SOS#10: Can Art Fix a Broken System? With Meghan Best

Meghan Best: 0:00

being a teacher right, and just being angry all the time like where's the money for this? And like why are they still in jail? And da, da, da, da, da. And then you go to law school and you realize like, oh okay, here's like a three-step process to like access the money that we need or to work around something to get. It's like so much more specific problem solving and fact-based problem solving than my prior 33 years, which was like emotional-based problem-solving.

Marcus Arredondo: 0:29

Today's guest is Meghan Best, whose career has spanned education and law in the fight for social justice. She started as a high school teacher in Brooklyn, later becoming dean in New Road School in LA. After law school, megan worked at the Children's Defense Fund, california, where she helped write SB 439, ending the Arrest of Children Under 12. In this episode, megan shares the challenges of working with incarcerated youth, how her experiences shaped the writing of her short film what Freedom? And her journey from teacher to lawyer to writer. We also dive into the realities of the juvenile justice system, the emotional toll of her work and how becoming a mother influenced her creative process. Let's start the show.

Marcus Arredondo: 1:10

Welcome to the Scales of Success podcast, where we take deep dives into the mindsets of game changers, visionaries and mavericks, exploring what success means to them and the pivotal choices that shape their journeys. Whether you're in the arena yourself or looking to elevate your game, you'll find inspiration and actionable insights from stories of innovation and resilience. I'm excited to welcome you to another enlightening conversation on Scales of Success. I'm super excited to have you on. Honestly, I know we hang out frequently and we dabble a little bit on this subject, but I'm very excited the idea of what you've done, from coming out of college to going to law school and then writing this script, which is a special script.

Marcus Arredondo: 1:55

I see why it's gotten the momentum it has. It's a really interesting zigzag, if I can put it that way. That's sort of where your trajectory is. Interesting zigzag, if I can put it that way. That's sort of where your trajectory is. But I I sort of want to start on the script and I want to start with something specific, which is what is your relationship to japanese anime? Do you have any background?

Meghan Best: 2:18

manga. So my relationship is. When I was a high school teacher it was very popular because it's just for background. I taught the lowest level readers in high school. I would teach ninth and 10th graders who were reading below a sixth grade reading level. Manga is such a way to get them excited about books and then sort of segueing into more wordy books. But that was always like such a gateway drug to like

instill an excitement for reading. And then I sort of carried that through with my clients when I would represent juveniles accused of crimes or juveniles who were incarcerated. Because you know again something to do. It's gateway to reading more.

Meghan Best: 3:04

And this particular book a lot of my clients read. I had actually never heard of it until one of my clients introduced me to it and he actually asked me to buy it for him. I'd never heard of it before. So I would say like my personal relationship is not strong, like I don't read it a lot, but this particular story is really fascinating because the idea that these people are subject to a greater power you know these Titans right and so they are not in control of their own destiny and they still feel some agency to fight back, even though their lives are not established in any way to fight back. So it's really more about that particular story and the idea that kids really like it. I don't know that was kind of it, but what's funny about that is like it's such a tenuous thing. And then when I met the person who would direct the film, he's obsessed with that story and he's watched every television episode and he was like asked me all these deep questions but and I was like like I can't really answer these.

Marcus Arredondo: 4:08

I've read like a few here and there so that's sort of where I want to go, because I didn't know about the specific story you're talking about is attack on titan and I had to do a little research on it and because I look, I'm a layman when it comes to this. But briefly, and I'll do a very butchered version, I'm sure there's going to be comments about how brutal this is, but it centers on the civilization inside of three circular walls and this seems as the last of humankind is known by the inhabitants. The walls protect the inhabitants from gigantic man-eating humanoids. Uh, they're comprised of, uh, pure titans and titan shifters.

Marcus Arredondo: 4:53

We don't need to go into too much detail there, but there's a lot of symbolism in that story that is really interwoven throughout the what Freedom script that you wrote and I just sort of for people who are soon to see it and hear about this, I wonder. I have a lot of questions about it and I think that serves as a good springboard to understand a little bit more of your background and where you came from. But I'm wondering if you might share with us the general thesis behind what freedom, what freedom's communicating and what the genesis of it was.

Meghan Best: 5:33

Yeah. So I think a lot like Attack on Titan, right? When you look at it from one perspective, it's these huge walls that are protecting people, and then the other perspective is they're locked in, right. So it's like I feel like that's a lot of the sort of injustice of our society in many ways, right, the patriarchal forces that we say like, oh, you're better off if you go to this juvenile detention center, you'll be better, blah, blah, blah. But it's actually just stripping young people of their humanity and their choice and their ability to overcome that restrictive lifestyle that they're so accustomed to in their formative years, right.

Meghan Best: 6:17

So I think that, like, that's also true of education to a certain extent, especially in America, and especially what we're seeing now in America, right. Like, I mean, I taught in New York City, so we don't really deal

with censorship as much, but think about Florida or other book banning states where it's like this is for your protection, but in doing so we're actually limiting the ability of these young people to explore in any path they might want to. So I think I've always just really butted up against that. I don't know. It feels very natural to me to always question things like that, since I was really young and I think that my professional choices have reflected that. And then I would also say that my professional choices have sort of multiplied that fervor as the years went on.

Marcus Arredondo: 7:06

So I think that's where I'd like to sort of dig in a little bit, because your representation of juveniles in this circumstance is really unique. It's such a small sliver of humanity that has insight into this unique perspective of what is entailed, what these young people endure where they're coming from. I think there's a lot of inaccurate assessment of these individuals and there's a lot of bullhorny type of pundits who like to speak about this or that without having any real context and from your perspective, being on the inside. Let's just start with. What do you think most people from the outside making sweeping judgments miss? What do you think we don't see firsthand that you were inside the trenches on?

Meghan Best: 8:03

Like you mean about young people or about the institutions?

Marcus Arredondo: 8:08

The institution and representing the young people in those institutions.

