

MG: During the Troy Kotsur interview, obviously the name of Jay Dean Jones was invoked. That's a name that resonates big time with you and I and a lot of people who went to Westwood. And one of the things Jay Dean was famous for is the summer musicals that he would put on.

BRIAN: Right.

MG: One summer musical I remember, I wanted to be hanging out with the cute girls who were going to be in the cast of *The Sound of Music*, and so I showed up for the auditions saying to Jay Dean Jones, you know, just hand me a spear and let me stand in the back. I don't really want-

BRIAN: I love how you thought World War II was fought with spears.

MG: Whatever was the token, "I'll sweep up the floors afterwards." And so he said, no, dummy, the only way into this is by auditioning so go up and, oh, by the way you're going to sing a song. So, I'm up on the stage. Shepherd Auditorium. And the piano starts playing and I'm like, Ugh, and the problem is I'm on the wrong page, so instead of singing "You are sixteen going on-", I am singing "I am sixteen going on-" "Innocent as a rose" "Gentleman dandy, drinking" "What do I know-" And so Jay Dean Jones lets me go for a while because he's loving this, right? And he says, that's great, John. But we don't need you for the girl's part.

THEME SONG - IT'S ALWAYS COOL IN MESA.

MG: If I asked you in 2021 to name an Academy Award winner from Mesa, you probably would have broke the google machine trying. But go ahead and search it now. Type in "Academy Award winner Mesa Arizona". Go ahead, I'll wait. (Pause) C'mon, Boomer. (Pause) You got it? Am I right? Troy Kotsur, Mesa born and bred, just won the Oscar for best supporting actor. And you're about to hear from him. It's *Always Cool in Mesa*, Season 3, episode 2, Troy Kotsur. Once people hear this episode, I think Troy's career is really going to take off.

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MG: I don't always go out of my way to see the movie that wins the Oscar for Best Picture. But I did see last year's winner, *CODA*, partly because it features a Mesa boy who went to my alma mater - Westwood High School - I was all in for this one. For those who haven't seen it yet, it's the story of Ruby Rossi, who's a hearing child of deaf adults - a CODA.

Ruby's trying to balance her own dreams with the needs of her deaf parents. Her father, Frank, is played by Mesa's very own Troy Kotsur who, not so incidentally, won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. Troy still lives here in Mesa, so when the Oscar buzz finally settled down, we coaxed him to come to the Mesa Arts Center so we could present him with the key to the city. He graciously agreed.

Before the presentation I met Troy and his Interpreter, Justin Maurer, in the Green Room where Troy warmly greeted me like an old friend.

AUDIO CLIP - The Mayor and Troy hug followed by back slapping.

MAYOR GILES: Thank you. Thank you so much.

TROY (through his interpreter): Thank you. I feel so honored to be here.

MG: I feel like I know you so well.

MG: I work with Troy's sister-in-law so I get all the inside scoop. We immediately began talking about the downtown Mesa we both used to know.

TROY: What's funny is I was born in the former building. This used to be a hospital here where this building stands.

MG: I was born in the same building. It's still here. It was the Southside Hospital. It's now Benedictine University.

MG: We reminisced about Main Street back in the day, before light rail.

TROY: People hotrod ding down the road back in the day and the police chasing them down.

MG: When I asked if he dragged Main years ago like so many others, he said yes. His brothers did, too.

TROY: Ironically, they became firemen and cops.

MG: We had a very similar experience growing up.

TROY: We understand each other. When we get old we look back at all these memories and we have this mutual understanding. We were there.

MG: Why'd he have to get all nostalgic and sentimental right before his key to the city presentation? I have a hard enough time keeping it together at ribbon cuttings!

MG: (tearfully) thank you very much. Isn't this a great event? Isn't it fun to be in the Mesa Arts Center? And for something this special! I think this is going to be hard to top. Um, it might be one of the greatest privileges I have as the Mayor to honor people like Troy Kotsur in our community.

MG: I got it together.

