

MEGHAN: There's a piece of art in my sitting room. It's not fancy. It's kind of this rectangle shape, almost plaque like that. And it just says a few words very simply across it. Human kind. Be both. My dear friend Genevieve gave it to me a couple years ago, and when I walk past it, it always makes me smile, of course, because I love her and our friendship and it reminds me of her. We've been super close since we were about 17, but also because it's true. Human kind. Be both. And it got me thinking of other types of wordplay that resonate. And I specifically was thinking about something that I was told many years ago. You're not just a human being. You're a human, just being. Now, the woman who told me this was trying to remind me to just be easier on myself, sort of in the same vein of saying "don't let perfect be the enemy of good". Well, this is just another version of that same ilk of advice. You're human, just being. And as I think about what we've covered throughout this podcast so far and the many ways my guests and I have reflected on the girls that we once were and the women that we've become. I wanted to revisit a large piece of my origin story, my old school, and explore if these labels and boxes are part of the self-identification for the young women there, or if they've given themselves the space to be a human. Being.

Meghan: Okay, ready team? This is all very nice and new. Isn't it a pretty campus? *M laughter*

Meghan: Oh, my gosh. How funny. My locker was right over here.

Producer: Which one?

Meghan: I was somewhere smack in the middle. I don't remember because these are your lockers when you're in high school and the middle school lockers were up there.

MEGHAN: You've heard me talk about Immaculate Heart on the series before and the influence it's had on my life. And look I was there from ages, about 12 to 17 which are really formative years in your life – they certainly were for me. And let me just say, being back there, the energy, it was, it was palpable. I was happy to be back there and it was also really fun especially when I made a surprise visit and I popped into some of the young ladies in volleyball practice.

VOLLEYBALL CLIPS

[clip 1] M WALKS IN... LITTLE SCREAMS, EXCITEMENT, ROOM HUSHES

[clip 2] ALL IN CIRCLE - Girls: Hiiii... M: Group hug?? ... excited sounds

MEGHAN: Or caught up with one of the young women in the Hallway, right in front of our lockers...

DIANA CLIP

Diana: And my mom was like are you gonna meet her? Are you gonna meet her? I was like, I don't think so, Mom. She has such a busy schedule. I don't think so.

Meghan: Not too busy for this.

Diana: And then you're like there and I was like, oh my god! My mom, my mom, I have to tell my mom!

MEGHAN: [laughs] Well, if she didn't tell you yet, hi, Mom!. Walking through those halls... just so many memories came flooding right back to me.

[footsteps]

Meghan: So now we are going into one of my old classrooms and oh, it's so great because you - as an adult, you come back into this environment, it feels so small. But when you're in high school, this campus was so big.

MEGHAN: It's true. Because back then, that campus did seem to be a lot bigger. But, then again... so did *everything in life*. Just think about it... middle school and high school, this is a really big time for anyone in their life. You're so young, you're so impressionable, and you also think...you know everything when you're a teenager! But for young women especially, *this* is the time period in which you sorta start to look around – at the culture, at society, at the messages you're receiving – and you ask yourself, constantly, *how am I supposed to be?*

At least, that was very much my experience of adolescence. And maybe... maybe things have changed.

Girls: Hi!

Meghan: Hi! How are you guys doing?

Abigail: Well, thank you!

Meghan: Great! Hi, I'm Meghan.

Grace: Hi, I'm Grace. Nice to meet you.

Meghan: Nice to meet you too, Grace. Hi. Oh ya good to see you.

Unknown Voice: Hi

M: Hello hello hello.

[Fade Out]

MEGHAN: I visited the school to sit down in conversation with three amazing young women just on the cusp of adulthood. They had just graduated, about a month or so prior.

MEGHAN: Abigail,

Abigail: I'm a recent graduate from Immaculate Heart High School, and I'm going to be attending UCLA next year.

MEGHAN: Diana,

Diana: I'm also a recent graduate from Immaculate Heart high school, I am planning to attend UC Santa Cruz.

MEGHAN: And Grace.

Grace: I am also a recent Immaculate Heart graduate. I'm planning to attend the liberal arts college Eugene Lang.

Meghan: Congrats on graduating!

MEGHAN: So here's what I wanted to ask them - I wanted to fully understand, do the stigmas and labels that I grew up with still hold the same weight? And keep in mind, at the time that I was sitting down with them earlier this summer, the show wasn't out yet. They didn't have a sense of what it was, so I was trying to set the table for them to understand - here's what I'm looking into, and I want to see if you see it through the same lens or if things have really changed.

[BEAT]

Meghan: I've been talking to a lot of women about the words, stereotypes and labels that get put on us. I want to ask you guys, what are the labels that you think women get tagged with?

Grace: The B word.

All Girls / Meghan: Yeah.

Grace: It just really rubs me the wrong way when men use that word, whether as like a direct insult towards a woman or just like in passing, but it's like a derogatory word used against women. And it's really frustrating to see how common it is.

Meghan: Well, and it's used so casually.

