

EPISODE 1075

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[INTRODUCTION]

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FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi. In continuation of our FIRE movement features this week, we're taking a closer look and having deeper conversations with minority members of the Financial Independence, Retire Early community. On Monday, we spoke with Paula Pant, a Nepalese-American woman and Founder of the Afford Anything blog and podcast.

Today, we're in talks with married couple, Amon and Christina Browning, Founders of Our Rich Journey, a very popular blog and YouTube channel. At the age of 39 and 41, Amon and Christina achieved financial independence and they retired early, quitting their federal government jobs, and moving to Portugal with their two daughters. On their journey, they lived and worked in California, Spain, and Japan while saving more than 70% of their income.

You just heard Amon talking about the house hacks they implemented to live rent and mortgage-free for more than 10 years. They learned to also travel hack. Free luxury vacations for their family all over the world. Their YouTube channel, Our Rich Journey, documents the unique ways they save, make, and invest money the FIRE way. In just over two years of starting their YouTube channel, it has garnered more than 280,000 subscribers and over 13 million video views. Their story has been featured in countless media outlets including Good Morning America, the UK's Daily Mail, and Parade Magazine. I'm so honored that they are here now on So Money.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:02:34]

FT: Christina and Amon Browning, welcome to So Money.

[00:02:38]

AB: Hey.

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CB: Thank you so much. We're so excited to talk to you.

[00:02:41]

AB: Thanks for having us.

[00:02:42]

FT: Absolutely. Our Rich Journey. Everybody subscribed to your amazing YouTube and so much that you offer. So much you have accomplished in the FIRE space in just the last less than a decade. You guys are retired now. Congratulations.

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AB: Yes. We're living a good life.

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CB: Thank you.

[00:03:00]

FT: But you're still working, so let's just talk about that. How do you define F-I-R-E, FIRE? My audience is well aware of this term. But maybe if you're new to the podcast or new to the personal finance space and you don't know what that is, define that for us and also how you personally view it.

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CB: Yes. I mean, there's this distinction between financial independence which is FI, right? Then Financial Independence, Retire Early which has that retire early component to it. Both of FIRE and FI require you to basically amass enough money so that you can live off of your investment portfolio and never have to work again. It can be in real estate. It can be in the stock market. We did both. We started with real estate and the stock market, and then we have all of our investments in the stock market.

For us, we were federal government employees and we retired. We quit our jobs, so we are on the FIRE component of it but we still do stuff. We still have a YouTube channel, like you mentioned, which is Our Rich Journey. For us, I think the big distinction between us, between FIRE and FI is that under this FIRE component, we get to do whatever we want. We get to do our hobbies. We started our channel, what was it, like about a year before we actually retired.

For us, it was just something fun to do. Our friends actually suggested that we start a YouTube channel, and we had never even considered it before, and it wasn't part of an overall plan or anything. But our friends when we were starting to talk to them more and more about our process of FIRE and what we were doing, one of our friends mentioned, "It would be great if you guys started a YouTube channel and started sharing this." We're like, "That might – I don't know how we do that."

We started doing it about a year before we officially quit our jobs as federal employees, and it just started picking up. I think people just started resonating with our story or just resonating with the whole FIRE movement. For us, we just continued to do it. I mean, we actually are doing it less now that we've quit our jobs, but we just have so much fun doing it and we get to meet so many incredible people throughout the process.

[00:05:22]

AB: Yeah. Having the channel and having this platform, it's really been a gift to us because we have this opportunity to talk to so many people and we didn't realize this when we first started this channel. But now, we're starting to realize that people are really taking action in the things that we're talking about. We're actually changing lives. For us, having the YouTube channel, having our platforms, it's something that it's like a dream come true. I would definitely not call this work. I'm not sitting in my cubicle. I'm not going to meetings. We're getting a chance to talk to people about the stuff that we love sharing.