MG: Troy is an accomplished actor and director, and as we all know, an Oscar-winning actor in the amazing film CODA. But that's not all. He was also recognized with a Screen Actors Guild Award, a Critic's Choice Award, the Gotham award, the Independent Spirit Award, and the Baft Award for the same role in CODA. And as we all know, the film won best film of the year, so really you can't top that can you.

(APPLAUSE)

MG: And so, without further adieu, I'd like to recognize Troy Kotsur with the key to the city of Mesa, for inspiring all of us to reach for our dreams and for your incredible accomplishments as an actor in theatre, film and television.

MG: As we got into the interview, Troy and I picked up right where we left off in the green room. He remembered his favorite ice cream shop downtown, also Dunkin Donuts...and a few other things.

TROY: And Del Taco. You know what I'm talking about, right?

MG: We've got some institutions in Mesa as far as restaurants go, Del Taco we've never listed so far. I was a Matta's guy, some people were El Charro guys. Do you remember those places?

TROY: Oh, El Charro, yes, yes, yes. That's a good one. I also remember that there was a bicycle shop.

MG: Pat's Schwinn.

TROY: Yes, that's the one!

MG: (to the audience) I'm sorry, guys, we're going to have a great talk, and we'll check in with you later. It could be Mesa trivia night.

TROY: Yeah, we're old farts now, so get outta here, we're just talking about history.

MG: Finally, we talked about the moment of winning the Oscar.

YOUN YUH-JUNG: Troy Kotsur!

MG: I told him how cool it was to be with his family and watch his Oscar acceptance speech.

MG: And we were blown away when you walked up to the microphone -

TROY: (audio clip from the Oscars) Thank you to my biggest fans, my wife and my daughter Kyra and my hometown of Mesa Arizona.

MG: You gave a shout out to your hometown of Mesa, Arizona in front of the whole world. None of us were expecting that.

TROY: Me either! Me either! I never thought it would happen to me, you know I was just doing what I loved from my heart, I didn't realize that it could lead to something that could actually affect the city of Mesa. I feel so proud.

MG: What is that like to go to the Oscars and then be there as a nominee?

TROY: It was overwhelming. It was too much visual noise, if you know what I mean. So hearing people experience loud noises, it's very distracting, that's how I felt being deaf. My eyes were distracted, and it was overwhelming.

MG: What is the first break you got to become a professional actor.

TROY: You know, I hate to say it, but it was CODA. CODA was my breakthrough, because before that, I was in a TV show called Criminal Minds, and it was a quite popular TV show, and I had a role and I thought that would be my breakthrough and that faded a few years later and on the theater stage I continued to perform and I thought I had a breakthrough and there would be great reviews and articles that would come out but not enough people really knew my name and didn't know who I was, so my best answer is CODA. It got me this Oscar and so now my world has changed.

MG: Was there a time, pre-CODA, that you started to think maybe I should hang it up and stop acting.

TROY: Absolutely. I was ready to quit. I was down to a bear thread. I just wanted to protect and support my family. And, really, deep down, of course, I loved acting and it was so hard to even consider letting go. But I had to think of my future. I was in my fifties. I was an old fart. I had to think of my retirement plan, right? And, so, then with CODA, it was my last shot. I didn't realize where it would lead me to, and we had success at Sundance and then our film was purchased by Apple, and, oh my gosh, everything it led to from there. It was amazing. It was an amazing journey, and it's amazing I'm here today. I love you all.

(APPLAUSE)

MG: So let's talk about CODA because this is the best picture of the year. This is a picture that's going to be very historic.

TROY: It was historic because, I really look at CODA - there's been a long history of something that was missing. It was this gap, right? And there was always segregation and separation between hearing and deaf people. And so with CODA, CODA portrayed the hearing audience members who can hear and communicate verbally, and then on the flip side, she was also a representative of the deaf community because she could communicate in sign language and that intersection finally existed and this CODA character bridged the hearing and deaf communities. And I was, like, it's about time. Finally, hearing people are able to enter our culture and as deaf people we're able to enter hearing culture and it was something that we were waiting for as a deaf community for such a long time. So it really increased awareness and it was a big step forward for us.