Abigail: Yes. And I. I think that's the problem people just like shoot it at each other. They just say it in passing, it's crazy how many times I hear that word in a single day.

Meghan: Wow.

Diana: Another word we could talk about would be when a woman speaks up or uses her voice, they're labeled as bossy.

Meghan: Mm hmm.

Diana: And I hate that word so much, because if a man says something or adds or pitches in an idea, it's like they're this great person. They're the leader.

Meghan: Aspirational!

Grace: Taking initiative.

Girls: Yeah.

Diana: Exactly. But there's many women out there that don't want to be labeled as bossy, and so they don't speak up and they just sit down and take it all in, which I think should change. And that's why I bring it up.

Meghan: Yeah. What a detriment. So when you guys hear the word bimbo, who do you think of or what do you think of?

Grace: I think the the only times that I've heard that in recent, like in recent years is on Tik Tok from self proclaimed bimbos.

MUSIC IN

MEGHAN: She's only ever heard the word on Tik Tok! I mean talk about aging myself. But this idea of the Bimbo, the dumb blonde, this was something I grew up seeing all the time and here you go...they hadn't. So I thought maybe let's gear shift a bit. What are some other topics that we've talked about throughout the season of this podcast. How about Singleton? And I walked these young women through my experience when I was at Immaculate Heart, and as I shared with you earlier. This assignment I had – to plan my own wedding, one of our assignments in our Religion II class. And I asked them their thoughts on that. Here's their response.

Meghan: I mean, can you imagine? Like, that to me was just what we did then. But now for your generation, you're thinking, what on earth?

Abigail: Yeah, that sounds insane. And like they're building a path for you!

Diana: I think if we would have had those assignments now, we would've definitely spoken up about it.

All Girls: Yeah.

Diana: I no doubt in my head we. Someone would have said something, if not everyone.

Abigail: A lot of my very close friends are, they are set on being single or they just don't want kids and they just like I feel like they don't have that pressure on them to conform to that norm or that past norm of women getting married and having children. But they don't see a problem with that, which I think is great. Um, and I think that's what's being taught to us in our classes, which is great as well, that we don't need somebody to support us, a man or a partner.

Meghan: And that you don't feel the judgment, but you also don't have the self judgment.

Diana: Yes.

Meghan: That's great.

MEGHAN: And each of their experiences are so unique. And also really refreshing. Because some of the conversations that we started having when I was sitting with them, are not the conversations that I was having when I was in high school. And also not the ways in which the girls that I went to school with would openly identify. As with Grace...

Grace: As a woman and for myself, as a queer woman, it's like there's it kind of feels like the world is against you at times. And while there is, there's definitely opportunities to make a community and like to find people like me and to find people who are different from me, but who, you know, we can see eye to eye on some things, but sometimes it feels like there's an army right outside, like, waiting to take away all my rights and, like, just, you know, it's it's just a dark time. And I think you have to kind of see the silver lining in that there's people all over the place fighting and supporting you. But, um, you know, it's, it's kind of scary where we're headed right now.

Abigail: And I think these labels also like are so detrimental because, as you said, they stay with women. So once they're labeled at one time in their life, they'll start to look in on themselves and say, what's wrong with me? What do I need to change about myself? And when the next opportunity comes, they might change themselves to be less outspoken or less bossy or less diva like, you know, um, and it just causes them to lose who they are and fit or try to fit themselves to society's expectations which is so sad.

MEGHAN: So this last comment, it really stuck with me. It's like the question I was posing earlier, the one that we ask ourselves in middle school and high school... and that we keep asking ourselves over and over throughout the course of our lives... *how am I supposed to be?* As opposed to... just being. And believing that that's enough which in some ways is rooted in our experience of not ever thinking that we are enough.

Dr. Shefali: The core archetype is the archetype of unworthiness.

That is the voice of Dr. Shefali Tsabary, author of *A Radical Awakening*, here to shed some light on what happens to our core selves as the years pass...

Dr. Shefali: And from that archetype comes these masks that we begin to wear in our lives in order to purchase the crumbs of love, worth validation and acceptance. So these masks become our second skin; we don't realize that they are our conditionings. We believe them to be who it is we are. We've all lost ourselves, I say on the sidewalks of our childhood, and part of our awakening is to go reclaim that. Reclaim that lost part of us.

MEGHAN: And here's where things come full circle... because those Three Words we asked everyone in this series... how would you describe yourself as a little girl... those words don't serve simply as a reflection on the past. Those words are a chance for another kind of reflection: who is the woman staring back at me in the mirror? What has happened to her over the years? How can I reconnect with some of the core tenets of my being?

Because, after all... that's what we are: human beings. Humans, just *being*. Whatever you were meant to be, however you were meant to be. No labels. No types. No masks. Outside the box. Just all natural. All you. You know the kid, on the sidewalk, dreaming about her endless possibilities. Where did she go? That's what we're going to dig into today.

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INTRO

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<< INTRO THEME BEGINS >>

MEGHAN: I'm Meghan. Welcome to ARCHETYPES – my podcast about the labels and tropes that try to hold women back.

