

MASTERS by Winn Claybaugh, May 2021

Dr. Michele Borba

THRIVERS: The Surprising Reasons Why Some Kids Struggle and Others Shine



Michele Borba, Ed. D., is an author, motivational speaker, and internationally renowned educational psychologist and expert in parenting, bullying, and character development. She appears regularly on NBC's *Today* show and has been a featured expert on countless other programs

Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, Michele offers hope to the generation of kids (and adults) who are stressed, unhappy, and struggling with anxiety, depression, and burnout. Her message will help parents, leaders, teachers, and bosses get back to the basics of what really matters for the pandemic generation.

WC: Hi everybody, Winn Claybaugh here. Welcome to this issue of MASTERS and I'll tell you something, I love the world that we live in right now, with being virtual. A lot of us thought that this was the worst thing that could happen to us, outside of the pandemic, and now I'm kind of thinking that it might be one of the best things that's happened to us because we get to connect with people all over the world whereas before we thought, *No, I need to wait until I can physically be in that person's presence before we have this opportunity*, and that's not the world we live in right now. In fact, this woman that I'm interviewing for this incredible podcast, I think within the last couple of days she's been in Dubai, Pakistan, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and she's probably never left her house in the last week or so. Is that true, Michele?

MB: That's true. That's the benefits, if there's any of us brave enough, of what's going on in this world but you also discover it's a much smaller world and you really have access to it.

WC: Well, I'm really curious and we'll bring up these other countries that you're visiting as it relates to this topic but let me just share with our listeners who you are. And I have to tell you guys, I have put hours and hours into preparing for this interview. And what happened was, usually when I'm interviewing somebody, it's like give me a couple of topics, a couple of questions, I can navigate, I've been doing this for 20 years. But when I started diving into, I don't know how many interviews you have done on the *Today Show* and then you have a TED Talk and so of course I watched as many of those videos as I possibly could, and then your book arrived and I started reading the book and, all of a sudden, I was no longer a podcaster. All of a sudden, I was a student. Why? Because I'm a dad, I'm a dad to a nine-year-old little girl, but I also care about this planet. Even if I weren't a father, the fact that children need us so much these days and what's happening right now and so, of course, I was just enthralled with this topic. I'm

going to read this. Michele Borba has been a teacher, educational consultant, and parent for 40 years and she's never been more worried than she is about this current generation of kids. The high-achieving students she talks with every day are more accomplished, better educated, and more privileged than ever before. They're also more stressed, unhappier, and struggling with anxiety, depression, and burnout at younger and younger ages. "We're like pretty packages with nothing inside," said one young teen. Thrivers are different. Again, I'm still reading this. They flourish in our fast-paced, digital-driven, often uncertain world. Why? Dr. Borba interviewed more than 100 young people from all walks of life and she found something surprising. The difference between those who struggle and those who succeed comes down not to grades or test scores but to seven characters that set thrivers apart, and obviously we're going to get into all of this. Michele is the author of 25 books including *Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*. Michele, great book! You have been on the *Today Show* I don't know how many times. You have spoken in 19 countries, on five continents, including shows like *Sesame Street*. You have spoken at Harvard, U.S. Air Force Academy, 18 U.S. Army bases in Europe and the Asian Pacific. This just goes on and on from the *Dr. Phil* show, *NBC Nightly News*, *The View*, *Dateline*, *Dr. Oz*, *The Early Show*. And again, your new book, which I'm going to promote, promote, promote: *Thrivers: The Surprising Reason Why Some Kids Struggle and Others Shine*. So, Michele, as you and I were communicating over the last week and I was telling everybody, all my friends, "Buy this book," and then they would send me a screenshot, "I bought the book!" And then I would copy that screenshot and send it to you because I hope you know how, first of all, just grateful. I'm going to get emotional right now. How grateful I am that you are taking this on. You could have said, "My kids are grown and gone," and yet what you are doing right now, the information and the impact that you're having on this planet right now, I hope that you truly live that and feel that every single day because it really is making a difference. Michele, thank you so much for being part of MASTERS.

MB: Oh, Winn, thank you. You just kind of made my life, kind of pulled it back. Oh my gosh, thank you so much because it's something I am so passionate about. You know, you and me, we all share one thing: we love our kids desperately and I think we're very concerned about what's going on in this world. How do we raise a generation that's going to be able to thrive despite everything that they're facing?

WC: Well, I'm going to quote you a lot and so let me quote you now. "We have raised a generation of kids who have more of everything but we've forgotten to give them the thing they need most to succeed: the mental and moral qualities that make them human and will help them thrive." But you say some young people aren't struggling, they're actually thriving, and why is that, Michele?