MG: I've heard Troy talk passionately more than once about the importance of Apple releasing CODA with "burned-in" titles. Not closed captions that are added later by a third party, but burned-in titles like you see in so many films foreign films.

TROY: Finally, they're able to watch sign language on screen with subtitles, with sound, and you can have a hearing and deaf audience react simultaneously together. And so that's what I was waiting for so long, ever since the silent film era. Ever since Charlie Chaplin. Do you remember Charlie Chaplin?

MG: Of course.

TROY: And, so then, they'd have subtitles on the screen just for a moment, right? And so they'd tell you what was going on even without sound, and so, back then the deaf audience members were able to enjoy silent films and then when the talkies came in we were segregated as an audience and marginalized from the experience and we were always behind and trying to catch up and waiting for access. Finally, we had VHS tapes and closed captioning and so on, and so on, and so on. Until here we are today.

MG: I asked Troy to tell us about his life growing up as a deaf child in Mesa.

TROY: My parents didn't realize I was deaf until I was ten months old. And they were shocked. They didn't know what to do and they took me to a doctor. We were so lucky that this particular doctor recommended that my parents learn sign language. And my parents were, like, okay, okay. And they put me in a school for the deaf. The Phoenix Day School for the Deaf. And so I started to go to school there in kindergarten and throughout high school.

MG: I heard that when you were maybe thinking about becoming an actor as a young child, there were a couple of people who really had a big influence on you. One was a Mr. Tom and the other was a Mr. Jerry. Did Tom and Jerry have an impact on your life at an early age?

TROY: Oh, yes. And you know why?

MG: Tell me.

TROY: So, Tom and Jerry didn't have any dialogue in the show. And I felt a connection with them. It was their facial expressions, it was the fight scenes, the eyes bulging out, the tongue sticking out! Oh, it was great. It was so visual. So as a young deaf boy I really enjoyed watching this cartoon. So don't forget that back in the 70s there wasn't any closed captioning. Absolutely none. And as I was telling them, I realized these kids just had this reaction and this light in their eyes it was like this electricity. And these reactions, they really made me happy, and it fed me, that energy, and it made me feel good and so I learned I really enjoyed acting. And that's where my history as an actor began.

MG: A short time after his Tom and Jerry routine on the bus, there was an event that forever cemented his love of performing.

MG: One the screen earlier we were showing a YouTube video of a pantomime that you do where you're the bowling ball and then you're the basketball. Did you start doing that back in high school?

TROY: That's an interesting question. So, when I was 12 years old I was at the Phoenix School for the Deaf and there was a theater troupe of three deaf actors and three hearing actors visited our school. And it just so happened that that night my parents were in the audience. And I was watching as well. And the guy on stage did the bowling ball act for two or three minutes and I was laughing and my hearing parents were also laughing. And I saw that all these deaf and hearing audience members were laughing simultaneously. So afterwards I walked up to the deaf actor, his name is Dennis Webster, and I said are you deaf? And Dennis said yeah! And I said can I act?

And he said yeah, of course you can. And that really increased my hopes. I really felt a spark with that conversation with Dennis Webster.

MG: Well, that sounds like it was a pretty significant experience where you had a very talented deaf actor look you in the eye and say, yes, you can be an actor as a deaf person. I mean, you now are that person to countless numbers of young deaf actors. How does that make you feel.

TROY: You know, I think about the past, and I think about what happened to me, that Dennis Webster inspired me. And now these kids are looking at me as a deaf actor and I completely get it. I completely understand. I have to tell them the same thing. You can do it, too.

MG: When Troy became a Freshman he decided to transfer to a public school.

TROY: I thought I really had to learn to socialize and interact with hearing people, so I really wanted to be who I was. And, of course, there were barriers and misunderstandings and communication breakdowns but it really taught me a lot.

