

EPISODE 286

[INTRO MESSAGE]

[00:00:34]

FT: Welcome back to So Money everyone. Thanks for joining me. I'm your host Farnoosh Torabi. Well ahead of introducing today's wonderful guest I have to quickly share with you the charity fund raiser and competition that's going to be going on all month here at So Money, the entire month of November, in tandem with a charity fund raiser/competition going on with Joe Saul-Sehy'ss podcast. Stacking Benjamins

To tell us all about that, I brought on Joe and Joe, here you go, take the mic, you invited me on to this little fund raiser of yours and I am excited but also a little nervous.

[00:01:10]

JS: Farnoosh, I'm way excited that we're doing this together, we can raise a bunch of money for charity. And I love this, at the end of the year with Thanksgiving, for people in the United States, we end the month of November with Thanksgiving. And I thought, "What a great way for our community to help another community that might need it."

So we are going to be raising money for the Texas 4,000, which is a 4,000 mile bike ride that University of Texas students take to raise money for cancer research and cancer related causes. I know that they give a lot of money the M.D. Anderson Hospital, one of the premier cancer treatment clinics in the United States, in Houston Texas and then they also give it to worthwhile research or facilities around the nation.

We're going to be raising money at Stackingbenjamins.com/texas4000. It's cool because our organization Farnoosh, has a lot in terms of where the money goes, a lot in common with what you're raising money for. Talk about that for a minute?

[00:02:10]

FT: Yes! Well thank you that was a nice transition. So I have chosen, your team here at So Money has chosen the largest student-run philanthropy in the world near and dear to my heart as well because I was a part of this when I was in college. It's the Penn State IFC Pan Hellenic Dance Marathon. It's affectionately known as THON and it's a year long effort to raise money and awareness for the fight against pediatric cancer.

It's raised over \$125 million for the Four Diamonds Fund at Penn State, Hershey Children's Hospital. Next year's THON, 2016 is what we are fund raising for now and that will be taking place February 19th through the 21st. It's a 46 hour dance marathon, I did it and I survived. It was life altering but of course it's for an amazing, tremendous, and important cause.

Thon.org/somoney is where you can go to contribute. I know it's high season for canning and this is a way to join in on the fun, anything you can do, know that it will be well spent. Over 95% of funds go to the families.

[00:03:18]

JS: That's so great. And the rider that we're riding for, who is riding in the Texas 4,000, her name is Shelby Schreiber, her father was a single dad raising her Farnoosh and when she was in high school, he started feeling bad. Went to the doctor, it turned out he had terminal cancer and he passed away when she was just in high school.

Here she is without a dad and now she decided she's going to ride this 4,000 mile bike ride in honor of him. They spend no money on the bike ride. All the food along the way, all the housing along the way has donated too. So I love these organizations but, Stackingbenjamins.com/texas4000 and I hope together we can raise a lot of money.

[00:03:54]

FT: I think we will. Thanks Joe.

[00:03:56]

JS: Thank you!

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:04:00]

FT: Alright, now on to today's guest! If you're a dog lover this show is for you, including my husband Tim who has been begging me, "Please, can we get a dog?" And he is converting our son as well, making sure that he is very comfortable around dogs. Every dog we see out in New York City, make sure to stop, pet, say hello. Evan's getting very used to the idea of having a dog as a friend, so I think I'm getting out-numbered. It's gonna happen soon for us, and I'll keep you guys posted!

But in the meantime, today a show dedicated to dogs out there and dog owners, dog lovers. Elias Weiss Friedman is the star, or camera man I should say, behind the insanely popular blog and Instagram account, maybe you're following him? The Dogist. Shares daily portraits of adorable dogs out and about on the streets to over one million followers. It's become such a hit since first launching in 2013, that the idea also translated into a new book. It came out just a few weeks ago, it's called *The Dogist: Photographic encounters with 1,000 Dogs*.

After graduating from Boston University in 2010, Elias moved to New York City where he worked at a major brand strategy agency for two years until... dun, dun, dun! He was laid off! Hey, it's a good thing. During this time he was inspired to be involved in a business venture that was more creative and authentic, so he decided to combine his two passions once and for all; dogs and photography. And from there the rest is history.