[00:05:58]

FT: Well, let's get into the nitty-gritty, which you're both so good at sharing. You are popular not only because you're so lovable but because you really go there and you are transparent with your numbers. I want to talk about how did you save 70% of your earnings. How did you get to two million dollars in less than a decade? But your story started about nine years ago, as you mentioned. It started with coming home from work, Amon, and saying to your wife, "I want to retire by 40." Christina, some wives would have been like, "Maybe you should rethink that," or, "You're crazy," or, "Hahaha." But you were like, "Okay, cool. Deal. Let's do that." I want to go back to that moment and specifically what drove you guys to it. What attracted you to this pursuit?

[00:06:43]

CB: Yeah. I loved that moment because Amon – We met in college. Ever since we graduated, Amon had been working for the federal government, so he had a job lined up all the – Right before he graduated. We moved down to San Diego, and he had been working for the federal government ever since. I remember when he told me he wanted to retire before 40. He had been at work. He got an award for working for a certain time period. Then there was someone right next to him who was also at the award ceremony who got – It was either 20 or – It had to be [inaudible 00:07:21].

[00:07:22]

AB: It was a 30-year award. It was significant. My award, it was a time and service award, and mine was for 10 years. At that ceremony, when they presented me with my award, they really just brushed me off the stage. The 10 years was insignificant in comparison to the 30-year award. For me, something clicked in my mind at that point. I went home, I told Christina about this experience, and I said, “I can't be here for the next 30 years, and all I have to show for is a piece of paper.” That's when we started to get really intentional about this idea of retiring early.

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CB: I think what's so funny, what he said also is that this idea that maybe the other spouse would say like, “That is crazy. We are – That is not the path we should be on. We should take the normal path.” I think one of the things that has really worked for us so well as a couple and as a family as a whole is that we really try and focus on the positive. When there is some sort of problem that needs some sort of resolution, we really try and work to getting towards yes. We don't try and shoot down ideas right as they come up. We're thinking about it and we think, “Okay, this sounds like a really novel idea.” But the FIRE wasn't a huge movement back then as it is becoming now. For us, instead of just saying like, “That's impossible. That's not what anyone done these days. I've never heard of this,” it was really this idea that we just started thinking about what would that look like and how can we get there.

[00:09:01]

FT: You established the vision and got excited about it but yet you are starting from a place of not high income. We often think of those in the fire movement as these white Silicon Valley dudes that usually have the word engineer in their title and a little bit easier for them admittedly to achieve early retirement because they have high income and they're okay like eating almonds for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. How did you do it? You told – I think I read an article in CNBC where you said you were overwhelmed in the beginning and you had this big goal to save over two million dollars in less than a decade. Where did you start?

[00:09:39]

CB: Well, it started I think just with that first step of really understanding our mindset and just being positive because, like you said, it can be very overwhelming to just say like, "Okay, we need to do this in 10 years and we need to come up with X, Y, and Z amount of money." For us, it was, "Okay, this seems very overwhelming. This can be very overwhelming if we just look at the end goal. But if we break it up into pieces and just look at these structured different areas of the goal and focus on chipping away at the first area of the goal and then going to the second step and the third step and then moving all the way to our goal."

That was definitely the way that we looked at it rather. It's almost like running a marathon, right? You're not like starting. You are saying, "Oh, my gosh. I have to do 26 miles." It's like okay, "Okay, let me get down with the first mile." Then you get down with the first mile. It's like, "Let me get through the second. Let me get through the third." That's sort of the mindset that we had when we were working on this journey. Then we just really focused on, "Okay, what are the areas that we can save? We need to save more money."

On this journey, we're both federal government employees, so it was like, "Okay, this amount of money is not going to get us to financial independence. We need to find ways to create more money also." It was all about how do we save more money. How do we make more money? Where are we investing the money? It just started to formulate this plan that really worked for us.

[00:11:07]

FT: How did you save 70% of what you earned? What were the things that you – What were – This is personal because everyone's budget is going to look different. What were some of the things that you "gave up?" What were the trade-offs?