MG: You played on the basketball team at Westwood. I think it was probably Buddy Doolen, your coach?

TROY: Yes! That was my coach! Oh, I loved Buddy. Can I tell you a story?

MG: Please do.

TROY: So, when I was on the basketball team, after a few weeks I taught some of the players some dirty sign language. And so all of the players were thrilled to learn all of these vulgarities in sign language.

COACH DOOLEN: I do remember that. That was a little behind my back.

MG: That's Coach Doolen. He retired more than twenty-five years ago.

TROY: And it just so happened we were playing a game, and one of the players got fouled. And he blew up and he signed a dirty sign to the referee and the referee didn't know what he was saying, but all of the players on the bench knew exactly what he was saying and started laughing hysterically after this foul, so my coach was kind of stupefied and he looked at my team's reaction and was like, why are you guys laughing? And so the next day he did his research and he realized that I had taught my team these dirty signs and so he punished all of us and we had to run these suicide drills, full-court suicide drills in less than a minute. When that was done, the Coach points at me and he goes, Troy, you're staying right here. You taught them dirty signs, you have to run another bunch of suicide laps.

MG: (to Coach Doolen) Did it have the desired impact?

DOOLEN: No, I think they still did it behind my back, but it was good for the team. Kept us all loose.

MG: Looseness. That was something Coach Doolen valued.

COACH: The best player and the best athlete was not always the kid that played all the time and was the star and was in the paper. Sometimes the best athlete was the kid that created the best chemistry for the team.

MG: And that was Troy. He was a chemistry guy.

COACH: He made everybody so loose. And we all struggled with sign language and trying to communicate and it became, you know, we joked around and had a great time. And that was important for the kids that actually got most of the playing time.

MG: Coach Doolen and Westwood Basketball gave Troy what he was hoping to get from public school. Integration.

MG: You made an effort, you and the team-

COACH: We all tried. Yeah, we worked hard on our sign language. I should have stayed up with it, but I just didn't. I remember some of them but I don't remember the bad ones, but Troy could refresh my memory.

MG: I'll bet he could.

MG: Troy loved basketball, but it remained a distant second to his first love. Performing.

TROY: That was the big reason why I wanted to transfer to Westwood high school. Because at my school for the deaf they didn't have a drama program. And I was a young kid. I really had that passion. I really wanted to act.

MG: Was Jay Dean Jones the teacher?

TROY: Yes, Dr. Jones! Yes, that's right. That was really my first drama teacher, Dr. Jones.

MG: And it was Jay Dean Jones, incidentally, my old drama teacher as well, who convinced Troy to do his bowling ball routine for a talent show. It was a hit. But not his only one in high school.

MG: People are still talking about graduation speech that you delivered in 1988. And that was a particularly tough time in your life, right? Because shortly before that your father had his accident. Can you talk about how that impacted your life?

TROY: So when that happened, my father's car accident, I gave a speech, and my brother, Brian was in the audience and he filmed my speech with an old VHS camcorder. And so, I signed my speech and when it was over - the reason he filmed it - he wanted to show - my father wasn't able to attend because he was in the hospital. And so my brother Brian brought the VHS tape of my speech to the hospital and I'll never forget that night. And so my father was in a wheelchair and they brought a TV with a VHS player into his hospital room and we all sat together. And my father was able to watch my speech. And I never saw my father react like that. He just broke down into tears and was balling. Obviously, he was so proud. And I completely understand. I think I explained enough.

MG: It bears mentioning that Troy Kotsur's father, Len, was Mesa's Police Chief, and by all accounts, a great one. Troy paid a moving Tribute to him at the Oscars.

AUDIO CLIP

TROY: My dad, he was the best signer in my family, but he was in a car accident and he became paralyzed from the neck down and he no longer was able to sign. Dad. I learned so much from you. I'll always love you. You are my hero.

MG: Tragically, Troy also had a younger brother who survived an accident but needed complete car for the rest of his life.

