know why. No, I am stupid for not doing this earlier. Every time I walk in, I'm mad at teenage me for not just moving to Chicago.

Now, of course, for context, they opened the New York location 2024. So this was not an option until that point, which is just crazy to me because it's right by where my favorite spot was, where I used to come the first three years, and I'd sit at the beach and I think, "What is my purpose? I'm going to stare at this river and listen to Mumford & Sons in my AirPods.

Mindy Henderson: Bang the bongos. Yeah.

Jess Westman: Yeah, exactly. And just do that. I'm a lone wolf. I'm figuring things out thing. And it's right in that area. Now, I have a reason to go there. Before I'd go there just to be like this Hopeless Wanderer, Mumford & Sons song. But now it's like I have class and we do jams, which are like these basically stand up or open mic for improv and you jump up there. And the craziest thing that happened with this... And then I'm done. I'll get off my soap box, my improv box about this.

But the craziest thing was we had this orientation, this jam, if you will, with 200, 300 students, people just there. And the guy I was sitting next to, believe it or not, we met. We were playing the same show three months before. He's this ex-military standup comedian, hilarious guy. Doesn't seem like he's funny, but he kills it. He's the funniest guy on earth.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, wow.

Jess Westman: We met, we reconnected. He goes on stage the first game they're playing I went to. And I remember as I got up, "No, no, no. Sit back down."

Mindy Henderson: There you go.

Jess Westman: But literally they're all watching you. You're establishing yourself either as the guy who fails or doesn't. To me, there's two ways to go with improv. You land it... So we're talking... I think the game was go up in bad occupations. So you go up and you pretend to be someone who's bad at their job. So they said, "Doctor," I was like, "No, that won't be good enough." Troll. I'm like, "Troll is not

[inaudible 00:41:51]." And then they said, therapist. And I didn't even think, I just walked forward.

Just please don't die is all I thought. Don't digest. Don't explode and die. And they said, therapist. And remember, it's bad therapist. I stared for 10 seconds. I looked like I was about to cry. And I said, "But you didn't ask me how my day was." Because I guess a lot of people have had bad therapists, they didn't just laugh, they cheered.

I felt in that moment, "Wait a second, I don't even think it was that good." I don't even think delivery was that good. I literally think this is just confirmation that I'm in the right place. I realized you don't have to say the funniest thing, just say the first thing, the most exciting thing. And you can't-

Mindy Henderson: The realest thing.

Jess Westman: The realest thing. And it is real. I can imagine that a narcissistic therapist... Not saying all of them are narcissistic. I'm sure there could be some narcissistic therapists that are thinking the whole time, "I wish I could talk about myself. Why aren't they asking me about me?" Right? I'm sure there are therapists that think that. I don't know which ones do, but they're out there. So there's a relatability factor. And I've found that. The funniest stuff often isn't funny because it's just out of this world. It's funny because it's true and it's true.

Mindy Henderson: First of all, that story gave me goosebumps because the punchline was so good and the cheering, but when you were setting the stage and talking about having to get up and do this, I was sweating and feeling nauseous and trying to imagine this. My hat is off to you, sir, because I couldn't do it.

Jess Westman: Well, my mom, she was the one who heard the before and after, so she heard, "I don't know, mom. I don't know." And then after, "Yeah, we're good." Just completely different people. But that's how tantalizing it is. It's like, "Whoa, this? In front of all these people that I don't know?"

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. It's like walking a tightrope without a net.

Jess Westman: Yes, exactly.

Mindy Henderson: You had me with the suspense of that story, and I am eternally more grateful than I already was that I will never have to do that in my life.

Jess Westman: Do it. I don't recommend it, but it's this weird... I have a loathing about it, but once you do it, it's like, "Okay, I should have been doing this the whole time." It's that thing about diversity.

Mindy Henderson: Well, you should have.

Jess Westman: What's that?

Mindy Henderson: I probably should not, but you should have.

Jess Westman: No. This is improv right now. People don't [inaudible 00:44:51] If you have a good conversation, that's improv. I'm just saying.

Mindy Henderson: You're very kind. I will give you that. That's true. So I want to get into the other projects that you have that you're working on right now. But before I do that, we talked a little bit... And you went down this road, but I want to revisit it because number one, I want to know the answer to this. And so there've got to be other people out there that want to know the answer. So we talked about pivoting and change and how you made this decision to go with comedy and make that your focus right now.