And today, we're talking about living outside of the box – the box that we've talked about all season on this podcast. The different boxes that we try to get pushed inside of. What is it like when you live beyond those lines – when you color outside of them. Freely expressing our identities and embracing the nuances that make us...quite simply... a human being. I'm so excited to talk about all this with a couple of women who own who they are, and who also model the complexity of the human experience...

Candace Bushnell: I had an epiphany. And I vowed that someday I would write parts for women that were real women, as opposed to what some man thought we should be.

MEGHAN: Writer and television producer, Candace Bushnell. As well as...

Michaela Jae: For me I had already been expressing this feminine creature, divine creature, womanly figure, from day one.

Actor and activist Michaela Jae Rodriguez!

That's all coming up after the break!

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ACT 1

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Meghan: I like all the pink. It's happy.

Candace: Yes! I was Barbie-core before Barbie-core was big.

Meghan: Oh my god. I love it!

Candace: I am a very pink person. I have to say.

Meghan: It is very joyful, especially as the weather changes. I think you must walk into your house and it feels like a rainbow [laughs].

MEGHAN: So you can't see what I'm referring to here but this was Candace Bushnell in her home when I spoke with her. She was wearing this multi toned bright sweater with pink and yellow in the fabric and her room was decked out... in other shades of pink. There was this gorgeous fashion sketch of a woman wearing a sleek pink ball gown on the wall behind her and even the blanket in the background was almost a pink plaid. It um, it was refreshing and also surprising. But it instantly made me light up. Because this was a woman who was so clear and so comfortable on who she was and how she wanted to present.

And if you're not familiar with Candace Bushnell, she's a writer and television producer who first made waves in the 90's with a little column in the New York Observer called.... *Sex and The City*. *You've probably heard of it*. Her musings and stories about women navigating life and love in the big city were compiled into a book, and then adapted into the mega-successful HBO show of the same name.

Sex & The City Clip

Miranda: Look at this, "don't let your soulmate slip away."

Carrie: Oh I know it's almost a threat it's like, "we have him. He's just waiting for you but hurry because he's slippin' slippin' away - oops there he goes."

Miranda: Soulmates only exist in the hallmark aisle in Duane Reade Drugs.

MEGHAN: Those iconic characters: Carrie, Samantha, Miranda, Charlotte... and of course, Carrie's will-they-won't-they love interest, Mr. Big... these were all based on composites of people in Candace's real-life social circles in New York. Carrie, the mid-30s journalist chasing love and success? She was inspired by Candace's own life. And Samantha, the very

provocative bon vivant, one of her longtime friends. And through her column, Candace introduced a fresh, modern lens on femininity. And also just what it meant for her and her circle of friends to be a woman, to be a single woman, to be a woman trying to date, to discover, to explore. To self discover... in New York. Candace's writing – it still holds up today. It still feels boundless today. And in her recent novel and one-woman show *Is There Still Sex in the City*, she continues to peel back the layers of what women can be, in all stages of life.

Candace: As women, it feels like we get so pushed into being a woman, whatever that means. And, you know, having to have all of these feminine attributes, feminine thoughts, feminine feelings, you know, we live in a world where, it's not just that we tell women how they should look. But it's also, there's a lot of pressure put on women as to how they should feel. And for me personally, even as a little kid, I never felt any of those things that women, little girls were supposed to feel.

MEGHAN: Is it a coincidence that Candace grew up feeling like she wanted to define herself on her own terms? To be a human first and foremost before the world could tell her how to be? Well, I'll let her tell you more herself...

Candace: I grew up in the sixties and you know that message, girls are sugar and spice and everything nice and boys are what is it, snails and puppy dog tails.

Meghan: Tails! That's what little boys are made of. Oh, my gosh of course!

Candace: So that was basically the message when I was growing up and as a girl, you were supposed to be nice. You were supposed to have nice thoughts. You were supposed to, you know, want to have children and be Googoo Gaga over babies. And uh...

Meghan: That was not your cup of tea.

Candace: No, I just. I felt none of those things and I think because I had no - I have no brothers. So I grew up just with two younger sisters. And my father was a research scientist. He basically invented the fuel cell they used in the first Apollo space rocket.

Meghan: Wow.

Candace: And he was considered a genius. And he... he was not a big supporter of male culture. He did not like sports. He was not crazy about the inherent disrespect that men had for women. And so he allowed us to kind of be full human beings, you know, without being pushed into *you gotta think about that male gaze*. And, you know, so even as a little kid. What most women grow up with, which is eventually, sweetie, someday you are going to be serving a man one way or another. We did not grow up with that.

And in fact when I was a little kid, I was a feminist. Why? Because when I went to kindergarten, I discovered women could only have four jobs: nurse, teacher, secretary or librarian. But even if you do have a job, you can't do anything with the money you earn.

Meghan: Oh my - even just hearing you say that, and that was the time you were growing up. Wasn't it - it was...1974, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of '74. That was the first time women were able to get a line of credit without a cosigner. I mean, that's wild. You grew up around so much of this and I wonder, growing up as a feminist, how did this all sort of, how did this play into your dreams of the picture that you wanted to paint, of the writing that you wanted to put out in the world, the messaging that you wanted to see. Were you painting a different world than what you saw?