MG: Do you think going through those tragedies as a young man, did that contribute to this resilience that has served you so well in your acting career?

TROY: That's very true. You know, after my brother and my father had those accidents - my brother was only four and he missed his youth. You know, before he was able to run and play with the ball and play in the playground and then he drowned and he was just bed-ridden. He could do anything any longer. I was seven years old and I was watching my brother go through that and it really taught me so much, and I struggled. I really felt torn. And throughout the years I grew, and I grew to accept what had happened to my brother and accept him for who he was, and then my father was in his car accident and there was another disabled member of our family and my father could no longer sign after his accident. And I remember this one specific night, where my father asked me, hey Tory, do you mind taking me to see Brent? And I said sure, and so I drove my Dad to see my brother Brent in the hospital and wheeled my father in and my brother Brent was lying in a bed and was sitting in his wheelchair and I'm sitting in the room. And my father waved to me. He was trying to touch my brother Brent. And so I picked up my brother's hands and I put it in my brother's so they were able to touch. And at that particular moment, I saw that these two members of my family were disabled and their hands were touching each other and mine as well. And I was feeling so torn at that moment and looking at myself, I was like, I'm going to cry about being deaf? You know, my father and my brother and everything they had to go through, they had such courage. And that's why I wanted to dedicate my Oscar to the CODA community, the deaf community and the disabled community because I understood through my personal experience what many of these people had gone through.

MG: Your father was a great man. The city of Mesa owes him a lot. I assume he was very practical man. He was a police chief, for heaven's sake. Was he worried when you told him, Dad I want to be an actor when I grow up? Did he try to talk you out of that?

TROY: He was very concerned. So, my Dad always called me a risk taker. And looking back, I understand why. I've struggled to pay the bills. I struggled to support my family. And so, I got it. My Dad was right in many ways, I have to admit. But I'm so glad that I was able to accomplish winning this award and I wish my parents were here to see it. But even though they're not here, after I won the Oscar, I went to the cemetery and I brought the Oscar and I showed it to them.

MG: At the end of the evening Troy addressed the audience, many of them members of Mesa's deaf community.

TROY: I'd just like to say thank you everyone, all of you for coming tonight. And thank you, Mayor Giles for inviting me here. It really does mean a lot to me. And I never

thought that my journey would lead me to be here on this stage today. And so it's been truly an amazing journey for me. And I'm so grateful to you, Mayor Giles, and to all of you. Thank you for the key to the city. I'm going to try to break into a bank with that key.

MG: There's Troy. Keeping things loose. Coach Doolen wasn't able to be there that night, but I told him about it when we spoke.

MG: After the recording -

COACH: Right.

MG: He stood up on stage, there was a long line and it took forever because he would talk for ten or fifteen minutes with every person who stepped up on the stage. Every one of them held the Oscar. Every one of them got their picture taken with it, and we had to pry people away from him because the line was so long to talk to him. So what you're telling me about what he was like in high school really rings true. He's still that way.

COACH: He got a long with everybody. Everybody.

MG: In other words, he's the same old Troy. He gets along with everyone, keeps things loose, has great chemistry, and, yes, his language is still a little blue. But he's the same in the most important way. Watching him hang around and talk with all those people - laughing and hugging each one - I could see that he's still the same kid in his brother's hospital room years ago - the kid who asked himself, "Am I going to cry about being deaf?"

That night was a master class in gratitude. Thank you, Troy.

AUDIO CLIP - Troy's Oscar acceptance speech

TROY: I just want to say this is dedicated to the deaf community, the CODA community and the disabled community. This is our moment. To my mom, my dad, and my brother Mark, they're not here today, but look at me. I did it. I love you. Thank you.

For our friends in the deaf community, there's a link to the entire transcript of this episode posted in the show notes. Spread the word. Also, you can see the entire interview with Troy Kotsur on Mesa's Channel 11 YouTube channel.

And finally, if you're enjoying the podcast, please like and subscribe. And share it with a friend.