

EPISODE 849

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:33.4]

FT: What is the right way to speak? How and why can your voice be a mask to help you accomplish the goals you hope to achieve? Welcome to So Money everybody, I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi. Today we are chatting with Casey Erin Clark. She's the cofounder of a business called Vital Voice Training, which is a voice and speech coaching company on a mission to empower women and change ideas around what women are supposed to sound like.

What are we supposed to sound like, you know? We talk about this as well as vocal fry, what is it, do you have that and does it even matter? Casey's business, by the way, was born from a career heartbreak. She grew up with a goal to be on Broadway and she had numerous career successes from being in a number of off Broadway musicals, she performed at the Oscars, she was a member of the Les Mis national tour but when she tried to get the part to perform Les Mis on Broadway after the tour, she didn't get the part, and we'll learn how she went from this huge heartbreak to a breakthrough, working as a singing coach and running Vital Voice Training with her cofounder.

Here is Casey Erin Clark.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:47.3]

FT: Casey Erin Clark, welcome to So Money.

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CEC: Hi, I'm so happy to be here.

[0:01:52.5]

FT: I'm a little nervous to have you on the show, admittedly, because of what you do as a professional. You are someone who voice trains and even though I've done about 900 episodes of this podcast, I feel – I know I've improved over the last four years, but it's another thing to have someone on your show who is probably, you're just always, you're not judging us but it's part off what you do, right? You listen for voice quality.

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CEC: I do, I'm listening for a lot and I think what you're bringing up is actually a great point and especially because you are a woman podcast host, you are a woman of color podcast host. One of the reasons why I started my company five years ago with my cofounder, Julie, is specifically to address this and that is that women's voices, people of color and women of color in particular, do deal with a lot of extra criticism in the world.

When we got started back in 2014, we were in this boom of articles about things like vocal fry and things like up speak and all of the ways that women needed to fix their voices in order to be taken seriously and show up in the world. We wanted to offer a different perspective.

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FT: I love that you identify that so much of the criticism, you're right, has been targeted to women. I remember reading those articles about vocal fry and starting to get really insecure about my own voice. I have gotten notes from listeners, men.

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CEC: I'm sure you have.

[0:03:26.4]

FT: Men who are like, “You have the worst vocal fry Farnoosh.” I take offense to that because I know for a fact that I don’t have the worst vocal fry.

[0:03:36.1]

CEC: You don’t. I’ve listened to you and you really don’t.

[0:03:39.9]

FT: Thank you. I mean, I definitely, it’s a podcast too Casey. So we get really comfortable on the show, we don’t talk like we’re on a stage and for that, sometimes I feel like I get penalized. But I think you’re absolutely right that women are often at the butt of a lot of this criticism and your company is called Vital Voice Training, it’s a voice and speech coaching company that really does cater to women and you know, you have this belief that we’re supposed to sound a certain way. Not your belief but you’re trying to combat this belief that women are supposed to sound a certain way. What are we supposed to sound like? Men?

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CEC: Again, one of the reasons that we funded the company was as a reaction to what we saw as traditional voice and speech coaching. Whether it was, you know, the 1940s we would call it elocution lessons. The object of elocution lessons, for both men and women to be fair, was to get rid of any original accents, to get rid of any colonialisms that might give you away and essentially to teach you how to put on your serious voice so people would take you seriously. It was essentially based on a model of there is one way to speak correctly and that way happens coincidentally to look a whole lot like a middle aged white man.

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FT: Yeah, I’m thinking broadcasters, right? Is this the Walter Cronkite method?

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CEC: Yes, it is very similar to that and there are even to this day, there are plenty of public speaking coaches out there who will count or teach you to put a rubber band around your wrist and snap it every time. Or they will talk about things, again, as there is one correct way to speak and this is what we're rebelling against because especially as we move towards a world where we're more conscious of diversity and more important than diversity, inclusion, that's going to start to look like different sounding voices. Leadership sounds different on different people and that's not only okay, that's a great thing but what it requires us to do is confront our unconscious biases of how we listen to people.