And of course I have him walk me through the steps, things don't just manifest, you go after them! And so some takeaways from our interview include making a great living as a photographer, how to really differentiate yourself, the power of Instagram and how it can actually build your business. As I mentioned, Elias has over a million followers, but he started with just zero. And why dogs? I mean I know they're cute, but why not cats? Why not babies?

Here is Elias Weiss Friedman, the Dogist.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:06:05]

FT: Elias Friedman, welcome to So Money. The Dogist, my first photographer on the show, very excited to have you. Welcome!

[00:06:13]

EF: I'm excited to be here.

[00:06:13]

FT: Now Elias, we're gonna talk about all the exciting things that are happening for you this month, namely your new book this month, "The Dogist", which is coming out this month, photographic encounters with 1,000 dogs. We are big fans of your work at the So Money headquarters. My assistant is back, Sophia came to me and said, "We've got to interview Elias." At her previous job her whole team would follow you on Instagram, where you've got now over a million followers.

So let's, I'd love to start — there's so many questions that I have! But I think my first question is, photography; how did you know this was the path you wanted to take? I understand this wasn't necessarily a main focus for you growing up, it was really just a hobby. So at what point did you know that, "I wanna do this," and why?

[00:07:03]

EF: Yeah well you know, it was not until recently that I knew that this was the path that I wanted to take. I grew up with a dark room in the house and it was always a hobby. My dad did it, so I was noodling around with cameras. But I didn't see myself, you know, I come from a family of

physicians and I didn't see myself becoming sort of an artist or a struggling artist. I wanted to do something, at least on top of mind was more conventional.

But I moved to New York after school and didn't really know what I wanted to do. I started working at a brand strategy agency, and after two years I learned a ton about marketing and how to create a brand. After two years I was let go as part of a big lay off, so I had this opportunity to sort of get back into that mindset of like, "Well now I can explore some of this latent potential that I've been building up throughout my entire life." So that was kind of key is that opportunity.

[00:08:05]

FT: And I think also what's key is knowing how to market and how to brand yourself, as any creative artist out there, whether you're a photographer, musician, painter, there's the craft and then there's the business. Can you talk a little bit about what the elements are to a successful business, how to brand yourself properly? I think a lot of our listeners who have passions that are in the creative space would wanna know, "How do I actually make this a viable business?"

[00:08:32]

EF: Sure. Yeah, so let's see. After I finished at Siegle and Gale, the brand strategy agency, I got involved with my buddies in the startup world and they sort of had a very good understanding of how to create a platform through which to do artistic things, I think. And I didn't understand that going in. So besides having a brand, and that was something I learned to do, you know, have something simple, tell a story, change things slowly, don't do anything too radical. But how do I take something I love to do, photography, and do it in a way that's successful and that people can access. And I think a lot of people just focus on the photography and not the way to spread the word about what you're doing.

[00:09:28]

FT: Right, and you've chosen Instagram as your vehicle, over a million followers. Interestingly, you're only following three people. [Laughter]

[00:09:34]

EF: Yeah well...

[00:09:36]

FT: That's quite the ratio!

[00:09:37]

EF: Right. Well it all sort of started on a couch a year and a half ago and it was Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr. And it's been, you know, I posted the same thing to each of those platforms at the same time. Now Instagram is the focus because that's where people are paying the most attention nowadays. And yes, I do follow very few people just because I don't — I follow myself, I follow The Catist — I'm also The Catist by the way.

[00:10:09]

FT: Oh okay. I didn't know that! The Catist. So you're expanding your animal kingdom. I like it!

[00:10:13]

EF: I'm sort of, I come across cats sometimes and I'm covering my bases. They're harder to photograph, but they're beautiful.

[00:10:22]

FT: They probably don't want their photograph taken! I can only imagine.

[00:10:25]

EF: They don't look at you like dogs do. And "Barking at Dogs" was actually a project I started doing before The Dogist, which were interviews with dogs on world news and topical issues.