[00:11:23]

AB: I love that question because we didn't start saving 70% of our income overnight. Before we really got intentional about our saving and investing, we were doing what the average person was doing. We were investing and saving about 10 to 15% of our income. But when we got

intentional about it, when we really started to look at where our money was going, we realized that there were a lot of things that we can start to save on. We just tried to focus on getting 1% better. We didn't get to 70% overnight but we started to move that number. We started to move our savings rate closer to that number.

One of the big things that we were able to save money on was housing. In the San Francisco Bay Area, people spend 30 to 40% of their income on housing. Well, we figured out a way to start house hacking. We used an FHA loan in order to get into a house, and then we used that house to start to house hack, and we used the equity that we built in this home to start to also acquire other real estate. House hacking was a really big thing.

Our transportation cost. At one point, we were driving a BMW X5. It was – We were trying to keep up with the Joneses. But when we got on this journey, we seriously scaled back. We started driving a \$800 used minivan. That was another huge area of savings. We can really just go on and on, but it was getting these big wins and these little subtle savings and all these things added up.

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CB: I will also say in addition to being able to get our foot in the door in the real estate market in the Bay Area, I mean, it was very difficult for us because, like you said, we didn't have a ton of money to invest into real estate in the Bay Area. It was really expensive, and so we focused on finding these properties that looked really bad. They were eyesores on the inside. But we realized that with the work, the sweat equity that we could put into these properties, we could flip them and turn them into really beautiful properties. We started doing that. By just putting \$20,000 down total on our first house, we were able to flip that house by ourselves and then turn that into taking equity out of that house and turning that into a second property and a third property and turning that into over \$400,000 in profit. That's with us not even being able to get our foot in the door and really trying to figure out how we could do that.

But another savings that we did too was just housing in general. We ended up working for the federal government abroad when we lived in Japan. Because we worked for the federal government in Japan, we got completely free housing. We got free housing and we got free

utilities. It was a huge savings in that because, like Amon said, a lot of people's expenses, the majority of it goes towards housing, and we were able to cut that completely.

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FT: I didn't realize you were on the West Coast.

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CB: No. We're in Lisbon. We're in Lisbon, Portugal actually.

[00:14:30]

FT: Oh, my gosh.

[00:14:31]

CB: Yeah, yeah. No, we're from the Bay Area.

[00:14:32]

AB: Yeah, yeah. We didn't even get into that stuff.

[00:14:34]

CB: I know. We didn't even get into that. There's so much to this story but no. Yeah, we are from the Bay Area. But then we moved to Japan. We've lived in Spain before. Then now, we're here in Lisbon.

[00:14:45]

FT: Wow. With all the pandemic stuff going on, has it been difficult to be mobile? How is Lisbon doing in terms of the pandemic?

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CB: We've been doing incredibly well.

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AB: Lisbon's been really good.

[00:14:57]

CB: Yeah. I mean, we've been doing a lot of more staycations. When we moved here, we had all these ideas of even traveling back to the states and visiting people but then also traveling throughout Europe, which has definitely hindered us. We haven't been able to do any of that. But we are

moving around locally, and Portugal has been incredibly well in terms of their response to COVID that we feel like, yeah, we're very fortunate.

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FT: In terms of being able to live in foreign countries, do you have to move around every so often because of visa issues?

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CB: No. We're actually residents here. We applied for a residential visa that is based off of our retirement income. It's actually for retirees. When we went into the office and told them we were retirees, they were like, "No, there's no way you're retiring."

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FT: Is there a loophole on the application? What's going on?

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CB: Yeah, right. It's nice though because, I mean, normally you only get the three months while you're here in Europe if you're a US citizen, and then you have to move or you have to leave. For us, when we were getting ready moving up to our retirement, we're processing all our paperwork, and submitting everything, so everything would be all laid out for us. Fortunately, we had our final interview for our residency about –

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AB: In March. We had it in March.