Candace: First of all, I started writing professionally when I was 19. I had a dream that I was going to just write novels and I was going to win the Pulitzer Prize because I was so talented. I quickly found out that ain't happening because there are no doors open for you. And people tell you if you're a woman back then, you can't do this. I mean, even when we were started doing Sex and the City, you know, people would be like, you can't write a script. So I actually did not write any scripts for Sex and the City, honestly, because I thought, I can't do this.

Meghan: Whoa.

Candace: But the message that I got a lot was, You can't do this. You're not allowed access to this area. I mean, that's something that's changed enormously for women, is that they do have access to being the creative behind the TV show. But one of the realities is most parts for women are written by men.

Meghan: Right.

Candace: And that was when I first moved to New York. When I was 18 or 19, I knew I wanted to be a writer. And one of the first things I realized when I went to acting school was that all the parts sucked. I could not find a part that was a whole woman. And I remember I went on an audition for a TV commercial. And I got into a line and there was a long line of beautiful women and it was moving really quickly. And I was like, "gosh, what's going on?" And one of the women said, Well, this is one of those auditions where they eliminate you if your eyelashes are too short. And I had an epiphany and I said, I'm giving myself permission to never do this again. And I vowed that someday I would write parts for women that were real women, as opposed to what some man thought we should be. Have I succeeded? I don't know.

Meghan: Yes, I think we could all say yes, you certainly have done that. The moment that you write characters that give women the liberty to live outside of those boxes and to color outside of those lines a little bit, I think is when people feel seen.

Candace: Yes. It's not just I think that people feel seen. I think that's the way people really are. And, I mean, the reality is I when I was writing Sex and the City, if you look at the book Sex and the City, there are lots and lots of different types of women. But I mean, what Sex and the City really is, is they took the book and Darren Star put a standard TV template on top of that. We all know that there are, you know, more than

four types of women in the world. But on TV, there's this feeling that the audience can't keep track of all these different types of women. So lots and lots of women turned into four types of women.

Meghan: Interesting.

Candace: So, that's why you see the four types of women. Now, I think that maybe the four types of women are an improvement over what we used to have as a choice.

Meghan: Yeah. You know, we talk a lot about the nineties on this show because it was such a pivotal moment, in terms of pop culture and the news, and all of this framing of women, the way women were depicted. And so for you, I'm wondering, since your original column was started in the 90s, how did it all come to be?

MUSIC IN

Candace: You know, I wrote for women's magazines all through the eighties. I wrote a lot about relationships, sex, you know, and I really analyze it and I really analyze, like, why do we behave the way we do? And one of my theories, because I grew up in the sixties where, you know, again, women were told what your sexuality is supposed to be like. You know, you're only supposed to want to have sex with one person and you're supposed to want to just have sex with that one person for the rest of your life. And the women I know just they weren't like that. So my question is always. What is women's real sexuality when you take away the. I am dependent on a man aspect. Like what if women had their own money and they had their own power? What does their sexuality look like? It looks a lot like Samantha Jones.

Candace: You know, being single in New York in the nineties. And having a lot of women friends who were single and were not dependent on a man for whatever reason. You know, there was a lot of sex going on. And a lot of enjoyment of sex. And, you know, pretty much any of the cliches about women's sexuality, I found they were just not true. And that was really the impetus for writing Sex and the City. It was really to, you know, to explore. What women's sexuality really looked like.

Meghan: The reality of it versus this glossy - yeah, this glossier sort of, I don't know, pared down version of what it's supposed to be versus what it actually was. That's probably why it struck a chord with so many people, because you didn't have these flat characters. And I'm wondering now, as you're seeing, you know, the landscape of TV and writing has changed so much, which you touched upon, even just women being able to be more actively involved in screenwriting and more behind the scenes. What do you think? We'll continue to move the needle forward as we broaden female characters and have that. Be more of the role modeling that we see. How do we get us out of the place where those flat characters aren't the default and instead these more fully formed characters become the benchmark?

Candace: Well, I mean, I think that we see that, as, you know, women are telling their own stories. And also, I mean, I would like to say that we also see it on social media.

Meghan: Yes, definitely!

Candace: You know everyone's critical of social media but it is one of the few places where women can directly make money without having to go through a gatekeeper. And one of the things that's so interesting to me is, I mean, women are great entrepreneurs. And I think we see that on social media, you know? Somebody creates a little product and they put it out there and then more people want it. And they have a business.

Meghan: They have a business. Yeah, that's true. And I think well, you certainly know what it's like to go from not having a business to having an empire of sorts. I'm wondering What was that moment like?

Candace: You know, everybody thinks that my life changed. It did not.

Meghan: Really tell me?

Candace: I did not make a ton of money from Sex in the City.

Meghan: How does that make you feel?

Candace: Angry.

Meghan: Yeah.