[Laughs]

[00:10:36]

FT: So access is important, as you say, as an artist finding your way to get people to find you. That's key obviously. Talk about the importance of having a focus too. You've chosen dogs, and sometimes cats — why did you know this was going to be successful? Why did you lean towards this? And then speak a little generally about the importance of having a niche when you are a creative person.

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EF: Yes, well I knew that dogs were wildly popular, they've always been in part in some form. And nowadays you see them everywhere. And I think that's largely because they're so much human-ness in them, whether it's their eye contact or their emotions. And so there's this incredible story, right? These dogs, you know, I didn't have a dog and I saw all these beautiful dogs walking around New York and I'd say, you know, "I want to know more about this. This is kind of a problem that a lot of people share." They say, "Oh, what is that? Oh what is he? What's his name?" And I saw that as an opportunity to tell their story and be a documentarian, or "dogumentarian".

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FT: Well it's not a surprise too, because when you think of what does well on YouTube, people obsess over cat videos, dog videos, baby videos. Maybe you should be The Babyist? That should be the next one!

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EF: Yeah.

[00:12:06]

FT: I would follow that.

[00:12:07]

EF: Yeah, I'm not sure if I could get away with that in New York.

[00:12:10]

FT: Right! [Laughs] Maybe some parents wouldn't want their baby's photograph taken.

[00:12:13]

EF: Yeah, it's a little bit different.

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FT: Talk about your book, *The Dogist*. Congratulations! Not every photographer gets to get a book deal and yours has some 1,000 photographs. Was it difficult picking out which photographs to use for the book?

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EF: Yes. Let's see, I've published about 3,000 pictures online and so that means that I'd probably taken about 7–10,000 pictures of dogs — 7,000 dogs, let's say. So we sort of, I picked some of my favorites, which was about 2,000. And then we had to decide which fit into the full of our book. It was a fun process, but it was also a little bit, you know, like, "How do we make everyone happy?"

[00:13:03]

FT: Right, right. How do you know when a photo is a good photo or the right photo to post?

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EF: Yes, well you know, I think in any photograph you're taking something that's sort of ordinary, and you're making it seem dramatic. So you know, these are dogs looking for a place to pee on the side of the road, and that's pretty ordinary. [Laughter] And what I do is make it seem like there's more going on. Like they know that they're having their photo taken, that they're posing. So that's sort of what I look for, that sort of, that moment with the dog where usually it's eye contact where it feels like there's a lot more going on in the photo than just a dog going for a pee.

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FT: Yeah. Well on that note, let's transition to some money questions.

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EF: Sure.

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FT: Kind of unrelated, but as an artist, somebody who is entrepreneurial, living in New York City now, curious to hear your perspectives on money starting with your financial philosophy. Do you have one? And if you do, what is it?

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EF: What I said before is, you have to risk it to get the biscuit. [Laughter] You have to allow yourself to, I guess, not make money as an entrepreneur in order to invest in whatever you're passionate about. And then if you do it the right way then there will be opportunities for you to make money.

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FT: Can you give us an example about your personal life?

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EF: I mean simply, at the beginning of the blog, the first eight months or so I was spending my own through a savings and being very, very lean. And I'm still pretty lean, but just focusing on your product and keeping your costs low.

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FT: Yeah, I mean I guess what you do, there's not a lot of overhead. You have your camera...

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EF: That's right.

[00:15:09]

FT: And everything's digital nice, so you don't even have to have a dark room or anything.

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EF: Right. So setting out, my goal was to sort of be the definitive dog photographer. I wanted to become a master, if you will. And it wasn't focused on "how's this going to make money." I'm sure my parents asked me that a few times, you know, "Well, blah, blah, blah." But that's not really the question. I knew that if I had something to offer then people would pay for that eventually.

[00:15:36]

FT: It's kind of interesting. I mean there must be other photographers out there that focus on dogs, and I'm sure you know who they are because you wanna stay competitive.

[00:15:45]

EF: Right.

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FT: How do you differentiate yourself? What are you doing that the others are not?

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EF: Well the traditional photographers, they do studio sessions and they charge money for that and they have clients. And what I do is find my clients and sort of "work for free", if you will, in just being a documentarian. And I walk around, and I don't wait for business to come to me, I go find interesting subjects and share that with a community of people. And so now, you know, I've been able to sort of — now that I have people in a room and an audience, I can find ways to market to them in organic ways. And the book is probably the best way to do that.