Meghan Best: 8:12

Well, I think one thing about the institutions are that they don't help. And I think that the general population thinks that they're serving some sort of valuable purpose. And I mean, I guess if you value incarceration on its own as a form of punishment or removing people from society, then yes, they serve that purpose. But if you think that juveniles are being rehabilitated in these areas or in these institutions, then you're wrong. These are not like rehabilitative and if anything, they're dangerous. And you know, let's not even talk about incarceration but just once you're arrested as a young person, your risk of being rearrested or reoffending increases exponentially. So think about, once you're incarcerated and you're arrested as a young person, your risk of being rearrested or reoffending increases exponentially. So think about, once you're incarcerated and you're learning that way of life, then your risk of being reincarcerated also exponentially increases. So there's no like, oh, you're better now you're out, right? So I think that's a big misunderstanding. Is that these actually function to make society better or make young people better? They're dangerous places and oftentimes they're making life way worse for these young people and their families.

Meghan Best: 9:32

And then, in terms of young people, you know, I think there's like a lot of well, they did the crime right. So, like they did the crime, why should they not be incarcerated? That's just the way that Americans look at crime and punishment. I mean, there's a lot of reasons why I disagree with that, and I think even the most progressive thinkers about you know, which I don't claim to be, but like the most progressive thinkers still are like well, we can't do anything else because nobody will invest in anything else, like this is just like

there's no breaking this mold. Um, and I think there's a lot like, let's be honest, like there's so much racism.

Meghan Best: 10:19

Almost every young person incarcerated is a person of color, especially in Los Angeles County, and I think when you're a nation built on slavery, like it's really hard to break out of that cycle. And I don't think that you know people think, oh well, we're 200 years removed from that, or we're less than 200 years removed from that, but so the things must be different and it's like no, no, no, like those things are so pervasive that I think you look at young people who are incarcerated and there is the first instinct of most people in America is like well, they did something to deserve that. You know, I messed around when I was a teenager, like I never came close to being arrested, you know. So I don't know what that deserving thing is or where we as a society decided that, like, young people are deserving of these harsh punishments, these draconian punishments. This isn't how every culture looks at young people. This is just how our culture looks at young people, and you know it's just really depressing.

Marcus Arredondo: 11:22

Well, so you know, these are sort of generally broader concepts and I want to bring it down sort of into the real world because you know your main, your protagonist Kadeem.

Meghan Best: 11:33

Yes.

Marcus Arredondo: 11:34

In the script is presumably modeled after a or several Individuals you represented as a social worker, as a legal representative of these juveniles. Can you? And if it's, I think it would be interesting, because you never provide that context on Kadeem what put him in there in the first place? And just for the benefit of those who hopefully see this when it finally comes out. But he's at a juncture within his sentence of determining what his next steps are and he's presented with an opportunity to use his own agency to determine that fate and it really tests what his decision-making powers are and where that comes from.

Marcus Arredondo: 12:21

I won't sort of give away that component because you do an incredible job of moving this sequence through in a very short order through pretty interesting dialogue, not just between the social worker and Kadeem but also between him and the officers within the detention center. But I'm wondering if you might give us an example, if not Kadeem himself, but who that represented. What puts them there, where do they come from and what are you seeing through the months and weeks and years of representing these kids? What are your takeaways in that experience?

Meghan Best: 13:02

So this one was pretty specific because I had a lot of clients that we call dual status, which means they were both in the juvenile justice system, but they were also in the dependency system, meaning they don't have family. So they were either in foster care or maybe just bouncing around group homes. And I bring that up specifically because these young people tend to be lost in the shuffle the most because and

this was sort of it's not explained fully because it's too niche, but like, my idea for Kadeem is things I've seen with multiple clients where if you get into a fight in a group home, right, like I think you're an only child, right, but like if I got into a fistfight with my brothers growing up, my parents took care of it. But like if I got into a fistfight with my brothers growing up, my parents took care of it. If you get into a fight at a group home, generally the police are called or a probation officer or something that is way more punitive and I've seen that that's the worst. And I've seen that because that cycle plays out over and over again. So that was sort of what I had in my mind. Probably an assault, you know, a fight that kids get into. It's pretty common for teenagers to fight, but when you don't have parents and you don't live with family, the fight comes with much heavier risk. And that's kind of what I was thinking with him, so just kind of showing that like it's really hard when you're without options to break out of this cycle. And that's why he's kind of like he's been in there and he's also been to group homes and he's also been to this ranch which is sort of like they have these working places and he knows that like if he goes to a group home, the chances of him getting in more trouble increase because it's just so hard to like get in there and feel comfortable.

Meghan Best: 14:46

So I've seen that a lot and I would say with those particular kids these are the types of hearings we would mostly have. I mean, the juvenile justice system in California is pretty regulated in terms of like timing. So like once you're arrested, you only you have to be heard the next day, you know. And then they set you up on a schedule where it's like then the next week you can plead or whatever, and then it keeps going. But it's all codified in the law.

Meghan Best: 15:13

So unlike, say, adult court I'm sure you've heard horror stories of people being locked away in Rikers Island for years and never even being heard on their case, right Like that doesn't happen in juvenile court. So these types of things is mostly what kids will have to do is like where's their placement gonna be? And if they get there and they get bounced out, they're back in the jail again and then we have to go through this process again of finding them another place to go. So that takes a long time and that's kind of what I was highlighting. He just doesn't have anywhere he can go. There's just no spot to land.

Marcus Arredondo: 15:49

Well, and so you sort of talk about. He resists the idea of going back to the home. He'd rather be and this is such a butchered layman approach to explain this but he wants to be considered an adult and be able to go, survive and exist as a full-blown adult. The challenge that the system and the representative alludes to is that the skill sets may not be there at this point. Yet and I keep, you know, inherent in what you're discussing, the idea between punitive and rehabilitative. Those opposing thoughts seem to keep creeping into my mind. For somebody who's never seen a juvenile detention center, how rehabilitative is it? Are there mechanisms that instill skills that allow these individuals to come out stronger or in anywhere, more capable than they went in, because presumably they're going in? You're going in at 15, you're going into 13,. You're talking eighth grade education, maybe a fifth sixth grade education, and in this case he's in a foster home. So what happened? What landed him in the foster home to begin with?