Candace: It makes me feel angry. Yeah. And so that's, you know, I mean, that's one of the realities. So the fact of the matter is. You know, I'm fine. I'm okay. I'm you know, I'm doing okay. So I just keep working.

Meghan: What do you, what do you think that next thing is that you share with the world from your vantage point? Now, maybe...

Candace: You know now I'm a woman who's over 60, so, you know, that to me is that's really what I'm exploring but people are very you know, they're very reluctant to put women over a certain age on TV. I mean, that's still a big, big barrier. I mean, even when you have meetings with women who are. Over 55 or 60. They don't want to touch it.

Meghan: Really? Do you think anything will change about that ageism, because there is something so compelling.

Candace: I do. You know, there are more and more women between baby boomers and Gen Xers who are over 50 and over 60 and still have very dynamic lives and are doing things and, you know, are not going away.

Um, so, yes, I mean, that's it's really to me, it's. You know, it's about how, how do you live the second part of your life as a non-reproductive person. So, you know, now there's a lot of talk about menopause and this and that. Well, menopause only lasts for a year. So after that, you're post-menopausal. That's a very unexplored time.

Meghan: Oh, that'd be so fascinating to hear more about.

Candace: And, you know, for a lot of women, the message is so much about getting married and having children and taking care of children. But, you know, at a certain point, the kids leave home. So...

Meghan: Right, what is your identity without that?

Candace: Yes. What is your identity? So I think that that's really I mean, that's where I am right now, is exploring that time of life. It's an opportunity to, to do new things and explore different sides of your personality. I mean, I you know, we also live in a world where we don't want women to have too much. I mean, when I grew up, it was like, I mean, talk about archetypes. You could be the pretty one. You could be the smart one. The athletic one. The nice one.

Meghan: But the idea of them being all in one somehow is not possible. And that's the piece that I think we constantly try to, to break through. I don't know - how do you think we change that thinking, just as women, to get out of our own heads or get out of our own way?

Candace: You know, I think it's I do think it's being able to look at other women and seeing that they've done it and how they've done it – women who've broken the mold, so to speak.

Meghan: It might not be such a straight and easy road, but hearing that, that vulnerability, that, that is how we end up feeling connected. And I think it's much more aspirational than just seeing someone in a position of power and not really understanding that they, they, too, didn't have struggles.

Candace: Yes. I mean, it's – I think that's important because it's so easy to look at people and think, oh, god, you know, they've got it so easy and, and I have all these struggles and, you know, I'm never going to be able to make it. I'm never going to be able to get there. But, you know, it's all a struggle. It. It really is. It's just, it's a lot of hard work.

MUSIC FADES IN

And, I mean, there's a lot of rejection along the way. I mean, sometimes I think, like being successful is being able to deal with rejection and negativity and people saying, you can't do this and still finding that strength to continue on.

M: Yeah. And prove them wrong.

Candace: Exactly.

After the break, I dig more into this idea of discovering the women we want to be - and the human beings that we are, with my next guest.

Michaela Jae: There was a strong presence that I had that exuded through action and you know, for some people that may have possibly considered it over the top, which it was not, I was just extremely feminine, which was okay with me.

Actor, musician and activist Michaela Jae Rodriguez. Stay with me.

MUSIC OUT

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ACT 2

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MEGHAN: Welcome back.

So we've been exploring how women can break out of the boxes that society has created, and instead – just *be*. Whoever they are, however they want, free of expectations. And my next guest – well, she's one of the absolute best people to talk to for guidance on this journey...

Meghan: I don't know why it's not zooming in on me. So you can just - you see. You see my legs, but you can't really see my face.

Michaela Jae: A wonderful silhouette, if you ask me.

Meghan: That's very kind and very generous. I was going to come in here barefoot with slippers on. But I'm glad I put some shoes on.

Michaela Jae: Girl, listen, I'm over here without shoes. No judgment whatsoever.

Laughter

MEGHAN: No judgment – mixed in with a calm, very, very grounding presence: just some of the ingredients that are baked into the singular charm of the accomplished actor, singer, model, and trans rights activist, Michaela Jae Rodriguez.

Now, you may know her best from her historic performance on the TV show *Pose* – as the fierce ballroom housemother Blanca Evangelista...

Pose Archival

Blanca: *I loved my mother, but she wasn't exactly a great role model. She let my brother walk all over her. I always told myself I would be a tough mother when I had my own kids but I'm not so sure that was the right way to be. How do you do it? How do you support and challenge your kids?*

MEGHAN: This performance as Blanca earned Michaela Jae an Emmy Award nomination – the first time, by the way, for a transgender woman to receive one for a major acting category. And it also earned her a Golden Globe win. Another important first for her and for the trans community.

These days, you can follow her growing music career – or you can catch her as Sofia Salinas, a no-nonsense charity foundation boss, on the TV show, *Loot*.

Loot Archival

Maya: *Um, Sophia, were you wearing that yesterday? Did you sleep here?*

Sophia: *I was here all night but I definitely didn't sleep! Because I have no support and have to do everything myself.*

MEGHAN: But before all that – she was a theater kid... growing up in Newark, New Jersey in the 90s and 2000s... and she was known as simply MJ.