And you said it. I think sometimes we grow the most when we pivot. How do you know though when it's time to pivot or change course, or if you just need to stick with your path that you're already on and work through the problems?

Jess Westman: Well, I think, I felt called. I really did feel called to comedy. And I have my whole life, but it wasn't like this unfamiliar thing. I had been down that route before the genesis of Wheels. It was just performance, musical theater and comedy. That was it. And I think it was taking a leap in one way because it was revisiting something. But in another way, it was like I felt like I was just upgrading into Prime Jess. I don't know. I'm not a superhero, but I feel like Prime Jess or closer to him. Now that I'm doing this, I feel like I'm doing the right thing. And I feel like-

Mindy Henderson: That's telling.

Jess Westman: Yeah, it may be. I mean, I don't know if I come off more at ease or happy or whatever, but I just feel like Wheels will be ready for me. And I'll be for Wheels. It's not like I just woke up one day and said, "I'm going to be funny now. I'm going to learn how to do..." I have been messed up in the head like this since birth. I have always been like this. That's why I mentioned the whole video. I mean, we're talking about it a seven-year-old who does finger guns all the time. Not just like people are having serious conversations and I'd be [inaudible 00:47:29] to everyone. I thought I was pranking them.

A prank has to have a punchline. I would just do this and think I was pranking people. So in that, the silliness has always been a part of my life. If you know me personally, you'll know. Even during my most serious Wheels years, I didn't take myself too seriously and always tried to have fun. So I think I'm just really doing what I feel like I've always been doing, just pursuing it in my art now as well.

I think there is also going to be more to Wheels and more nuance to that story. Once I've lived a more fulfilled life doing this, I think I'm going to learn a lot

more than I would have if I just sat wallowing in the changes that are happening which are [inaudible 00:48:17] that my body is changing. I am losing stuff. But why would I just focus on that hopelessly when I can have some fun with life and the good things that are going on?

Mindy Henderson: And bring joy and happiness to the people around you. I like that.

Jess Westman: I attempt to do that, yes.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. So tell me a little bi..., and I want to cry because we're almost out of time, but I have just a couple of more questions for you. You talked earlier about how you've got like 8,000 other projects going on. You've got a comedy album in progress that I need to know more about that. And anything else that you would like to talk about that you're currently working on?

Jess Westman: Of course. Happenstance time. I'm about to become insufferable.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, dear.

Jess Westman: Let's do this.

Mindy Henderson: Got to go.

Jess Westman: Got to go, yeah. We have you said two hours and 59 minutes.

Mindy Henderson: We do. There's time. Go for it.

Jess Westman: Let's go. Okay, Happenstance: A Reverent Odyssey of Life and a Jess Because Death is Not an Option. That is the full title because death is not an option, parentheses, of course.

Mindy Henderson: I like it.

Jess Westman: Thank you. It doesn't play well anywhere. I don't think anyone likes the title that long. So there is an acronym for it. I'm not going to try to find it right now, so that would take a while. HT. No, see, I'm already doing it.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah, you have to think way too hard.

Jess Westman: Yes. But Happenstance. It's a tale of tragedy and joy, and grace, and mercy, and family, and love. It's basically a story about-

Mindy Henderson: Wow.

Jess Westman: I grew up just very unseriously and I had very serious parents. I had very serious circumstances, but I made a lot of silly decisions and cost full decisions. I am infamous in my hometown for wrecking cars. I'm a very expensive person. No, I

would get hit by cars. And then I also hit a car. And I had bad car luck. So just things happen in adolescence that I think taught me a lot. The main sort of through line of the story is I was heavily bullied as a kid, and then later in high school I became a bully trying to take that power back.

And then I think *Wheels* was my pendulum swing and really coming back to a place of empathy and not thinking about justice for me being bullied and all that, but more so thinking, "Okay, what is thoughtful to do? What is thoughtful to say? What is caring?" It sounds like I'm describing a psychopath trying to adjust to being normal, but-

Mindy Henderson: Not at all. I don't think a psychopath has it in them. So I think you're good.