[00:16:38]

FT: Absolutely. A book can be a great vehicle. Who knows? I mean what's exciting is we don't know what's on the other side of this book. You can kind of guess what might happen, you know, more publicity, maybe another book deal, but I predict lots of partnerships for you and just that's really exciting. Congratulations again! "Risk it to get the biscuit." [Laughter] I'm so gonna use that! I'm gonna Tweet that today.

What about growing up Elias? What would you say was your greatest money memory growing up that has now as an adult been a transformative — you look back and you're like, "That was pretty transformative"?

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EF: You know I had a few business growing up. I did a, one of those airbrush tattoo things for parties and like Bar Mitzvah's growing up, and that was one way of making money. And I had a few jobs, but I think this experience has been unique in itself and changed the way I think about making money.

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FT: How much did you make when you were doing that?

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EF: I was charging like \$150 an hour actually.

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FT: What?!

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EF: Yeah, because you know, you have these parties and people are spending thousands and thousands of dollars. And the other guy was just some stranger, and I was sort of a family friend or I was a young guy, so they wanted to support me. So yeah, I had a little business going. I had an assistant who I paid \$20 an hours.

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FT: How old were you?

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EF: Uh, you know, 15?

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FT: Oh my god you had an assistant, charging \$115 an hour.

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EF: Yeah, well I invested in a system of airbrushing tattoos.

[00:18:24]

FT: What did you do with the money?

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EF: I dunno? It was...

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FT: [Laughs] "I don't know!"

[00:18:32]

EF: Yeah. I just, I spent it.

[00:18:34]

FT: Oh man! That's a nice little business, it's a very nice business, even if you were doing that today. Were your parents entrepreneurial? Like where was the influence to just be very enterprising?

[00:18:44]

EF: Yes, I would say so. My mother, she's a physician but she also runs one of the largest non-profits, Breastcancer.org, which is a source for breast cancer information — not to plug or

anything! But she's a hustler, and she knows how to make connections with people, and she's had that drive in her. And my father's a little more conservative, and he's more the artistic introvert type, and I'm sort of a hybrid of the two.

[00:19:23]

FT: Yeah, I'd say so. What would you say is a failure that you experienced, a financial failure on your journey to becoming The Dogist?

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EF: Hmm, well I don't know if I'd peg them as failures; what I do something where I spend the same money again, maybe now? You know, I spend a lot of money on clothing, I think? Like, "Maybe I need these shoes to do this," no I don't. The shoes I have are great! Do I need this lens? Maybe not. There's a — you learn something from your mistakes, so I don't see them as sort of failure, I see them as mistakes.

[00:20:06]

FT: Right, right. Lessons learned.

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EF: That's right.

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FT: So how do you weigh the — how do you decide whether something is "worth it"? If you really need those sneakers, or you gotta get that lens, do you have like a method?

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EF: I'd say if it makes, in a functional way, if it makes your day better — with the camera stuff you have to think of it artistically. You know, "Is this something that's going to change my business? Is it going to allow me to do something I couldn't do yesterday?" I got a fisheye lens, and that sort of like opened this whole other type of image that I'd never seen before, never gotten before and that people loved. You know, it's dogs with wide angle lenses, right? So goofy and ridiculous! And just injecting that sort of, that experience into my work was a fun thing to do and it's nice to mix up the formal with the ridiculous.

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FT: What's the most popular dog that you photograph that often gets the most likes on Instagram?

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EF: It's usually the classics.

[00:21:19]

FT: The lab.

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EF: Labs, Goldens, and then of course puppies.

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FT: Puppies, yeah!

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EF: Can't go wrong with puppies, and I definitely...

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FT: They're So Money, puppies.

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EF: They are So Money! [Laughs] Walking down the street I admittedly look at some of these dogs and I was like, "Oh, that's a good one right there! People are gonna love that."

[00:21:40]

FT: That was a kind of a dog sound, "Ohhh".

[00:21:42]

EF: "Ohhh!" Yeah.