MB: I think the difference, when I talk to so many kids, is that they have this feeling of *I can do it*. And when I look at what's different about them, along the way, the first thing is they've acquired skills: a skill set that's different from knowledge of what

they can use in the classroom, but a skill set that they can use from life, like problem solving or if they face an adverse situation, they can find a way around it, or they have confidence in themselves, know what their strengths are. That's a whole different kind of skills. But the best thing is, it's all teachable. So, someplace along the way, they've learned that. I think the second thing is they've got a parent who also knows it's important so slowly has sort of stepped back so they're not always helicoptering and rescuing, because in the end they know that kid's got to make it someplace in the real world someday, someday without us.

WC: You know, it's funny how people will listen to a podcast and they will immediately disqualify themselves from needing to listen to this information and I just want to put it out there to everybody listening right now, you do not have to be a parent to want to be engaged in the information that's going to be shared right now. In fact, Michele, maybe you can guide us. What would you say to the leaders, the bosses who are listening to this right now who are hiring that generation? So, they're hiring Millennials or new young professionals that are coming into the workforce. To that group as well, this message is applicable to them because they're going to need to figure out what does their boss look for. If I want to be employed by that company, what's most important to that company? How do my skill sets fit into what the needs are of my career? So, this information isn't just for parents who are raising young kids, correct?

MB: Absolutely not. What we're realizing is that, first of all, 20 percent of employers are now doing empathy trainings for Millennials coming in because they are lacking that ability to step into the shoes of the client and go, "How would I feel if that happened to me?" When I chose the seven character strengths that help kids become thrivers or more resilient, I was fascinated. Actually, I was in Abu Dhabi at that moment and I was listening to employers there and political leaders say they were worried. The Global Economic Summit was choosing the character strengths that matter most for the next twenty-first century. That's the other reasons these character strengths kept coming up. And then Harvard came along, when I was talking at Harvard, and saying, "No, no, no, we're seeing a different format now, that our children coming in, who are now the teens and Millennials, are lacking some of these skills and the top employee ability factors are these very skills." So, any parent listening, you're priming your kid to be able to get out there in the real world and the employer, these are the traits that you want to make sure that your incoming employees have because they're not just the traits of a thriver, they're also the traits that are going to help you in that business world be able to thrive as well.

WC: So you're telling us that these major corporations and leaders and bosses and political leaders and Harvard, they're not focused on math scores as being the problem of this generation or the challenge that we have right now? It's empathy?

MB: Exactly. They're looking at empathy, they're looking at stress control, they're looking at why are so many young kids burning out at such a young age when

they get there, why are they still being directed, where are there—oh my gosh, one of the most amazing things is there was a group of employers who are actually worried that their employees that they'd just hired needed to be praised more. So, they were actually buying stickers and red pencils to be able to give them happy faces because that's what they were craving. These are the top-level individuals because maybe we'd raised them wrong. In all fairness, we love our children dearly, but I think one of the reasons that we've created such a generation is we haven't been given parenting strategies that are evidence-based by science and so we're not getting the results we need. Too often, we're giving the wrong information and as a result that's why so many of our kids are stressed to the max and what many kids told me, "We feel like we're running on empty."

WC: In your book—soon into your book, which is again *Thrivers*, why I was so captivated within the first couple of pages, you tell this story of a 16-year-old girl named Ava. Can you share that with us?

MB: Oh, yeah. That was the moment that I said, "We're doing something so wrong." I began interviewing just wonderful kids all across the country that counselors would give me access to and say, "Go interview this kid. This is a real peak performer." But as I interviewed these kids over and over again, Winn, I began to see something was amiss. Their grade points were in the ozone layers, their test scores were over the top, but they all felt empty. Well, Ava was absolutely extraordinary. She was one of those kids that you go, *Oh my God, there's the perfect kid!* She had everything going for her: clearly loved, opportunities galore. She was wanting to be headed for the scholarship of her dreams and so she'd get up so, so darn early every morning to be in swim classes before school and then high AP classes, AP classes, AP classes, and then again after school more swim classes, because she had a drive to get into a certain college that was the swim college of her dreams. And I kept in touch with her, thinking, *Oh gosh, this is the kid who's going to be going off to Wonderful Land*, and I called her because I wanted to find out, *Well, did you get in?* And when I called the number, her mom answered and she started to sob and she said, "I had to put her, my daughter, she's now in a hospital for severe depression," and she began to sob and the mom said, "I think what happened was that I didn't realize that I was helping her appreciate who she was. I thought it was all the stuff and the grades and the accolades but she never learned to just love herself." That was the moment when the problem was, once I saw the thing on Ava, I started getting a phone call from other counselors. The one that just drove me to pick up a pencil and start writing the book was actually a counselor saying, "You've got to come. We're in Arizona. We're living in a 20-mile radius and 40 kids in the last two years have killed themselves."

WC: Wow.