Jess Westman: Okay. Thank God. So I really... *Happenstance* was on my heart when I was in the hospital. I didn't know what it was called, but I knew it was something funny, and I knew it was something real. And I knew it was something to establish myself as an artist before *Wheels* ever hit the biggest stage it could be on. So that's the idea of *Happenstance* is this is my story. You'll never get this hour and 15 minutes back, but maybe you'll be okay with that because it's real, it's honest. People can relate to it and people can sympathize. People can be frustrated with me. It's a human story, and I think it is... This answer is too long. That's what I think. So, yeah.

Mindy Henderson: No, you're good. I am so excited to hear about this. So a couple of follow-up questions.

Jess Westman: Please.

Mindy Henderson: Number one, do you have a timeline, which I know can be an artist's nightmare to ask that question, but do you have a timeline and where would someone find something like this when it's finished?

Jess Westman: Of course. Timeline. So it's very humorous. We've done a few promos out in the ether, and I bring a microphone to different parts of New York. I was by the Brooklyn Bridge the first time, went to Times Square, second time Manhattan area. And I asked people, "What are you looking for in a new comedy album?" And I've already written a lot of it, so I'm not even going to use this stuff, but I just like to ask for promo's sake. But we went around and it was actually October 1st, 2024 was the first release date I ever put out.

And about four days after that, we didn't release it. Instead, I went on the street and asked people how they felt about me as an artist because I didn't release it when I said I would. And you would guess most answers were roasting me. Just completely destroying me, which I found hilarious. That's a long way to say 2025. That's all I'll say.

Mindy Henderson: Fair enough. I like it. It builds the suspense.

Jess Westman: Yes, exactly. And it could potentially be the December 31st, 2025. I'm telling you, 2025. That's all I will say right now.

Mindy Henderson: Okay.

Jess Westman: Can they release it? Everywhere you stream music, but also in your heart.

Mindy Henderson: Okay. Well, keep us posted. I definitely want to have a listen when it is available. Any other projects that you want to mention?

Jess Westman: Well, I don't know if this is a project like something you write, but I do have a podcast.

Mindy Henderson: Yes.

Jess Westman: Yes. But I don't know if we were going to speak about that.

Mindy Henderson: Go right ahead. Let's talk about the podcast.

Jess Westman: I'll be so quick. I'm plugging endless stuff.

Mindy Henderson: I love it. Let's do that.

Jess Westman: This podcast just might change your life. Listen to it. Bam. That's all I got. That's [inaudible 00:54:29] podcast.

Mindy Henderson: Brilliant. That's end of March, yeah? When it'll-

Jess Westman: March 31st. Okay.

Mindy Henderson: Anywhere you can listen to podcasts.

Jess Westman: Everywhere you listen to podcasts. And you guessed it, also in your heart.

Mindy Henderson: Love it.

Jess Westman: Yes. Mindy, will... There may be an episode with Mindy. It could be...

Mindy Henderson: Maybe, maybe not. I don't know. We'll have to see.

Jess Westman: I don't like the suspense. It scares me.

Mindy Henderson: See, it works both ways. I can do suspense too, but I hope so. I'll just say that. So let's do this. Let's talk about... I've said it a couple of times. The world is a bit heavy right now. What advice would you give to listeners who might need some more joy, laughter, levity in their lives right now?

Jess Westman: So I wrote down an answer for this because I really want to be sincere, but I also think sincerity is just the truth of what's inside you, not something you have. I really think that we need each other. I think seeing people less as an enemy and more as an opportunity to forgive, move forward. I mean, I really don't... Well, that's easy for me to say, forgive. But I really do believe there is a lot of hate everywhere. It's on all fronts.

Obviously decisions are being made that are affecting people with disabilities, my kids' futures, my future kids. And I know there are people scared about that. There's equal, if not more amount of people that are happy about that. I think what is alarming is people aren't willing to meet on the divide. People aren't willing to talk to each other. I think we should be talking to each other more. I think we should be listening more.

As a man, as a person, I follow the teachings of Jesus very closely just how he loved everyone. He uplifted the marginalized. He was with them in their brokenness. He was there for people. And I think that's what we need to be. We need to be there for people. People we disagree with, people we do agree with, just be there, be present. Again, five answers. I'm giving you five answers in one.

Mindy Henderson: No, that's good.