Vocal fry for an example, it's a perfect example. Everyone vocal fries, very much including men. For those of you who may not know what vocal fry means, vocal fry is the sound of like this. There's not a lot of breath coming through my voice. You might hear an extreme version of vocal fry that people call, as popularized in the movie called in a world that Bell wrote, sexy baby voice, it's like the Kardashians.

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FT: Gosh. I don't want to get used to that, don't make me get used to that. I don't want to okay that. I think that needs to actually go away.

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CEC: There's a helpful way to talk about it and an unhelpful way to talk about it. Basically, what we're talking about when we talk about sexy baby voice or Kardashian voice or whatever you want to call it is it is a specific cultural adaptation. It is, not unlike what Tod was talking about in your last episode, a bit of a costume, it's a character and the thing is, we don't speak to our friends or our children or our puppy dog the way that we speak to our boss.

We are incredibly socially adaptive from a vocal and communication perspective, it's how we build our habits and sometimes the habits that we build in one area don't serve us in another area. What we're teaching our clients to do is to claim their full voice, not just the habitual voice that the built over the years, to explore all of the different pitch frames that they had and tonal

range that they have and the different ways to access that, whether it's through an objective, whether it's, what am I trying to accomplish with the person that I'm talking about? Talking to.

Whether it's a technical exploration of it from singing or using Shakespeare. There are so many ways to play with our voices that keep it in the range of what is my voice capable of and then, I get to make an empowered choice about how I want to show up in the world. That's what we want our clients and frankly, everyone to do.

With vocal fry, a lot of it comes from two places, it comes from a lack of breath. We speak on an exhale and as my partner and cofounder Julie likes to say, we live in a bit of a post breath culture. People just don't breathe when they talk anymore because, you know, it's cool.

[0:08:27.2]

FT: Because life is suffocating us?

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CEC: Yes, definitely a part of it and so we don't think about the fact that our words ride on our breath into the world. Vocal fry tends to show up at the end of sentences because we just sort of drop off. We just sort of like — we talk and we talk and we talk and often, we don't put periods at the ends of sentences and then we kind of just run out of air and that's when it happens.

Or, the other thing that I see all the time and hopefully you in particular again as a woman who hears her recorded voice all the time will be interested in this. A lot of women particularly older women in particularly women who work in a male dominated environment. So the finance industry, for example, have artificially lowered the tone of their voices in order to fit into the cultural norm of the system they're in. So you see this particularly in women who are in their 50s and 60s.

It was a way to kind of de-feminize yourself in order to be thought of as authoritative because what we're used to when we hear an authoritative voice is a deep male voice. What happens is that they go underneath where they can actually, on a purely physical level, where they can fully

phonate and it becomes – So I'm putting on this low voice and then when I – my sentence is on a down. I go past where I could actually comfortably make sound in a full way.

So a lot of the vocal fry that I see comes from that, from women not wanting to sound girly and then being accused of sounding too girly because they have too much vocal fry. It is a classic double bind.

[0:10:13.3]

FT: We can't win. We just can't win. I like the connection you made with Tod's episode. Tod Herman who is on recently talking about the alter ego effect and how I think your voice is part of that mask, right? That you put on and you go out there and you try to do all the things and kind of get out of your comfort zone for the purposes of executing and achieving success.

You arrived at this profession, Casey, as an actress yourself. Such an amazing resume, 18 months on tour with Les Misérables, you were on the Oscars I believe, you performed at the Oscars. My goodness. Off Broadway musicals. First of all, I think it's so incredible that you got to Broadway, forget the Oscars, I mean, that's like one in a million, billion. But so many little girls and boys grow up dreaming about being on Broadway. You did it.

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CEC: Yeah, well to be totally technical, I have never been on Broadway, I've been on tour.

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FT: No one's really on Broadway, they're on like 48th street.