Meghan Best: 16:57

Could be anything. I mean, I've met formerly incarcerated youth who were in like a food fight in their cafeteria and the cops were called and they were arrested and that's when, like everything started. You know, I had a client who was in the foster care system since he was three. His mom was murdered and

you know who else? There's no one else to take care of him. You know, there it could be a number of things, but it's mostly either death of parents or abdication of parenthood in some way, either like drug addiction, or they're incarcerated themselves, which is pretty common, or something happens that takes them out of their home and then, once you're out of there, it's a lot easier to get picked up by the probation department in Los Angeles County.

Meghan Best: 17:41

But the school question is a really good question because obviously I'm very passionate about that as well and it's just like it's sad. You know, it's like there's like a lot of you know sheets or like online programs. You know because you think about the challenge of like differentiating all different ages, all different accomplishments you know great accomplishments and they just kind of decide to do the least possible they could do. I once experienced this group home that was in like the San Gabriel Valley and they had their own school and it was on a property of another school, but it was a trailer in the back corner of the parking lot and it was like cause you're, that's not equal education, right? That goes against Brown versus Board of Education. Like you can't have separate. It's inherently unequal, as we know from the constitution. So they like had all these worksheets and this guy who barely talked to them and like that was their schooling, just because they lived in the group home.

Marcus Arredondo: 18:45

So they were formerly incarcerated you know, it's just like gross and the worst possible scenarios you can imagine cover all of it, yeah, but, but it's, it's sort of the gift that keeps taking right, because you know and it's unfortunate that this is sort of my brain does, but you know, I've seen family members fall victim to alzheimer's and just you know aging adults whose future is narrower than their past and with a more myopic view with it.

Marcus Arredondo: 19:18

It breeds a lack of optimism and hope for what you can accomplish, because when you have hope you can remain inspired, you can get up and do more things. But this sounds eerily similar in that you know what I am effectively doomed into this system where, even when I'm released at 18, not only am I lacking in the skills to be effective at competing against others in obtaining employment, I'm already sort of behind the eight ball because I've got this history behind me, not to mention the emotional scars from having to navigate this on your own and without any emotional support. You know the idea of being isolated for the bulk of your formative years seems almost irreparable in recovery. I'm curious if you've maintained contact with others who've gotten out of the system. Are there success stories? How do you see some of those futures playing out?

Meghan Best: 20:30

Yeah, that's a great question. And first of all, yes, your analogy with Alzheimer's I've never heard anybody say it but yes, that is like a really beautiful analogy Sad but beautiful, and it's just sort of. It's exactly like that. And also I would add to that like think about people who love someone who's suffering from Alzheimer's, or people who love someone who's incarcerated. It's sort of also it has a ripple effect, right, it limits what your experiences are going to be with that person as well. You know, like a mother whose child is effect, right, it limits what your experiences are going to be with that person as well. You know, like a mother whose child is incarcerated, right, you can already see the future with your child narrowing and that's sort of heartbreaking in its own way.

Meghan Best: 21:08

But so there's really good organizations in Los Angeles who do a really good job of supporting people who are formerly incarcerated, especially youth, and some of them are even run now by formerly incarcerated and system impacted youth, and so they do a lot of great work, like in the political sphere in Los Angeles. So, like when I worked at the Children's Defense Fund, we worked with all these system impacted youth who were really leading the charge in terms of like coming up with policy ideas, lobbying for those ideas, organizing people to show up to you know, comment at board of supervisors, meetings, everything. So I've seen this happen, right. And then, once they have the confidence of like, okay, well, I just did this, I can, you know, I just did X and now I can do Y, and you can see the ripple effect of like, how success impacts and community impacts their future. So it's not like hopeless, right, but it's a challenge. But yeah, I've stayed in touch with people like that and it's really nice to see.

Marcus Arredondo: 22:17

Well, and I sort of think about momentum right, Because you know, for better or worse, we're all products of our genetic lottery and when you have some momentum with, just you know, a couple of parents that are supportive of you and loving, you end up generating momentum from that right. I mean, that's a good central place to get going. And so by the time you're 18 and you're presumably starting to develop your own acuity as an individual, you've garnered some successes, you've garnered the momentum of that achievement. In many ways, these unfortunate souls seem to be walking out of here with starting from ground zero, where others have had some form of momentum. In that vein, I sort of want to talk about your momentum because there is a through line through some of your history, right, and I'll let you deduce this where you see fit.

Marcus Arredondo: 23:12

But a couple of facts that I think are interesting, more than a couple One you're raised on a nursery on Long Island not in Long Island, but on the line, Yep, that's right. Uh, your dad was special ed teacher, Correct? Um, you ended up jumping colleges a lot, but ended up at Hunter where you were the minority for the first time. Uh, you ended up working in an automotive high school in Brooklyn and then eventually you ended up going into law. Is that a fair general trajectory? Yeah, Talk to me a little bit about what stands out in sort of tell us a little bit about that journey. But I am curious landing in representing, as a social worker, juveniles?

Meghan Best: 24:01

Well, I was an attorney, not a social worker.

Marcus Arredondo: 24:04

Well, fair enough. Okay, but my only point in representing them you get a law degree, you can go off and make a very good living.

Meghan Best: 24:14

Yeah.

Marcus Arredondo: 24:15

But you chose not to do that. That's where I'm going, right, because you chose to do something that aligned more with what I would assume you're more purposes.

Meghan Best: 24:25

Yes.

Marcus Arredondo: 24:26

Is that a fair assessment?

Meghan Best: 24:27

I only went to law school to do this.

Marcus Arredondo: 24:29

OK, so talk to me about that. That was the only reason I went. That's why that's what I would like to hear about.