Meghan: You know, for you, one of the things I think is so interesting is as you've had this progression with your career and you were known for quite a long time as MJ Rodriguez, which is it true that was from Spider-Man?

Michaela Jae: Yes, it was from Spiderman, it was from my childhood days.

Spiderman Archival

Aunt May: *Peter this is Mary Jane Watson, Anna's niece. Anna is running late.*

MJ: *Actually everyone calls me MJ*

Meghan: And then now because as we all continue to evolve, it's Michaela Jae.

Michaela Jae: Yes. As a child, you know, you come up with nicknames, but you don't know how much of an impact they have on other people and also how people get stuck in that nickname. They get stuck in the name that, you know, they've been calling you. My mom used to call me "boomper" when I was a child. She still slips up and calls me it today, which I have no problem with, because you know who doesn't like being coddled by their mom?

Meghan: Yes, exactly. My mom still calls me Flower.

Michaela Jae: See!

Meghan: *Laughing* yeah.

Michaela Jae: Don't you love it though? There's still a little piece of like, awe mama.

Meghan: I do, I'll be a 41 year old flower. That's fine.

Michaela Jae: But yeah, I would say when I became a mature adult, I was like, okay the world needs to understand who Michaela Antonia Jae Rodriguez is. Also how do I let them know the full, well-rounded creative aside from the full name. And that was Michaela Jae. MJ is just a piece of me. Like, Michaela is all of me and more.

MUSIC IN

MEGHAN: This idea – this idea of *all of me*, as she says – genuinely that is at the crux of what we're exploring here today. Because what happens when we open up a woman's humanity, free her from the constrictions that society places on her identity, or on how she expresses her femininity, and on her ability to freely *be* herself... all of herself?

So, we started, back at the beginning: her childhood... a young person whose parents divorced when she was quite small... whose mom remarried the man she affectionately calls her quote "second dad" ... and who knew, deep, deep within, that there resided a quote "divine feminine creature."

MUSIC OUT

Meghan: You very, very clearly are a woman of intent and insight. If you at seven years old are saying you have this divine feminine creature within you, you can feel that, that's a very mature, insightful language at a young age. So help me understand what that moment is like then, when you're really starting to carve out this space and what that conversation is the first time with, you know, with your mom or your second dad, as you say, about this feeling. Can you take us back to that?

Michaela Jae: Yeah, well, believe it or not, at that time, my mom and dad hadn't been divorced and I hadn't really expressed to them verbally... my orientation, sexuality or identity at that moment. But there was a strong presence that I had that exuded through action and you know, for some people that may have possibly considered it over the top, which it was not, I was just extremely feminine, which was okay with me. And not to mention, I was always seen as, you know, a girl until someone had mentioned, oh, no. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

Meghan: What's the blah blah blah blah blah blah blah?

Michaela Jae: *Oh* you know, the blah blah blah blah blah blah blah.

Laughs together

Michaela Jae: It's them addressing the identity that wasn't really structured to me, and they saw it as a correction, which in my head I was just like, No, there's no correction here. The mistake you thought you made was actually the truth.

Meghan: How were you so clear at this age? That is wild.

Michaela Jae: I guess it was. The young ones around me too. When I was seven years old, in the first grade, I would always be bullied. But it never affected me because the bullying would be the exact thing that I was like, Oh, this is exactly what I want to hear. This is exactly who I've been. You're not fazing me. And I think it would make the bullies upset that I didn't fall or give in to it.

Meghan: Yeah. You didn't take the bait?

Michaela Jae: Oh no, I didn't take the bait at all because it was exactly what I was when they were saying, why do you sound or why do you look like a girl? I would say, Oh, okay. Well, that's because I feel like one and keep it going. You know, my mom never heard that, but the kids did. And I think in those spaces, when you're a child, we just are openly free and we say whatever we want and I was always rebellious and defiant at this point as a child. I went against the grain and I think that's what kept me at seven years old. But I hadn't mentioned it to my mom until I was 14, and that was in high school when I was able to actually have well-thought-out, you know, expressions.

Meghan: Yes.

Michaela Jae: Seven years old you're not really able to express that at seven, but 14 years old I was able to do that.

Meghan: Yeah so at seven, you have the feeling. At 14, you have the words.

Michaela Jae: Exactly. Exactly. And that's when it happened.

Meghan: So in those words. Yes. You sit down with her. What was that moment like for you — with your mom?

Michaela Jae: Oh, it was so scary. It was so scary because there's always this sense of...Will my parents discard me? Will I be displaced from my home because of who I am? Even though I knew my mother loved me to the moon and back, my dad loved me from the moon and back. And my second dad loved me. But there's always this tension, this scariness of what if? So I was thinking about that as well. And I cried and I just cried while telling them. And they didn't budge. [Laughs] They were like, Oh, okay.

Meghan: Really?