[00:16:22]

CB: Yeah, right before COVID hit. Then we got our residency cards right before COVID hit, so we were so fortunate because we know a lot of people who were planning on moving to Portugal or they were in Portugal but they hadn't gotten their residency yet, so it was a really difficult time period too, whether or not the government in the United States was going to allow people to come back and forth. The timing really worked out for us.

[00:16:48]

FT: Are you going to come back anytime?

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AB: To visit.

[00:16:51]

CB: To visit.

[00:16:51]

FT: To visit. But you are now expats.

[00:16:53]

CB: Yeah, we are expats.

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AB: Yes, we're expats.

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CB: We're official expats.

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AB: We're buying a house pretty soon actually.

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CB: Yeah. I mean, we're interested to see where it goes though I think because it's like the girls, they're 11 and 13 now and so – I mean, it seems like a faraway –

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FT: Do you speak Portuguese?

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CB: They – More than us.

[00:17:12]

AB: More than us.

[00:17:12]

CB: Yeah, because they play basketball. They swim. Before COVID hit, they were at a Portuguese school, and so I think kids just pick it up so much quicker and especially just – I think it's that reciting everything. It's that recitation. But just saying and listening to Portuguese all the time, they really picked up on it really well. I think having the friends definitely helps.

[00:17:40]

FT: Do you think right now with almost all of us who had desk jobs now working from home that we can now have that flexibility to kind of live anywhere and that the FIRE pursuit of – At least even just FI of having more money saved is even a greater possibility now because we can be location-agnostic to a lot of us can be.

[00:18:05]

CB: Yeah, absolutely. I love that you said that because I actually read an article a little bit ago about Silicon Valley because housing is so expensive there. Now, with the result of COVID and how the economy is working right now, a lot of people are working from home. In this article, it was talking about how housing is going to change in the Silicon Valley, in the Bay Area because a lot of people will be able to move outside of that bubble and move into areas that are more affordable but be able to continue working at their job because they'll be able to work from home.

Even with this shift, once COVID gets resolved and hopefully it gets resolved as soon as possible, but once it gets resolved a lot of employees may actually start changing the paradigm of how the work life occurs because they might say, "Oh, people may be more efficient working from home or we can save more money in the office space with people working at home." I think because of this, I guess the silver lining is it does give people potentially more opportunities to

move around and move to potentially lower cost areas and save money and continue to work where they're working.

[00:19:18]

FT: At some point through all this, your rich journey, were there parts of this that were really uncomfortable for you? Telling the story now, it seems like all the puzzle pieces fit. But for someone who's listening to this and wants to know the real deal, like you're going to have to maybe get uncomfortable at some point. But what can you say to somebody who's not ready for those uncomfortable moments? Is this for everybody?

[00:19:44]

AB: I think financial independence is for everyone. Retiring early may not be for everyone. But just by pursuing this goal, you put yourself in a better position no matter what. For us on this journey, I guess what some people would call uncomfortable we really embraced. One thing I mentioned earlier, we really made drastic changes in our lives. We stopped trying to keep up with the Joneses. I think people took notice of that. One day you're driving a fancy car. The next day, you're not. Maybe people had questions about what's going on in their lives, but we weren't less happier. Nothing changed. We just had a different look about ourselves. We broke from the consumer culture.

I think that's one of the things that's really hard for people to do, because people say that as kind of a catchphrase but when it plays out in real life, when you really make that decision to break away from that, to not fall prey to a lot of the peer pressure that's put on you every day. When you go to work and someone shows up with a new car, people totally celebrate that. But when you go to work and you show up in a used car, people question, "Why are you – Ohm my goodness."

[00:21:03]

FT: What's going on? Is everything okay?