Meghan Best: 24:41

So I think, ok, this is my parents. You know a lot of people. Their parents are like you could be whatever you want when you grow up and like I definitely live that life. But my parents were definitely like you can be a teacher when you grow up, you will be a teacher when you grow up. Every my brothers work in schools. They're teachers. Like everybody's a teacher, because they're just like why would you do anything else? Like you know, that was it, that was the plan right. So I went to Hunter. I became a teacher and I worked in New York City public schools, which I wasn't really thinking I was going to do. And then here I was, but I wasn't thinking I was going to do it because I had no idea what I was going to do.

Meghan Best: 25:14

Quickly it becomes so obvious how the you know how incarceration, arrest, all the trauma that is wound up in that impacts student learning. Like it was a shock to me. I didn't really know anybody who was like arrested or incarcerated when I was a kid and then here's like young people talking about it all the time and I was just kind of I was shocked. You know, I started teaching when I was like 21. I was like three years older than some of my students and you know I learned so much about how that impacted their reading level. You know their attendance, which really impacts their reading level, just everything was all bound up and as I progressed, you know I was a teacher for 10 years, I was also a school leader, I was assistant principal in the South Bronx and then I was a Dean in Santa Monica and during all of that I kind of was like, maybe if I can keep kids out of jail, then we can increase their educational attainment.

Meghan Best: 26:18

You know, and that was really what it was, was just sort of another angle to attack the problem, but it, I mean, it's too big of a problem, like. But that was my thinking, that was what motivated me to do that. I

wouldn't have gone to law school, like for any other reason. That's what happened. That makes sense, do you want?

Marcus Arredondo: 26:38

to hear a specific story. Absolutely.

Meghan Best: 26:41

Okay, so I keep thinking about this story as sort of like a defining moment. But I had this really awesome kid I won't say his name, we'll just call him DB and he was so annoying but so fun and like, passionate about learning and was at school every day. He was the first kid there. Just like you know, you never know what the first kid's there, if they're just like trying to get out of their house or if they're like just excited to. You know, it's probably a combination of the two, but he was just sort of a very memorable student out of the hundreds of students and one time he missed like four days of school, which was very out of character for him, and I was really nervous and like after three days I started calling his mom and finally she picked up and she was like he was arrested and I was like, like for what? You know, how is that even possible? And I was like why didn go get him?

Marcus Arredondo: 27:38

and how old at how old is he at this point?

Meghan Best: 27:40

16. He was 16 and she was like I'm not a citizen so I don't think I can go get him out. And I was like no, you can like that's. But she had no idea and she was worried that if she went and got him they would be deported. And you know, she just had no idea and he had never been in trouble before and this was all like. So then he comes to school the next day and he is like he's really smelly, like which was also unlike him. He had pretty good hygiene, like very upset, and as soon as he got into the class, just like was crying, you know, because she left him in the jail for four or five days. He was just like, he was shook, you know, and it completely changed him, you know.

Meghan Best: 28:27

He eventually found himself again, but I would say for the next like month or two and this is like a strong character boy like for the next month or two he was just like you know, wouldn't really talk, didn't want to be called on, didn't want any attention, you know. And I was just like you know, wouldn't really talk, didn't want to be called on, didn't want any attention, you know, and I was just like this is so oh, and what he ended up doing that got him arrested in the first place was like he and his friends were throwing eggs at each other. They lived in a project, so like they were in the yard, which is, like you know, public property. So again, my analogy if they were living in a house with their own backyard throwing eggs at each other, nothing would happen. But he was arrested for like vandalism and you know something, assaults, you know, which is like 16 year old boy, basic stuff, right, and I don't know. That was like the beginning of for me, like maybe there's some other way to like help this reading problem.

Marcus Arredondo: 29:22

So bring me into this. So why were you representing him at 16?

Meghan Best: 29:25

I wasn't. I wasn't representing him. I was his teacher. He was in my class.

Marcus Arredondo: 29:29

Got it and that's the triggering point that wanted, that made you want to get into law.

Meghan Best: 29:33

Yeah, that's why I was like maybe, yeah, that's when I really started thinking like there's another avenue at this. And I don't know, I just always felt so disappointed in the like involvement of their representation, which now I understand was really unfair. Like now I realize, like how much is on like the public defender's plate and like everything they're dealing with. But at the time I was like who's more important than my students? Like who's more important than my students? Nobody's more important than my students. Like why is this happening to them? And I was like outraged, you know, and that's good, because that was like what catapulted me to do this.

Marcus Arredondo: 30:09

but you know, then I learned like it's just the same mess, you know, just a different skill set, I guess did you realize at that point what I would imagine, the emotional weight of what you would ultimately end up doing in representing them?

Meghan Best: 30:28

So I didn't think it would be very different from the emotional weight of the students that I had in my classes and I think I was right. I think it was the same amount of emotional weight. It was a little bit more bullshit Like. It was a little bit more dealing with so many people Whereas, like as a teacher cause I like accepted my responsibility for their like progress and reading to be like it was like paramount to me I was like crazy about it because to me it's like this is the number one divider right. It's like if you can't read at that level you're automatically disqualified from so many things you know.

Meghan Best: 31:11

And I took it very seriously, as seriously as I take with the freedom of a young person. So I think it was as heavy. They were both very heavy. But that one was also being an attorney, was also annoying too, cause it was just like DAs are so annoying and, like you know, so many more people involved that you have to manage, which, when you're a teacher, you kind of just deal with, like your principal and your students and their parents but it's parents there too, I don't know but same my mom was a teacher and reading was something that was just drilled into my head and I'm grateful for that.

Marcus Arredondo: 31:50

I became a better reader. But a few things about reading, and I think you focus on it, because the opening scene is in a library and a lot of kids are not reading, but there's a couple that are, and that reading is the portal to another life. It allows you to experience other forms of empathy. People who read more tend to be more empathetic because they can see different perspectives. They also wire their neurons differently.

When you're teaching, what did you find to be most effective? It seems like motivation is probably where you need to start right. I mean that into more educated, educational, driven curriculum.