[00:21:44]

FT: Yeah. My husband is gonna really be excited to hear this interview, cause he grew up with a lot of dogs and when we started dating I was not a dog fan. I didn't know — I knew like what a Labrador looked like, and that's about it. And now I can tell you what a Boxer looks like, and I can tell you what a Pit bull looks like, and so I've come a long way. And now to be interviewing you, I'm gonna get some gold stars at home, so thanks for doing this with me and making me really cool in the eyes of my husband!

[00:22:17]

EF: Well I have a lot to learn myself too!

[00:22:20]

FT: [Laughs] What would you say is your number one So Money moment? I would say you've already named a couple; one is your book deal, the other is when you were 15 and running that very lucrative tattoo art — I guess it was removable tattoo? Or?

[00:22:36]

EF: Yeah it was just, you know, you could rub it off.

[00:22:39]

FT: Rub it off, yeah. So \$150 an hour, exceptional. What would you say is your So Money moment? A time in your life where you really experienced financial awesomeness. What happened? What did you do? How did you celebrate?

[00:22:52]

EF: You know I haven't thought about this in a while, but you know what comes to mind was early on in this project I was shooting and I set up a PayPal account and I didn't — the balance was zero. And I went out and I photographed some guy's dog, and I had this thing on my website that said, "Blah, blah, blah, donations help support this project." And the guy emails me and I send him a picture of his dog that didn't make the cut, unfortunately. And then next thing you know I get my first \$20 from him in a form of a donation to my project. And I was like, "That, like I'm making money!" [Laughs] Even though it was not very much money, it was just like this moment where I was like, "Okay, I'm in business a little bit."

[00:23:48]

FT: So you made \$20 and that was your So Money moment?

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EF: I think so!

[00:23:52]

FT: [Laughs] That's a first on this show!

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EF: Yeah, I mean I've made more than \$20 since then. You know, I've started working with big dog brands and previous partnerships, and that's becoming more lucrative as my project develops. But it all starts somewhere and that sort of, that moment for me was this moment where I'm like, "I'm not entirely wasting my time chasing dogs around the city."

[00:24:24]

FT: Right. "I feel like I'm on to something!"

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EF: I feel like, yeah, this could work if I keep going.

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FT: And that was just two years ago?

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EF: Yeah, not even.

[00:24:32]

FT: Not even!

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EF: It was October 2013. 2013 was the first post.

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FT: Wow, and now — yeah so now it's October, we're airing this in October, your book's coming out, that's pretty inspiring to know that within two years you could have so much success by making sure that you're giving your art the proper access, the consistency too. You're posting 1,000's of photographs and that you have a focus that no one really is really, really focusing on as you are.

What would you say is your number one money habit?

[00:25:03]

EF: Number one money habit? I'm kind of a gear-head so I like toys, cameras, and devices, and ways to make my art easier, I guess?

[00:25:20]

FT: So you invest in making your art easier?

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EF: Yeah. You know I have like five different versions of knee pads that I've gone through.

[00:25:29]

FT: Yeah! I wouldn't think so, but that's right.

[00:25:32]

EF: "This one's better than that one for this reason." Different types of, you know, I like to optimize my experience. So like these pants bend with me a little bit more when I'm on the

ground with the dogs, or they resist toenail scratches from dogs or dirt from the ground. And these shoes I can wear all day and the toe brand, that's like the piece of rubber, doesn't get messed up because I'm dragging it. And these are just sort nuances of things your photographer, that sort of gets me excited in a weird, in a funny way! [Laughs]

[00:26:06]

FT: No, I mean it's so interesting to hear this. I don't think any of us really know the behind the scenes of what it means to be a dog photographer. You're right, knee pads, comfortable shoes, really important.

Okay, Elias, are you ready for some So Money Fill in the blanks? This is the part of the show where I start off a sentence and you finish it, first thing that comes to your mind.

[00:26:26]

EF: Sure.

[00:26:27]

FT: Okay, if I won the lottery tomorrow, say \$100 million, the first thing I would do is ____.

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EF: Book a flight to Peru.

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FT: Why Peru?

[00:26:42]

EF: Cause I've never been there and I think it would be an interesting for my personal and dog/canine perspective.