[00:21:05]

AB: Yeah. Fortunately, our friends and family were very supportive of our journey. While we were on it, we talked a lot about it with people. I think people that were close to us understood that, and that's one of the things about this journey. We had really good people in our lives that supported us, and we talk about that a lot on our channel. You want to surround yourself with positive people because you will hit roadblocks. The stock market will crash. Housing will go up and down. You'll take losses. But if you dwell on them, if you can't move forward because maybe your spouse doesn't support you or the people around you, then you're not going to make this journey because it's a long one. We were able to do it in a relatively short amount of time, but really it took a lot of sacrifice to do that. It was short-term sacrifice for long-term gain.

[00:22:00]

FT: Do you think that race plays a role in one's ability to achieve FIRE or be a part of the FIRE community? When you look at even just your own journey, do you think that there were some experiences, obstacles that were exclusive to you because of the color of your skin?

[00:22:18]

AB: Yeah. I think – I mean, certainly this is a very relevant question, and it's good that people are talking more about this. But this is something that as I was coming up even at my job with the federal government, I had to deal with these types of questions of who I was, why was I sitting at the head of the table. I mean, my skin color was one of those things from my first day at work it was something that was brought up.

Yes, while we were pursuing FIRE – I mean, really anything in life. As you go through life, you have to deal with these things. For us, we've always had this attitude. When we see an issue, when someone gets on our face about it, we take action and we try to address it as soon as possible. I think this is something that we've been talking a lot about with our kids because we want them to also have that same tenacity. We certainly don't use it as an excuse. We use it more of something to motivate us to move forward, to overcome.

[00:23:35]

CB: Yeah. I think – I mean, it's interesting too because it's like we're already at the place that we want to be in terms being financially independent. But you do. I mean, as a minority in general, you have obstacles that are just placed on you just being a minority. I mean, you don't – When you think about FIRE, the faces that you see. Even you said, right? You don't necessarily see a black family with kids that are able to reach financial independence. We love that we're able to represent that.

For us, we've gotten to where we are but it's also we have two little girls that are 11 and 13, so the idea about race and financial independence. We are having these conversations with our kids all the time. Especially right now with Black Lives Matter and everything that's going on in the States and it's not anything new. It's just something that's coming more into the forefront. But being able to talk to the girls about what's going on.

Really, for us, the idea is you can control yourself. You have control over yourself. For us, we want the girls to have control over how they respond to things and have these different tools basically in their tool belt, so they know how to address racism when they're faced with it, because we don't say, "If you're faced with racism, this is what you should do." It's like, "You are going to be faced with racism throughout your life," and so we need to help prepare them to do that throughout their lifetime.

[00:25:11]

FT: That's amazing. Thank you for sharing that and taking us behind the scenes a little bit into your household and the conversations that you're having with your family. I think it's important. Like you said, it's not if. Unfortunately still, it's when it happens. In talking to so many black individuals on the show, I did a whole series on this Black Wealth Matters. It was a repeated thing, a comment that they said, "Growing up, we either didn't get the literacy or in some cases, even knowing where to access the information, where to access the tools."

What were your personal money stories like growing up? What did – Okay, to simply this, what is one story that you remember from your individual childhoods that had something to do with money that made an impact?

[00:25:58]

CB: For me, I – We didn't have a lot of money. I could start up by saying that. Something that I remember though is as a kid I remember one time as Christmas was approaching. We never talked about money in my family. I remember going to the bank with my mom once, and it was when you go into the bank and you hand them your little slip and you do a deposit or something. My mom told me that each month, she would set aside, I don't know, 10 or 20 dollars from her paycheck so that by the time Christmas came around, she would have that money in order to buy gifts.

That really stuck with me because I understood that we didn't have a lot of money. But I also saw her taking steps to do what she could so that she could minimize going into debt and increase her savings so that she understood when, for example, more big ticket items would be coming up and for her. For our family, it would be the one year at Christmas. That really stuck to me in understanding as a kid like, "Oh, if you can save, if you can even split out a little bit of your paycheck from the beginning, then you can use it towards – You can use it for something your purchase in the end."