[0:11:26.5]

CEC: That's true. I majored in singing and dancing and acting, I have a musical theater degree from a wonderful mid-western small liberal arts program called Illinois Wesleyan University and moved to the city when I graduated college and I mean, the whole small town girl, moves to the

big city to make it on Broadway cliché and I was really fortunate. I've gotten to be a part of some really amazing shows, met some incredible fellow actors and artists. It was a great – it was a beautiful experience. Les Mis in particular I think, people have such love for that show. So touring the country with it and experiencing how people just, I mean, they just love this show. It's such a gift to night after night, affect people the way that Les Mis affects people.

The thing about the theater business is that it's a terrible way to make a living like a genuinely terrible way to make a living because even when you get to the tip top of the profession, there is almost no job security and, you know, the top salary, if you're not a super star person who is on Broadway, if you're not the lead in the show, the equity – equity is the actress union, the minimum salary I think at this point.

Equity people, feel free to correct me if I'm wrong, is something like between \$1,800 and \$1,900 a week. This is like the top of the profession. Living in New York City, which of course is a very expensive city to live in, and you're not cracking six figures, not even close because you've got to pay your agent, you've got to pay the union.

Plus, we're dealing with the very real supply/demand imbalance in the industry. There are so many talented people in this city. I mean, hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people, honestly. There are 200 girls who are like me who are 5'7" and the same weight and have red hair and have similar vocal types.

It's an immense talent pool for a very small number of available jobs. So what that imbalance does, of course, is it causes a great deal of stress, a great deal of feelings of competition and feelings of I think a lack of abundance, that lack mentality. Then it's kind of, I have a soap box about this. It's kind of glorified in like the starving artist mentality.

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FT: Don't even get me started.

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CEC: My god, we could talk about that for hours girl.

[0:14:11.8]

FT: I've done whole podcast episodes about this.

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CEC: I'm going to have to seek that out.

[0:14:18.6]

FT: Yeah, it's not right. I don't think that it's, it has to be that way, right? I've talked to a lot of artists who reflect on their journey and they say, "I wish I had known there was another way to actually practice my craft and also make a living." They're not mutually exclusive people.

[0:14:38.3]

CEC: This is what I'm encouraging, I do still work in addition to working with my business clients. Gentlemen, I'm happy to work with you too. I do have male clients. In addition to working with my voice and public speaking and communication clients, I do still work with singers and with actors of all levels but a lot of professionals and a lot of young professionals.

So I do this camp every summer where I talk with high school and college kids who are about to enter this business and that is when my base soap box is with them is not only is it important to recognize that making money does not make you a sellout. There are things that make you "a sellout" if we want to get into that, but the act of being able to take care of yourself as functioning adult human being does not make you a bad artist.

You can create the kind of art you want, you can make your own opportunities and you can nurture your other skillsets and create what I have started calling, the way that it's manifested on me is what I've started calling my career multiverse. Like, I have all these things that I do, I have these skills that I bring to the table and I am immensely fortunate that I'm building

something where people will pay me for those skills and it fulfills me on a very deep way because, you know, when I'm speaking at a women's conference or doing a workshop, I am on stage and I love being on stage and I am not ashamed to say that I love the spotlight, I love being on stage. Because I'm an actor, please. But I can do that in context other than, "Oh god, I have to book this Broadway show or my self-esteem is dead."

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FT: Well, you did have a point in your career when your self-esteem died, I would say.

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CEC: It did.

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FT: Right? Can I say that? Your heart definitely broke. It was when you – after touring with Les Mis for 18 months, you were not booked the part on Broadway. Which I think that's quite the let down because you're like, "Well, I kind of know this role people, I've been doing it for 18 months. I've gotten this far." Yeah.

Did you think you had it and then it didn't happen or were you pretty – what was that moment like when you were told you didn't get the part? Were you surprised, were you, I mean, obviously upset but what did you think it was like – whose fault was it? That's what I would have commiserated over for like at least 24 hours. "This is not my fault!"

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CEC: Well, again, the reality of the business is that there are tons of talented people and so the journey kind of towards the Broadway production of Les Mis, you know, I had done the tour; I have been off the tour for a while. I had been invited to go to the Oscars performance with the movie cast, which was as you said, a one in a million opportunity, they chose 10 women and 10

men from all the worldwide productions of Les Mis to come in and sing at this one event and it was one of the biggest honors of my life, for sure.