Meghan Best: 32:45

Well, I was very lucky with like, a wonderful mentor who's still my mentor today and he lives in LA now too, which is so great, and he was like, so generous with like, with not only himself and teaching us how to be better teachers, but also so many interesting trainings we went to that helped cultivate all this. I had no idea, right, I learned so much just from my principal and my assistant principal, who really taught us how to do that, and then you sort of get creative with each individual student based on their interests, right. So then you're, you're more equipped with all these tools. At the time we were practicing these reading strategies which I think now are like passe. So now we're like oh no, everybody's moved from like that sort of balanced literacy model to like a phonics model, which we didn't focus on that much, but I did a lot of like sight words because my students were so low level.

Meghan Best: 33:43

But basically I would say like definitely focusing on interests of students and then finding ways that they can connect to stories that don't seem like they would immediately be interesting to them. You know is all about making connections, and that would be really satisfying because you would see them like oh okay, make the actual connection. I mean, that's what teaching and learning is all about is, like you said, wiring those synapses, and I think that I was just really lucky to land where I did with the staff that I did, because everybody was so knowledgeable and passionate and willing to like train and send us to training.

Marcus Arredondo: 34:26

So talk to me a little about you. Don't just get up and say I'm going to go to law school, there's some prep work that goes into it, and then you actually have to go and then you got three years of the books pretty hard. Yeah, I want to sort of hear what at that point you had had a professional career. What hold are you at this point when you're going to law school?

Meghan Best: 34:46

Well, I graduated in 2017. So I was 35?.

Marcus Arredondo: 34:54

Something Okay.

Meghan Best: 34:55

So I went when I was 33. I was definitely the oldest person in my class and how did that feel? Um, crazy, really crazy. It felt really weird, you know, because I don't I mean, I still don't feel like I'm as old as I am, right, so, like being 33, you feel so young.

Meghan Best: 35:15

And then you're like hanging out with 23 year olds every day and you're like, oh right, right, right, you know very different kind of cool because it was like, on one hand, sort of alienating but on the other hand,

like I had all my friends already so I didn't need to like. But my classmates were so sweet and I'm still friends with some of them and they were very supportive, but I was not the best law student. But I say this to anybody it's like such a privilege to go to law school and if you ever can like take the time and you have the money, you should just go because it rewires your brain in such a fantastic way and I just like really enjoyed that part of it, to like look at the world completely differently than I used to look at the world.

Marcus Arredondo: 35:59

Give me some examples of that.

Meghan Best: 36:01

Okay, great example, being a teacher and just being angry all the time like where's the money for this and why are they still in jail? And then you go to law school and you realize, oh okay, here's a three-step process that to like access the money that we need, or to work around something to get it's like so much more specific problem solving and fact-based problem solving than my prior 33 years, which was like emotional based problem solving, like just like pure instinct and emotional problem solving. And now I feel like I'm much more like oh yeah, I could see why that's a problem. Here's some ways we could think about looking at it. You know, it's just like a much more it.

Meghan Best: 36:46

For me, it was so calming and it put my brain. It made my brain way more efficient than just sort of like constantly spinning out of control. So I really liked that. Part of it was really confused by law school, because I was so like smart up until then and then I was like not the best at law school and it really like messed with me. But whatever, you just have to graduate.

Marcus Arredondo: 37:12

You know, you don't have to like, you don't have to have all A's, you just have to graduate, which I I was going to ask that because you're out of academia, you're not a student for at least a decade and you go back and the coursework in law school is significant, it's enormous, right, and the amount of reading and the pressure I mean, especially as an adult you have to sort of get your endurance back. I would imagine Was it challenging during that time frame to recommit to why you were doing it. I mean, to some degree, I think the fact that that was your purpose, the fact that you wanted to go back and fight for these kids, was maybe what allowed you to continue on. Because without something like that, I would suggest if I started law school at 23, I would get through it because I needed to get a job, but if I had had some life experience I would have needed a stronger pull than just going to law school for the sake of getting a law degree.

Meghan Best: 38:13

Yeah, I mean the first year you're so slammed you don't really have time to think about it, and I was just like I just have to do this because I committed to it and I wanted to see if I could. And then, starting in the second year, I was participating in and one of the reasons why I picked Loyola Law School is they have a really solid juvenile justice clinic. So starting my second year, I could. All my classes were to do with that. I was certified by the state to actually represent clients in court, even though I was still in law school. They call it certified law clerking. You're under the supervision of.

Meghan Best: 38:49

So almost immediately starting my second year, I had all these opportunities to do the work that I wanted to do. So that really kept it alive for me, because even while I'm doing all my coursework, I'm also working on someone's case, and so it was like I knew I had to do it because he was relying on me or whatever, and so that really helped. But, yeah, I needed that. And then you spend your summers clerking, clerking yeah.

Meghan Best: 39:16

And the first summer I did at the Inner City law center, which is like skid rows, only legal representation, and that was really cool. And so I was almost was like maybe I just want to do this Cause, like obviously in Los Angeles, like housing is so crazy too, you know. So I was sort of like pulled in that direction. But then when juvenile justice started, the clinic started, I was like okay, okay, I'm back, like that's what. But I continued to volunteer for, um, like they used to have clinics once a month at the inner city law center. So I would continue to volunteer once a month during law school to like provide, you know, free housing advice to whoever, and that was really satisfying. But, um, then I worked at the San Francisco public defender's office has a designated juvenile unit and that's where I worked my between my second and third year and that was like the best. And so that was sort of like exactly what I wanted to do and it was just like the culmination of everything coming together. It was really great.

Marcus Arredondo: 40:19

You get to law school. Now you're doing exactly what you wanted to do, right, and what's your experience like, and how long were you doing this for before you started having thoughts about writing?