Jess Westman: Just trying to give all these nuggets of things that this is how I live my life. It's what keeps me away from bitterness and toward growth. But again, it's easy for me to say. I think there's a lot of people who need accommodations that are being jeopardized right now. I'm ambulatory, I'll say that. We need to lead with empathy. We need to come together. And that was the most beautiful thing that I think I have seen. And my relationships is in times like this, we come together. We learn how to work together as one and again, meet on the divide.

Mindy Henderson: Well said. Well said. That was not the answer I was expecting. I was expecting something about watching comedy movies or something like that.

Jess Westman: That too. Watch Conan.

Mindy Henderson: Sure.

Jess Westman: Watch Conan.

Mindy Henderson: Obviously, that too.

Jess Westman: Yes, please.

Mindy Henderson: But that answer was so much better than the one I was thinking I was going to get. And I could not agree with you more. You're so wise. Thank you for that. And unfortunately, my last question for you, I'm going to ask you right now, no pressure, but what is your favorite joke?

Jess Westman: Come on. Oh, this is my favorite question.

Mindy Henderson: Yes. I've been waiting for this one.

Jess Westman: Boy, are you ready?

Mindy Henderson: I'm so ready.

Jess Westman: I got to crack my knuckles.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, wow.

Jess Westman: I know. Wow, I have been... It's been-

Mindy Henderson: That needed to happen. Wow. That was quite a crack.

Jess Westman: It kind of hurt. My index finger is swollen. Weird. All right. I've got to hand it to babies because their little arms can't reach anything. That's great. Hey, that is more of a, "I can't believe he thinks that's funny," type of joke. The joke is that that is my best joke. And I will always assert that as my best joke anytime anyone asks me a joke.

Mindy Henderson: That was pretty good. I've got to say, it's kind of like spicy food. It creeps up on you.

Jess Westman: I got to ask you, you know this is a two-way street, and I actually wish I could ask you every question. My promise is my podcast, I will. I will ask you if you ask me. Curated to you. What is your favorite joke?

Mindy Henderson: Oh, so I will tell you, I was an ambassador for MDA as a little small kiddo. Started when I was like four and did it until I was about 12. And my mom and her infinite wisdom because she would've to show up places and thank people for being there and for their support. And that's not something that comes naturally to a four or five, six-year-old child. And so she always primed me with an elephant joke to start out with. And it was my way of warming up the audience. The look that you just gave me, do you know elephant jokes?

Jess Westman: I don't. But I'm about to learn. And I need to-

Mindy Henderson: They are the dumbest jokes you will ever hear in your life, but they're brilliant.

Jess Westman: Yeah, I make those every time.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. So I will ask you, I'm trying to decide which one. I have like 80,000 of them. It's a two-part joke. Why do elephants paint their toenails?

Jess Westman: Why?

Mindy Henderson: So they can hide in M&M bags. Part two. Have you ever seen an elephant in an M&M bag?

Jess Westman: I'm not supposed to say yes. No, I haven't.

Mindy Henderson: You see how good they are? They're the worst jokes ever. So, so bad. Right?

Jess Westman: You know what? Courage.

Mindy Henderson: I tried.

Jess Westman: [inaudible 01:01:37] courage. Me doing the improv thing, it takes courage. You knew the end of that before I did.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah.

Jess Westman: And still did it. And to me, I actually respect... I respect you twice as if I could respect you more.

Mindy Henderson: It was-

Jess Westman: [inaudible 01:01:50] twice as much.

Mindy Henderson: It was much more charming coming from a six-year-old. But they still make me chuckle. So that's what I've got.

Jess Westman: No, now it's hitting me. You know how you did the drum sound and then you laugh. To me, it's like there is... All right.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. Like I said, dumbest joke you'll ever hear. But, Jess, thank you so much for being here. This has been an absolute pleasure. I said at the beginning that you are someone who always makes me smile. You do always make me laugh. And so thank you for that. Thank you for being here. I look forward to watching everything unfold that you're putting out into the world and sort of tagging along on that journey with you.

Jess Westman: Mindy, you are amazing. And even with your last statement, I don't even know how to follow it up. You really encourage me to just be a better person. And I'm just honored that you would have me on. So thank you. Oh, one of your book titles, the truth about things that suck.

Mindy Henderson: Yes.

Jess Westman: But you don't.

Mindy Henderson:

Thank you very much. I appreciate that. And on that note [inaudible 01:03:09] thank you all for being with us. Thank you for listening. Jess, it will not be the last time. We'll talk to you soon.

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