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FT: Yeah, you could go see Machu Picchu?

[00:26:53]

EF: Sure, yeah.

[00:26:54]

FT: I thought I would wanna do that on my honeymoon, and then I asked around and people were like, "Only if you wanna get divorced, because it's quite the trek, and it tests all relationship."

[00:27:07]

EF: Right. Right, right, right. No I think the answer's basically travel.

[00:27:11]

FT: Travel, yeah.

One thing that I spend on that makes my life easier or better, besides knee pads?

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EF: You know, good food, I think. That's what I do in New York is I have to balance my job with my personal life. So it's important to keep your friends close and share meals with them.

[00:27:37]

FT: Yes. You know, for as often as I hear this, that from New Yorkers, "Food is my number one splurge, it's my number one expense," then to hear that so many restaurants fail every week here..

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EF: I know, it's risky!

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FT: You would think that there would be a simpler model. Just open up anything that sells food and you will make money.

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EF: Well it's what's around the food.

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FT: Exactly. It's the experience.

[00:28:01]

EF: Yeah.

[00:28:02]

FT: Well what is your number one splurge? You know, food is something that you spend on that makes your life easier, better, enriching. What would you say is your biggest splurge?

[00:28:11]

EF: You know I'm pretty frugal. I would say whatever it is that you're into, get the best of it. Whether it's your instruments, your musical instruments, your computers, your chair. I think a lot of people cut themselves short because they aren't willing to fully invest in their things. So you know like, "How do I get pictures like you?" And they have, you know, this kit lens that they walked out of the store with. And that's fine, and you can create art with that. But you have to do a lot of research to understand why some things are better than the others.

[00:28:59]

FT: Right. Especially if it has to do with your career, your livelihood, your happiness.

[00:29:04]

EF: That's right, give yourself the best shot just to see.

[00:29:07]

FT: Yet another pun — give yourself the best shot!

[00:29:11]

EF: That's right. I didn't even think of that!

[00:29:13]

FT: You're full of gems here, money gem on So Money.

One thing I wish I had known about money growing up? Your parents were very inspiring to you, entrepreneurial in many ways, but what would you say is one thing that was lacking that didn't occur to you till much later when it came to managing your money?

[00:29:34]

EF: Money is very easy to spend. It's like the easiest thing is pending money. The hardest part is figuring out to do the things you bought, you know — I grew in a relatively affluent household, and so the object wasn't money it was activities, what can I do? Now that I'm sort of on my own and making my own money, I'm realizing if I need this money to do things that all these other things that I took for granted. So don't spend any money!

[00:30:20]

FT: Keep it close, keep it close.

[00:30:22]

EF: Spend on the things that are important, but don't...

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FT: Yeah, it's different when you're not spending mom and dad's money.

[00:30:30]

EF: That's right.

[00:30:30]

FT: Or when you're not making \$150 an hour at Bar Mitzvah's.

[00:30:33]

EF: Right. [Laughs]

[00:30:34]

FT: And then, when I donate money I like to give to _____ because _____.

[00:30:41]

EF: I guess I would say the shelters that I work with. Going forward I think now that I can sustain myself as an artist through various means, that you know, so much of what I do involves the shelters. The subjects on the street that I meet, a lot of them are there because of shelter work. So supporting that cause and continuing to visit these shelters and donating my time is gonna be an important facet of The Dogist going forward.

[00:31:22]

FT: Yeah, I like that a lot. Okay, and last but not least Elias, I'm So Money because _____.

[00:31:28]

EF: Because my dog photos are inspiring others.

[00:31:37]

FT: Yeah, and they are making you a living.

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EF: That's right.

[00:31:40]

FT: Congratulations on following your passion and profiting. Your book *The Dogist* is out this month — *Photographic encounters with 1,000 dogs*. We will be checking that out, and please follow The Dogist on Instagram. It will put a smile on your face, not matter how you're feeling, not matter how your day's going, it's sure to be a nice little pick-me-up, and it's free!

So Elias, thank you so much for your great work and being on the show.

[00:32:02]

EF: Of course! Thank you Farnoosh.

[00:32:05]

FT: That's a wrap, thank you so much!

[END]