Meghan Best: 40:32

So really it was just I was doing it until the pandemic and then it was very strange, I had just left the Children's Defense Fund and started working at the Legal Aid Foundation because they were looking for someone to run like a housing clinic in the basement of the Englewood Courthouse and I was like, oh, this is kind of I was still into that from working at the Intercity Law Center and I also thought of it as like I was kind of missing, like teaching, and there was something like vibey about that, like all right, we'll be working with people and preparing them for the courtroom themselves, and I liked that you know like teach a man to fish mentality of the job instead of just always relying upon other people to represent you and whatever. So I had taken that job like two weeks before the pandemic hit, but then because it was in a courthouse and all the courthouses were shut down and then also I was pregnant, which was like I couldn't reconcile. Like before the courthouse just shut down, I was still required to go to work every day and I was like I don't want to get this disease nobody knows about and maybe disease my long sought after child right. So I was like, so I quit, like, and then they shut the court down, and so then I was just like pregnant during the pandemic, the world shut down, it was like a time off, and I was like breathing for the first time, like napping for the first time, and I started having all these, like I was journaling a lot because I was like, oh, I have all these stories that like I don't want to lose them, and what if, like, something happens?

Meghan Best: 42:13

I want, like, my child to read these stories, you know whatever. And then, when she was born, you know how it is like baby sleep all the time. So then I was like not pregnant, I felt so much better, she was born and I just started writing, was like not pregnant, I felt so much better, she was born and I just started

writing like I wrote a novel, a play and this movie, so, which is all sort of their own subject that I'd like to dig into.

Marcus Arredondo: 42:31

but what made you choose this movie as as sort of a launch pad? How did you start to consider floating it around for something more than just on paper sitting in your own files?

Meghan Best: 42:45

I mean it just I don't know belongs in the world. Like it's just so moving to me and it's which sounds really weird to say about something you've created, but like it really feels I want other people to see it, I want other people to know, and you know it felt the most urgent, I guess, to get out of the files and and share with people.

Marcus Arredondo: 43:10

I also see it as the easiest.

Meghan Best: 43:12

To me. This is like a false sense of confidence, but like because I know so many people who work in the film industry, it felt like, oh, I could do this. You know, whereas novel, I don't feel like I have that understanding of that industry or whatever. So it did feel like the easiest hurdle too, even though that's ridiculous. I understand that objectively. But given my friends and whatever, I was able to just feel like, oh, I think I can make this happen.

Marcus Arredondo: 43:42

I'm not sure I understand why you think that would be ridiculous, because if you've got contacts you start with what you know, right? I mean, that seems to make sense.

Meghan Best: 43:51

Yeah, I think it's just like go ahead.

Marcus Arredondo: 43:54

I was just going to ask. So what was your next step? I mean, when you started coming to the thought that, look, this is something I need to put out there. This has merit to it, and I think the world should be exposed to the story. Where do you? What's your first call? How do you start putting that together?

Meghan Best: 44:10

So my first call is my best friend, whose name is Jess Kelly, who is casting director extraordinaire, and she is just like you know, she knows everybody, she helps make movies all the time. She does TV shows too. And I just asked her, like you know, is this something, Is this anything, or is this like embarrassing? Luckily she's my best friend, so I was like 12 years old, so I could like trust her with this, and she was like I really like it and I think we should make it. She's always open to like producing something. So I was like

okay, how do we like make it? How do you do that? And she was like well, first I want to introduce you to my friend, Paul James, who is, um, he's an actor, but he's been dying to get into directing and since this is a short film, I'd met him over the years but hadn't't really like spent so much time with him, and so I sent it to him and said like I hear you want to get into directing, do like this script. And he was like I love it, let's talk about it.

Meghan Best: 45:13

So then we met with Jess.

Meghan Best: 45:17

I was like immediately into it because I had kind of known him enough that I felt like we had like a really easy back and forth and you know I didn't really want a situation where I was just like here's my script, Like it's so personal to me and if it's done wrong I would be really mad, because it's so often I feel like young black teenage males are portrayed in such a like disrespectful way and I was like this can't happen with these boys, Like I love them and let's make sure this is like done right, and so I couldn't just hand it over.

Meghan Best: 45:48

And so then we like worked on shortening it a little bit and you know he asked me a lot of questions about you know, we sort of like came up with another draft of it and then just started showing it to producer friends of hers and Hungry Bull they produce a bunch of indie films and some feature films Loved it and they produced it like pretty quickly because they wanted it to be done to submit to Sundance. So we're still like we have like a final cut pretty much tonight. We should be getting it and we're submitting it next Friday, which is crazy because we just shot it in july. But that's how it all happened like before we knew it. They came on board in may and we shot it in july that's incredible.

Marcus Arredondo: 46:33

Yeah, I don't think that I've ever heard of a story with that quick a turnaround yeah I mean maybe a testament to how moving the script is itself. I'm curious how much it changed from the original to what it is now, and sort of the back and forth between you and the rest of the crew.

Meghan Best: 46:50

Not much changed at all, just the scene with the lawyer was much longer. It's already way too long and in like our editing we've already cut a lot of it, but it was even longer and that's pretty much. It Like choice of words here and there. Even longer, and that's pretty much it like choice of words here and there. And no, I always knew what the story was like in completion. I was not really trying to change that much of it. Like we had gotten a lot of feedback that like the ending should change, and I'm like no, that's the whole point. Like, if you think the ending should change, this is not a movie. And so I was like really happy that the director and everybody who read it was like on board with the ending. It was kind of like the you know, it's like who's Jon Snow's father, mother, like if you don't know, you're not really included in this. Yeah. And then I had like I had really have you ever read the fortress of solitude by jonathan letham?

Meghan Best: 47:46

no so I mean, I don't want to talk too much, but basically another like really great story of like two young boys growing up in brooklyn and they have there's a lot of like uh, supernatural elements, like magic elements, and when I was first like thinking about attack on Titan and you know, I kind of wanted like there to be a sort of magic to Kadeem, like when I know if he is like, for example, if he's climbing a fence, he like can fly over it or like just to sort of like. And that's the only thing that like never really came to fruition. I think that's kind of fine. I think it's fine without it, but that was one idea that like I liked and Paul really liked, and we kept thinking about how we can make that happen, and I don't think that's going to happen, but that was like it's really the only thing that I feel like, oh, that could have been interesting to explore, but it's a short film, you don't really have the time for that.