Michaela Jae: Yeah, it was wild. I had to dry up my tears of drama, I was crying so much, but they were filled with love and they cloaked me instead of putting me out in the cold or letting me stay out in the cold, they put a cloak around me and made sure that I was warm. And I think that just instilled even more strength in me. After I got the rite of passage from my mother and my second dad and also my dad as well. There was nothing that could stop me. Until my parents die. It's locked into my spirit. Until this day

there's no one or anyone that can really deter me from my goal or my passion or who I am. I always say this. They can state the quote unquote obvious as much as they want to. But. The fortunate part is that I'm still going to keep going. I'm not going to stop.

Meghan: Yeah, that's beautiful. I mean, one of the things that I think as all women we face is as you're getting older, you're exploring and starting to understand your sensuality, your feminine divine, your sexuality. Oftentimes it can be very much used against you. And I give the example of, you know, for a woman especially versus a man, a man, if he is a player or out having fun or whatever he's doing, it's often celebrated, even heralded. But for a woman, I don't care if she is perhaps the most successful woman in finance in her mid-fifties, I promise you someone will still go: Yeah, but she was such a slut in college.

Michaela Jae: Oh my god they will.

Meghan: It will stick with her

Michaela Jae: They will!

Meghan: It will stick with her like —

Michaela Jae: Glue.

Meghan: Yes. And I don't understand what it is about the stigma surrounding women and their sexuality, the exploration of their sexuality that is so much more vilified than for a man. And I wonder what that experience has been like for you, especially coming into your own and really understanding who you are, how you identify as a trans woman.

Michaela Jae: You know, I feel like a lot of women on all different spectrums of all different life, we have so many similarities and I can say that's one of the similarities that I share. It hasn't happened in the industry, which I'm thankful to, but in worldly circumstances it definitely has. And it's just, it's kind of disgraceful when you feel that.

Meghan: Yeah, what's happened?

Michaela Jae: There was one experience where it was literally an Instagram post and I posted a picture of, you know, me just, it wasn't topless, but there was a mesh shirt and you know, I freed the nipple. I felt liberated, not just to show, but just to feel artistic and feel creative in knowing that this is my body and not someone else's. And when I would read the comments, you know, obviously there were women that uplifted me because most women are like, yes free the nipple. We should be able to feel comfortable with our bodies, but when I would look at some of the comments of what men would say, they would go into my personal and I'm like, That's, one, none of your business. Asking about my boyfriends, how does that equate to you? And also, I mean, are you dealing with something within yourself as to why you have to ask me the question?

Meghan: Oh, yes. It's always a projection.

Michaela Jae: Exactly.

Meghan: It's always a projection. Oh, it always says so much more about the other person than it does about you.

Michaela Jae: Oh, yeah. And for me, I sh - I shut down, like, I just look like, oh, okay. I try my best to keep it moving. So this is what is traditionally obviously been taught to me growing up. But I always was scared of speaking or talking back to men in general, because I thought that there would be consequences or repercussions because I was outspoken or because I know how to communicate. It doesn't have to be forward. It can be as calm as I'm speaking now. Or it could be a tone, you know, different. But there was always that worry of like, oh my God if I speak, what are going to be the consequences to me actually expressing myself? Trans women are always wondering about that simply because of the lived experience that we have with men in general. So we simply just want to live and exist and move through the world, just like any human being should. But unfortunately, a lot of trans women are not allotted to have or be in the spaces like I am. I understand because I was there at one point in my life too, and it's just unfortunate that there's no spaces held for bodies like ours.

MUSIC IN

MEGHAN: So we've talked about this before on the show, but it bears repeating — repetition is recognition, as they say. So for this one what we're talking about is representation. How much it matters seeing people who look like you in TV, in movies, in all sorts of industries — it just matters so much. I mean it's how we begin to understand what's possible for our lives; it's how we understand what *spaces* we belong in; and it's how we come to feel *seen*.

And for Michaela Jae, this crucial aha moment of feeling seen came with none other than the Broadway musical *Rent*. I remember waiting in line forever to go and see *Rent* in New York. It originally debuted on Broadway in 1996, when Michaela Jae was just 5 years old. Written by the late Jonathan Larson, it's the story of young, struggling artists living in New York's Alphabet City under the shadow of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

And in its time, this was a master class in representation – especially for the LGBTQ community. And in 2011, when the show launched an Off-Broadway revival, Michaela Jae was cast as *Angel* – a character that some say was written as a drag queen; others say a transgender woman. And regardless, for Michaela Jae, this was the role of a lifetime.

And when she sang Angel's big introductory number — *Today 4 U* — you could feel it in her voice.

Michaela Jae Off Broadway *Rent* Archival

Angel: It was my lucky day today on Avenue A when a lady in a limousine she drove my way. She said, "Darling, be dear, haven't slept in a year, I need your help to make my neighbor's yappy dog disappear." This akita, Evita, just won't shut up... [FADE]

Michaela Jae: When it started out with Rent, I was just about 19 or 20 years old, so I was new to even -

Meghan: So young.