That probably in addition to the fact that I had experienced on tour, I didn't feel like I had it in the bag but I think, you know, intellectually, I always knew it was still a long shot because that is just the facts but I think in my heart, I was like, "Oh my God, this is it! This is the dream, this is the thing that I have been working towards ever since I was a little girl, and this feels like the time it's going to happen." No matter how many times I tried to reason with myself like, "Okay but don't get invested in it," of course you get invested in it. It is the reality of how we as human beings feel things.

So when it didn't happen, it did break me for a while and it really made me question everything. It made me question, "Did I piss someone off? Did I bomb that audition? I don't think I did. I felt really great?" and at the end of the day, what I – oh god, at the end of the day it was one of those phases that because of Les Mis will never ever be the same because it's the title of one of the opening songs of the show.

At the end of the day, you have to go all right, this wasn't the moment. This wasn't the thing that I was supposed to do and now looking back on it over five years later, it's the best thing that ever happened to me was not booking that show, which is a scary crazy thing to say but not getting my Broadway dream caused me to start to broaden my goals of what would make me happy and those goals included then, as my bio says, I read the book *Half the Sky*. So *Half the Sky* if you have never read it, first of all you should. Put it in your reading list it will make you very angry in the way that I think women are not usually allowed to be angry. But it is about the five major issues facing women worldwide, particularly in developing countries and thank God, it's not, "And this is how the benevolent white people swoop in and fix the problem."

It is about the women who are experiencing these issues finding their voices and finding their supportive communities and creating solutions to the problems that they know intimately and I got really fired up about these things and these issues and how big they seemed but also so inspired by the women who were tackling them and I thought, "Okay, I majored in singing and dancing and acting, like what can I do to help support this?"

And the answer was, I know how to help people feel confident and I know how to take someone who has beautiful ideas but feels very uncomfortable relating them to people and help them relate to people in a way that will get those ideas on the table so that we can create real solutions to these very real problems and I am so – oh my god, Farnoosh I love my job. I love this thing that I have created and I don't know that I would have built this or at least built this at this point in my life if I had booked Les Mis and done the Broadway thing.

So it is a perfect example of how all these little moments throughout our lives hopefully work together to make us the person that we're supposed to be. If we respond to them by saying, "Okay, time to iterate, time to do the brave thing." Thank God for Brené Brown and helping me confront my perfectionism and step into vulnerability, and do something, which was insane to be a musical theater actress who has never started a business and be like, "I think I'll start a business today." It was crazy.

[0:21:48.5]

FT: Well, that is what I would love to explore too is the "let's start a business" part because as you mentioned, you were not an entrepreneur necessarily in this way of running a business and having clients. I would love to know that transition and how you supported yourself and how you got that plane to ultimately take off as you were trying to manage your finances and build savings and all of that?

[0:22:15.5]

CEC: Well, first of all, my financial journey I have to acknowledge the immense level of privilege that I have. So I grew up as an upper middle class white girl in a small town near St. Louis, Missouri. My father grew up quite poor with many brothers and sisters and I think that as he started to gain success, he really wanted to give his children all the opportunities that he never had anything. I think that this is a story that we hear a lot.

So I never had to think about money as a child as a teenager and even really going into college, I mean, I was incredibly – I didn't ever get everything that I necessarily wanted but I certainly got everything that I ever needed and a lot of the things that I wanted and so I never really thought

about money in the way that people for whom money is an ever present worry in their lives have to think about it.

So thanks to scholarships and the immense generosity of my parents I graduated debt free, which is an insane advantage and start in life and I also met my husband fairly young and we got married fairly young at least for now how people do that usually and my husband who was an actor stepped into the business world and started making actual money and so I've always had a support structure in my life that allowed me to take risks. That said, I've had to start as an entrepreneur, thinking a lot more deeply about money. Thinking about how to get it, how to keep it, how to spend it, how to invest it and that's been a major part of my journey.