Marcus Arredondo: 48:39

What's your experience been like? Sort of seeing your baby outside of your control to some degree, or to a large degree, because once you mean you're not directing it anymore, uh, the producers get involved and are notorious for changing a number of things. Maybe that didn't happen here, but you also had to just be prepared for that potentially to happen. I'm'm just what's your sentiment, what's your take now, getting to this point? Obviously it hasn't been released yet, so there's a whole future that you can't speak to yet, but up until this point, what's this experience been like?

Meghan Best: 49:17

It's been really cool because I kind of went in like all right, all these people know more than me about how to make movies, how to make movies people want to watch and I really wanted people to watch it. So I was like I'm going to be open to any suggestions that make this highly watchable. I don't want it to disappear, Right. So I think that's been really helpful because it's sort of removed my emotions from it. I'm not like. I mean, yesterday we had sort of like a very frame by frame feedback session and you know I was very nervous that like a very important part the white boy handshake would end up being cut and I was like we can't, we can't. It was like the only time I felt like no, we have to do this. And for now I think it's still in, but like I don't know that it'll forever make it. But I think I just tried to like enjoy it as much as possible because it's such an amazing experience and I don't know if I'll ever get it again.

Meghan Best: 50:18

And you know, just, it's scary, but it's scary in the best way and I think, because I fully trusted everybody involved, it was like they're never going to do anything cheap with it, you know, or anything. They totally understood my point about like really respecting the circumstance and and it's so clear from when you watch it how much everybody respected the circumstance and that's really like that was my, you know, bottom line. I feel like it was met and anything else. I feel like if it's going to make it more watchable, okay right. So I just feel like it was an open experience. I wasn't nervous about other people unless they were going to screw it up. I'm more nervous about like I don't know. It just feels so surreal. Still, it's hard to like imagine it being watched by people other than those that have only been involved in it.

Marcus Arredondo: 51:16

Well, and that's sort of what I'm most interested about, because you wrote this as a means to capture these stories and then this story came out and surfaced to you as among the more important ones, and I'm wondering if your perspective on what the future holds for this story. You know, not maybe even specific to Kadeem, but the story behind the story. Has this changed now that you're seeing? I mean, this went from something inside your head to now potentially being inside, you know, in front of the eyes of

many, many different people. Are there goals that are changing? Are there, you know, green lights in front of you that you haven't thought of before, that are starting to present themselves? How is this metamorphosis occurring? Real time?

Meghan Best: 52:15

Yeah, I think. So. I think that spending so much time focusing on it in, like, leading up to the shooting of it, I was really like it's sort of it's a little bit dated at this point because so much has already changed in the juvenile justice system, but this is like from when I was working there, let's say, 2016, 2017. So some has changed. Like, in fact, we were able to shoot at a former detention center that, like, I used to have clients at, because it's empty now. So there's stuff that's already changing meta, right, but I was really missing the work.

Meghan Best: 52:48

Um, like, I was really thinking about like all right, I think I'm gonna go back into it when this is over, because I really miss it. And then then we shot it and like being on the set and like you know, just sort of like the insane creativity and like skill that I've never seen before, it was just like, oh no, no, no, I'm like definitely gonna do this again. This is way more fun and like what a different adventure, right, like just feels like to. I mean, I don't personally have like major goals. I think it's a perfect short film. I like love it as a short film, but like if something were to happen, like I can see other stories that could come out of it or make it richer or bigger, but I also have, like other stories I would also like to tell so, but I would say in real time, it's inspiring me to keep writing more and not inspiring me to go back to working as, like, a juvenile defense attorney.

Marcus Arredondo: 53:49

Something I find in a lot of achievers is that there are opportunities presented to themselves through intention or circumstance that speaks to them such that they end up pursuing it further, beyond what some might just sort of allow it to. You know, pass through. And two adjectives continue to come to mind as we've been going through this. One is educator, the other is advocate, and alluding to sort of what you were saying back when you were a teacher nothing is more important than these kids, but how can I maybe affect more change? And what I find interesting is that you went into the legal system to do that and now you're landing in sort of an entertainment world where that bullhorn can actually be even louder, in a way that you've never been able to accomplish that without having gone through these sort of different iterations. And I'm wondering, sort of going through that process and with the theme of advocate and educator, how has that shaped your being a mother?

Meghan Best: 54:50

when, like surface level, it seems like I'm kind of all over the place, right, like oh, she was a teacher, then she went to law school and now she's trying to be in the movies, like what's wrong?

Meghan Best: 55:10

But it's like a very clear through line of like a values based life, right, that, like I believe in something is right and something is wrong, and like everything that I've been doing so far has been walking in the same path. It's just been a creative way of getting there. And that makes me feel good because I feel like my daughter will have a clear understanding of those things, because and you know my husband who

works in basketball, but we met teaching at the same high school in Brooklyn, so it's like we also share those like very strict sort of justice, inclusion, kindness, empathy, and also like not lazy, you know, like not just acknowledging that these things exist but trying to work to make them better. And I feel like that makes me feel like a good mother. If I could instill those things in her, you know, and the fact that like I keep coming across these, to like express myself in these ways, I feel like she will too.

Marcus Arredondo: 56:10

What a great answer. I did not expect that to be your response. I think that that was a lot more all encompassing than I expected.

Meghan Best: 56:18

I'm curious.

Marcus Arredondo: 56:20

Not that I don't know what I was expecting, but that was. I think that was a really good answer. So what's? You alluded to? Some more writing. I'm curious what do you think? I'm not holding you to it, but what are you passionate about doing next? I know you mentioned you had a novel. You had some other stories get that in the world.

Meghan Best: 56:47

But now I'm also like now I've got this like movie bug and I have like a couple ideas, but they're all funny, I think, which I'm like. I I think I'm funny, but I don't know if that will like translate, so I don't know. I'm gonna start writing a few and see if any like have a flow to them. But yeah, um, I think I'm gonna finish this novel. It's almost done. I'm almost done with the second draft. That's why it's been. I'm almost done with the second draft. That's why it's been taking so long.