I think she never taught me anything about investing because she didn't know anything about investing. We didn't have a lot of money but she did have – In her own way, she taught me about this concept of saving.

[00:27:32]

AB: Yeah. When you said that, I think what immediately popped into my mind, my story is seeing my mom hustle. My mom was just a natural born hustler. My father worked and my mom – When me and my brothers were born, she stayed at home and she was a stay-at-home but she was always hustling in one way or another. I remember being a kid, 10 or 11 years old, and my mom selling t-shirts in the parking lot of one of our local supermarkets. She was just so good

at it. I was – I still have this image of seeing her do that, and it reminds me of how hard she worked for us, and I never take anything for granted. My mom has been gone for almost 12 years now, and I wish my girls had a chance to really get to know her because she was just the definition of a strong black woman, a woman that would – She didn't – She would make things happen. For me, I think my money story was really formulated by how hard my mom worked.

[00:28:47]

FT: And continuing her legacy. How beautiful. Lastly, this has been a lot of fun. I got goose bumps hearing those stories, by the way. Thank you for sharing. A technical question before you leave because I know everyone is like probably so obsessed with this interview. They're going to go find you and then check out your work. To reach your FIRE number, you have a formula. Why don't we share that formula for everybody? It's a straightforward formula.

[00:29:13]

CB: Yeah. That's a great question. What you want to do is you want to – It helps if you create a budget. But the idea is that you want to budget for your retirement expenses, so you want to go down and line the item and find out all the expenses that you're going to have in retirement. You look at your annual expenses in retirement. Once you get that number, those annual expenses, that total amount, then you multiply that by 25. Then whatever that number that is, that is considered the financial independence number. That's the amount that you could live off of ideally and retire without ever having to work again.

We call it the financial independence number but it's also the fire number because, like we said at the beginning when we started talking to you, FI is just the same thing as FIRE without that retirement component, so you calculate it the same way.

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FT: It seems you're withdrawing at a rate of 4%, right, every year?

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CB: Exactly, yeah.

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FT: A lot of people are wondering if they can even retire now. Do you think that – In some ways, has this recession and the pandemic derailed some of the retirement plans for people in your community, specifically the FIRE community? Is retiring at 40 now going to be 45?

[00:30:28]

CB: I certainly hope not. I think there two different stages. There's either you're on your way towards FIRE or you've already reached FIRE or financial independence. For us, we had this safety net for us. We decided that we wanted to have a large emergency fund in case these crashes happen. Everyone probably remembers what happened in March of 2020. There was a huge crash, and people got very scared. If you have already retired and you have a nice emergency fund already built up, then you can live off of your emergency fund until the stock market recovers, which is already today.

But if you are on the road to FIRE and there is a huge crash, we always consider that an incredible opportunity. Because if you think about what happened in March of 2020 when there was this huge crash, if people continued to invest and didn't sell off their investments because they got scared of losing their money but they kept their money in the market and still continued to invest, they would have even more money today.

I think in terms of whether or not you're pursuing FIRE, whether you already reached FIRE, it's really understanding what your plan is when you're investing, what you should do when there's a stock market crash, and just having a very solid contingency plan and a plan moving forward.

[00:31:50]

FT: Brilliant, yeah. I'm all about the cash. Cash in the bank makes me better at night, and there's no price tag you can put on that.

[00:31:59]

CB: Exactly. Amon and Christina Browning, thank you so much. Our Rich Journey, check them out, YouTube, blog. Do you have a podcast?

00:32:08]

AB: No.

[00:32:08]

CB: We don't have a podcast.

[00:32:10]

FT: Yet.

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CB: Yeah, I know.

[00:32:11]

AB: We just like hanging out on other people's podcast.

[00:32:13]

FT: That's fair. That's cool. Thank you so much and best wishes to you.

[00:32:18]

CB: Thank you so much.

[END]