In terms of the actual technical aspects of running a business, I often call it going to Google University in that I had a question. It's like, "Okay, I want to do this thing when I build my website. I am going to Google that problem and I am going to find a way to do it." So I have adopted a personal philosophy of everything is figure out-able. So I was able to Google, to start to what is the good information and what is the bad information and to ask for help when I needed it. I was very fortunate to have – to start building this community particularly of women and women entrepreneurs and women business owners around me who were so generous in the sharing of their knowledge and their experience with this stuff.

So you know if you are out there and you're an artist and you are thinking about starting a side hustle and you're like, "I don't know anything about business, what am I going to do?" Google is your friend and friends are your friends in that you can ask for help. You don't have to do it by yourself and you can make mistakes because Lord knows I certainly did.

[0:25:17.3]

FT: I appreciate what you said about affording yourself the ability to take on risks and really leveraging the financial stability that your parents raised you with. A lot of times people don't do that and I think that owning that story is really brave because some people don't admit that they had, that they entered their adult life without debt and that is what actually helped them to get a head start or at least to experiment, take on some healthy risks.

It is much sexier to say, “Well I lived in my car and I had all of these student loans and then luck struck”, you know? Like, “Then I got my big break,” or “Then I got my part in Les Mis” but I think it is important to own your story, which you did and to say it out loud for the other people who might feel like it is not appropriate to share that story, right? Because I didn’t have a tough debt ridden upbringing. But believe me, there are people who have a lot of resources who don’t do half the things that you did in their life.

[0:26:24.9]

CEC: Well, and there are people who have a lot of resources who have this myth of, “Well I am a self-made man,” or whatever that don’t acknowledge that privilege and I don’t think we can have productive conversations about the universe of what money does without talking about privilege, without talking about what certain people, you know the old cliché, certain people start on third base and I don’t think I necessarily started on third base, but I am sure as hell did not start at the place that so many people do and that is why I do admire those stories of — I was reading about Arlyn, oh gosh, I forget her last name, the amazing black woman who is now a venture capitalist who did talk about taking these immense risks and is talking about how we need to fund black women entrepreneurs because they don’t have the advantage of again, fitting into that dominant cultural story of what an entrepreneur looks like.

And as long as we have this very narrow idea of what an entrepreneur looks like, we hold ourselves back from getting to the best ideas and the best solutions. So I just don’t think it is possible to talk about money without talking about privilege and it’s something that I am learning to acknowledge. So thank you, I appreciate that.

[0:27:51.7]

FT: You’re welcome, thank you. All right time for a question from our sponsor, Chase, which is what is your money resolution, Casey, and have you kept to it? It’s February.

[0:28:05.1]

CEC: Yeah, so there's two. My main one and this sounds so simplistic, but my main one really is to pay more attention to money. I think I tend to be again, I think this goes back to my upbringing of never really having to think about it. I tend to be a little bit avoidant of things like looking at the numbers in my bank account and looking at where my money is going and looking at my teeny-tiny little 401(k) that I invested in when I was on tour with Les Mis, seeing how that is doing.

So just being more aware of how money is fitting in my life and what's coming in, what's going out, what did you save for taxes because #freelancelife. That's the big thing to think about. So being more mindful of all of it and the second one I think and again, just touching back on this idea of ridding ourselves at the starving artist mentality, my partner Julie and I as we looked at our goals for the business this year was we want to make a lot of money, ethically.

That ethically make a lot of money is a very important piece of it but what does that mean for our business. It means charging what we're worth. It means seeing the different ways that we can access business, doing corporate workshops where we're talking to more people than we can. You know when you are trading an hour of my time with one person, you know there is kind of ceiling to what I can charge. When we're trading an hour of our time and expertise to more people than that, it's a different ceiling.

So looking at the balance of how our business brings in funds and figuring out how we can make the kind of money that allows us to continue to grow and continue to get what we now are able to stand in very confidently and say is important to work that does a lot of good to get that out into the world.