Meghan Best: 57:07

It's like the second draft is really tedious. You know, like I added a cat, so now there has to be like a cat in every scene and I have to go, you know. But it's a fun. It's like a murder mystery, it's not. It's not serious like the movie is. I kind of want that to be in the world too, because it's really fun. It's about a teacher, which is cool. And then I think I'm going to start these scripts that I have One I've kind of already started, but it's about basketball wives and Judd won't let me, but it's funny.

Marcus Arredondo: 57:38

So I'll start to wrap this up. But you know, the creative process is very easy to and the creative process is very easy to. I think people think creatives just flounder around and let inspiration strike. But I'm curious what's your day-to-day like? What's your discipline, your system, the drive to go through a second draft without an editor by the way, there's no deadline that's pushing you to do this. What is your system that keeps you sharp and pushing day to day Like wake up, go to bed. What happens in between?

Meghan Best: 58:11

Well, like right now like nothing, like I wake up and I like get my daughter ready for school, drop her off at school and like work out for an hour or two and then like, eat lunch, maybe do grocery shopping. You know like I'm not doing anything right now, but when I am in a disciplined mood I wake up, work out and write for two hours and I like to write somewhere where I can eat lunch so that if I'm still feeling it I can keep going and then if I'm not feeling it, I can go home and eat lunch. So that's been that that has. What worked really well for me in the past was just like find somewhere. I like different places, I like to switch it up because I think, like watching other people is really fascinating, and so that's really two to three hours a day, you know four days a week. And then that was how I was able to get like all this written and it was really like I would do like a word goal. So like, say, I would that day I would pick a thousand words and if I only was able to write like 500 words, then I would just like free write. My, a friend of mine who teaches writing taught me this. He's like just make a goal of 20 minutes and just write whatever comes to your mind, and then I would just do that for practice and then the next day I would come back and like see where I picked up.

Meghan Best: 59:30

But I have like a, really, you know, I think all of my like professional and even like growing up with like the responsibilities I had growing up in a nursery, I think like there's not, my brain doesn't function in like well, I'm not really done. Oh well, you know what I mean. There's no like it's like no, I have to finish it. And like I oh well, you know what I mean. There's no, like it's like no, I have to finish it. And like I also am like trying not to be as competitive as I used to be, but I'm still like pretty competitive with myself and I'm like well, you said you were going to finish this novel. Go finish this novel. You know, tiffany, you know what I mean. Like you said you're going to do it, is it? Uh, how do you divvy up?

Marcus Arredondo: 1:00:12

between writing and editing.

Meghan Best: 1:00:14

I just write through and then like go back and do the whole thing.

Marcus Arredondo: 1:00:19

Are you doing it all on word? Are you using it?

Meghan Best: 1:00:21

I was using um. I took this like UCLA extension class how to write a murder mystery and the teacher recommended what's it called the weird Scrivener, somewhat cumbersome after a while, and I wrote the movie on word and now I just finally got final draft. So I've been loving that and writing on that and then I think I'm just going to write the like I'm going to finish this second draft in Scrivener, cause I have all my notes and everything there, and then I think I'm going to go back to word for the book.

Marcus Arredondo: 1:01:03

I think we'll wrap this up with this last question what's on your mental diet? What are you reading? What do you? What podcasts are you listening to what? What's what's motivating you? What's keeping you inspired and driven?

Meghan Best: 1:01:15

Um well, I just read the like over a thousand word um Barbara Streisand autobiography and I listened to it because she reads it and that will fuel me for years. But it did ruin my podcast diet Because every time I was listening to anything, I was listening to Barbara and it took months to listen to it. It was it's an over 48 hour audiobook and it was so great. It's like one of the best books I've ever read. I was always like mildly obsessed with her, but now I'm like I'm all in. She's fabulous, oh my God. So I just finished that. And then I read the Miranda July book about like have you heard about her latest book? It's kind of like a woman's midlife crisis. She like lives in LA, she's a create and that was just so like I had to stop in the middle and take like a week off Cause I was like having like a I don't know identity crisis.

Meghan Best: 1:02:11

And then I went back and it's just like so funny and smart and inspiring, just like to be able to write like that. So that's been really huge. And then I another thing that I did which has really changed everything is I went back to subscribing to the New Yorker physical because we had like cut that out. You know you get behind when you have a kid and stuff, and so we just were reading it on our iPads and now that it's back physical, I've been reading it every week and it's just like the best.

Marcus Arredondo: 1:02:41

Yeah, there's something special about the New Yorker. Yeah, how can people get a hold of you and what type of people do you want to hear from?

Meghan Best: 1:02:47

Cool people, only Anybody really. I mean, I love talking to like educators and lawyers and writers and I'm on LinkedIn M-E-G-H-A-N-B-E-S-T and when is when do you hear back? When you're submitting to Sund Sundance this Friday, which would be the, are you the 30th or the six? And then I don't know when we hear back. I assume in December, because it's in January. So like it's a pretty quick turnaround, but I don't know, I don't know how. Like I think they get like 30,000 submissions or something. It's crazy well.

Marcus Arredondo: 1:03:23

I really enjoyed the script. I wish it well, I think, whoever does see it. I'm excited to see it. I don't know what the final product looks like, but the words were moving and it was informative while being entertaining. So I really appreciate you being on. Thanks.

Meghan Best: 1:03:42

Thank you.

Marcus Arredondo: 1:03:42

All right. Thanks for joining us on another Edge West Capital production of Scales of Success. If you found today's episode valuable, subscribe to the podcast and our newsletter at scalestofsuccesspodcastcom, where we'll share even more inspirational content on growth and resilience.

We've got more incredible stories from independent thinkers and achievers who are challenging the status quo and actualizing what once was only the seedling of an idea. If you know someone who's also committed to uncovering what frameworks drive progress, consider sharing and help us spread the word. Until next time, I'll leave you with the words of Lao Tzu the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.