Michaela Jae: So, young. Just a little teen baby. In this show that I had dreamed about being in. When Rent came into the fold, I did see myself in a character and a lot of people had different descriptions of her, Angel. I saw the description of myself in this character who was this Latino, Latina character who was just free and of light. And I was like, this is what resonates to me and if I can do my job and display this part like how I need to it might do me some justice too, and help me out in letting the world know who I am. And as time went on, a year went past, it closed. I broke down like a baby because I thought no work was ever going to come after that, especially being a trans person, so as time went on and when the show closed, I took about three years of auditioning like a crazy person and figuring myself out and how I was going to let the world know who I already was and how they were going to have to just deal with it. Right. Because for me, I had already been expressing this feminine. Creature, divine creature, womanly figure from day one.

Meghan: So I wanted to come back to this idea of the divine feminine creature with Michaela Jae – because it reminds me of a speech that she gave earlier this year, when she was named as one of 12 women on Time Magazine's Women of the Year list. An incredible list of women who are working to build a more inclusive and equitable world. Let's just take a listen to a little bit of that speech that she gave...

Time's Woman of the Year Archival

"There are so many perceptions that I had to womanhood, right, and every girl does whether she's trans or not. There's a perception that a lot of young girls have before they become a woman of what it is to be and I thought it was, you know, being in this structure, being in this hyper-effeminate kind of vision for people to see in order for people to understand my womanhood. And as time went on I realized that that's not the case. It's what you go through life. It's the experiences you go through whether they're good or bad, and I feel like that has contributed to my art and that has contributed to my work. Now I don't feel like I'm in a barrier."

Meghan: Mm hmm. Yeah. Yes, exactly.

Michaela Jae: Thank you.

Meghan: And this is why I also wanted to know, for you personally, what kind of traits do *you* value when you think about women and how we move through the world?

Michaela Jae: Immense strength and more than anything, being resilient, I think. Women in general. We have so much on our plate. Not only just being women, but if we're of color, there's just another added layer. And then obviously if you're trans or a part of a different demographic. But resilience. The fact that we can. Even in the worst of odds, triumph is what womanhood is. It's what womanhood looks like.

Meghan: Mm hmm. That is so good. That's so good. And that's a perfect segue way, because it brings me to really one of the things that I've been asking anyone who joins me. The young version of you and if you had to choose three words to describe yourself when you were younger, what three words would you choose?

Michaela Jae: Energetic. Rebellious. And also convivial.

Meghan: Oh, great love of the word, too.

Michaela Jae: Yeah.

Meghan: And three words to describe yourself now as the woman that you are today?

Michaela Jae: Not as energetic, no I'm just kidding. No -

Meghan: Tired.

Michaela Jae: Imagine. Oh, tired honey. Um Oh.

Meghan: Yeah.

Michaela Jae: What would I say? I would say empowered. Triumphant. And enough.

Meghan: Ooh

Michaela Jae: That last one took a long time for me to get to, but now I can say it enough.

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Meghan: I'm so grateful for your time and getting to know you and I'm so far away from you, but I'm going to sneak up close so I can see my big old smiling face.

Michaela Jae: A virtual Hug

Meghan: Yeah exactly, give you a virtual hug. And hopefully we'll meet in person one day soon. Here we go I'm coming in

Michaela Jae: *Laughter* Hugs! *kissing noises*

Michaela Jae: Thank you girl!

Meghan: Bye

Michaela Jae: Bye beautiful

And of course, we couldn't end the show without hearing Candance's Three Words as well...

Meghan: What are the three words that you would use to describe yourself as a young girl?

Candace: Gutsy. Feminist. Smart.

Meghan: Those are great. Strong, strong. Young lady. And what are the three words you would use to describe yourself as the woman you are today?

Candace: Probably those same words.

Meghan: Hopefully one day I get to meet you in person soon. Thank you so much Candace. I really appreciate your time.

Candace: Thank you! Bye!

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CLOSING THOUGHTS

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MEGHAN: I find it so inspiring to listen to women who are clear on who they are, unwavering, not waffling, confident, in spite of whatever barriers they may have seen in the foreground. And as I thought about closing this episode and how I could just bottle up that feeling, that inspiring feeling of liberation when you shed all those fears of judgment and you sit in your authenticity. When you allow yourself to be human and to be. So, I thought, as opposed to continuing with my musings. It would be good to maybe surprise you with a guest. A final guest in this moment for this episode. And she's sitting right next to me right now. It's Miss Amanda Gorman. Amanda is going to share with us a poem, a piece of writing that she wrote that she felt is appropriate. And powerful for this very episode. Take it away, Amanda.

Amanda: There is a movement brewing.

We are the storm, the very form of change.

The way forward isn't a road we take but a road we make.

Forged forth by a future that is female.

We will not fail, we will not sway

For where there's will, there's woman

And where there's woman, there is forever a way.

MEGHAN :mmhmm. It's so good! I mean, did you guys hear that? "And where there's women, there is forever a way." Truer words have never been spoken. Thank you Ms. Amanda Gorman.

Amanda: Thank you!

MEGHAN: And thank you guys for listening. As ever, I'm Meghan.

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CREDITS

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