[0:30:08.2]

FT: I am so happy to hear that you want to make more money. I think that I was just having this thought the other day that for too long, I think that women have had this story in their head. Not all women, but I think more women than men have a story in their head or like a voice in their head that says, "Making too much money," first of all that there is this thing as having too much money, which I don't agree with and that by being someone who has a lot of money or someone who wants to pursue the act of making more money or a lot of money that that is a bad thing. That that is not a virtuous thing and I think that is a bad message. It's what kept a lot of women

inadvertently and right, dually in poverty right? You can't tell yourself these things. You cannot believe these things and actually expect your life to improve, to actually expect you to have the ability to make an impact on your life and on other's lives. You need money. Money is a real resource.

[0:31:11.5]

CEC: Well, it's a tool and I think that like any other tool, how you use it is what creates the results and I think that the women entrepreneurs that I am friends with and that I am building these communities with feel very strongly that money it can be. in the right hands and with the right application, an immense tool for good and so the very first business conference that Julie and I spoke with and it is actually our origin story.

The day that we bought our domain name and sitting around in my table and my one bedroom New York City apartment drinking Rose going, "What are we going to call our company?" The day that we bought our domain name, we sent out our first pitch email to the founder of this feminist business conference called The Bullish Conference and Jen Dziura is fantastic and she is very much in that mindset of women that it is possible and even a good thing for women to make money, and she said something at that conference that really struck me, because we are doing this exercise of where do you want to be, not in five years or 10 years, which is a standard timeline for those questions but where do you want to be in 30 years and I realized when I was asked that question that in 30 years I would be the age that my mother was right then and I thought about my mother's life and I thought about what she's able to do.

And what she does do and I thought about what I want to do when I am my mother's age and so everybody sharing. It is a lot of really cool things but it all boiled down to Jen saying, "You don't necessarily know what your future self would want but you know what your future self will need and your future self needs options and resources," and that struck like a gong inside my heart. I was like, "Yes! Options and resources." We need to be able to make empowered choices and let's be clear, money makes making choices easier and we need resources, we need a way to manifest what we want. I keep using that word, I actually don't love the word manifest but we need a way to do what we want in the world and again, money is a tool.

[0:33:36.1]

FT: Money is a tool, that is so true. Think about what your future self needs and that will come much easier than maybe what you want because that could be very subjective to your future life and your future self. But this is such a – have you ever had these kinds of conversations on a podcast before? I feel like you have such a gift to share in these stories.

[0:34:00.9]

CEC: Well, thank you. I love podcasts. Julie and I are actually planning on us starting one this year if we could ever get around to it in the immense to do list of the entrepreneur. But I do love to talk about my work. I love to talk about women's voices in the world and men's voices in the world. I love we talk about the way we communicate. In terms of the way we think about money, I have been fortunate to have a couple of clients who are finance people and who are doing this work and asking people to think about their money stories and I think working with them has caused me to think more deeply about this, which is something I think we all have to do.

Anytime you could apply a little deep thinking to something that is a little scary and a little icky and a little uncomfortable like money tends to be, I think that you can illuminate really important things about what you want and what you need, and knowing what we want and need is such an important tool to living a fulfilled life in this crazy stressful world that we live in. So yeah, thank you. I really appreciate it.

[0:35:16.5]

FT: Thank you and hopefully by the end of this, we're all –

[0:35:18.3]

CEC: This podcast, happy to do it.

[0:35:20.8]

FT: Oh I just lost that last couple of seconds from you. Just say whatever you just said like five seconds ago again. I think you were saying thank you.

[0:35:28.5]

CEC: Oh thank you so much. I really appreciate the compliment and frankly, shameless promotion, I am so happy to talk on literally on anyone's podcast. Invite me, we'll talk about voices, we'll talk about anything you want. I can talk.

[0:35:45.4]

FT: Well, I will tell you what? After listening to you, after talking to you, I definitely feel as though I have more breath in my voice, you know?

[0:35:52.3]

CEC: Wonderful.

[0:35:54.1]

FT: Yeah, you have given me an injection of oxygen and that is all to say that I really was inspired by everything that you said. I feel really like I want to take more action now and just be more intentional with everything in my life. Thank you so much and happy new year to you.

[0:36:14.2]

CEC: Happy new year to you and thank you very much for this opportunity. I am so thrilled to speak to all of your listeners.

[END]