MB: Forty kids in just a short amount of time. There's—Gunn High School in East Palo Alto now has parents on a train watch because these high-performing

schools around the area have so many kids who are suicidal that they're throwing themselves in front of a train and parents are now watching the train tracks to make sure that their kids aren't throwing themselves in front of the train. That was my "enough" moment. In fact, I just did a *Dr. Phil* special. He was, saying, "Every parent's got to buy this book *Thrivers*," and what he did was actually bring in two of the parents from the suicide belt in Arizona and those two parents said, "We just lost our sons, but if I had to do it all over again, I'd raise my child to have resilience."

WC: Wow. And people listening to this right now, they're thinking, *Oh my gosh, this is just doom and gloom. We're all in trouble. Now our kids are dying of suicide*, and I have to tell you something. For me the information that you were sharing was kind of good news because I was feeling guilty sitting in the back of the room during parent-teacher night when they were talking about the importance of math scores in second grade, in order to—

MB: Uh huh

WC: —plan the trajectory of your child's college career. And I'm thinking, *Wow, I'm screwed*. I had mentors that would say, "Do not overschedule your kids," and I was like, "Cool. I can do that because I'm tired already. I don't want to have to play a chauffeur to go from this appointment to that appointment." And then another mentor came along and said that you need to plan hours of boredom every single day for your kids, where nothing is scheduled, because it's in the process or in that place of boredom that they then will use their imagination, they'll use their creativity. What do you say to all that?

MB: I love that line! I love that thing called "go outside and watch the clouds go by, sweetie pie," because not only does it decompress you, it builds up that sense of curiosity, and curiosity is the making of a thriver. That kid who goes, "I got this," or that kid who's confronted with a diversity goes, "That's okay, I can go around it." Because thrivers are open to ideas and people, and the way you get that is by open-ended possibilities. Now look, we know that our kids need to have activities but maybe you need to stop and look at your kid's activity or look at your own. Look at your own list because we're all burning out right now and one of the reasons is because we're not building in just time to decompress. Emmy Werner is one of the persons that just turned me on to this concept of thriving. Phenomenal researchers, can you imagine this, who have actually been studying kids who overcome extraordinary adversity. Winn, we're talking about war zones, homelessness, schizophrenic parents, abuse in a home. And when they look at cohorts of phenomenal groups of children and they keep studying them, going, "Is there any hope for these kids?" and halfway into the study they're going, "My God, a third of them are bouncing back despite it. Why?" Those are the studies we need to look at because one of the strongest commonalities is those kids have hobbies. They have an opportunity to decompress. They have things to go to when push comes to shove and just go, "Okay." I don't care if it's knitting, maybe it's books, maybe it's a swimming pool, makes no difference what it is but

ordinary things we now know can make an extraordinary difference in our children's lives, if we start realizing we've got to intentionally start helping our kids become resilient. And once we do, and once we know this is science backed and proven, and once we realize—I swear it's not another program or fancy tutor or an app—ways to weave this into your natural parenting. Or if you've got an older kid or you're self-worried as an adult, it's not too late for you. We've got to start weaving it in because this is doable.

WC: Before we get into what you call the seven essential character strengths, and then let me tell you something, you guys, this could be an eight-hour podcast. I told Michele to bring a snack and a sleeping bag because I have so much I want to ask her, but I feel like I need to ring that warning bell and so I'm going to read some of this that I pulled from your material. You said, "One-third of college students drop out at the end of their freshman year. The United States now has the highest college dropout rate in the industry. Studies find that parents fixate far more on kids' deficits instead of their assets. Empathy in American teens dropped more than 40 percent in 30 years. Narcissists increased 58 percent." This one was interesting. "U.S. students are the most sleep-deprived of kids from 50 countries," and, you know, this just goes on and on and on. I apologize if I'm taking you all over the map. I'm a little bit ADD, which, by the way, I think that that is kind of one of the assets I like the best about myself.

MB: *[Laughs]*

WC: It's on my résumé: I'm ADD *[laughs]*.

MB: Yay for you, Winn. Yay for you! *[laughs]*

WC: I'm all over the map, girl. So, you have actually done work with the Navy SEALs. You talk about the Navy SEALs' coping skills. What is that?

MB: Oh my gosh, this was absolutely profound. I mean, so many of the best things that I learned were just by chance. But commanders asked me to come onto army bases and I was there to train counselors on how to help kids with posttraumatic stress. In the meantime, so sad, but in the meantime, commander said, "You know, you should go talk to the Navy SEALs." Now, here's the most elite forces we have in the world. I said, "Why?" They said, "Because we're retraining them so they can keep their arousal control when they're dealing with some obviously tough issues," right? So, they've got to keep their cognitive ability straight and keep their stress down. So, I asked a couple of Navy SEALs, "Okay guys, what the heck are you doing differently?" and they laughed and they said, "Something that you should be teaching kids because it's mind boggling." It's actually rewiring our brains, quote unquote, and it's true. First they said, "The moment we start to feel stressed, we are primed now to figure out how to keep it down. Number one is we start identifying each other's stress signs, because everybody's got their own unique stress signs." Some kids are—watch your kid, by the way. But don't watch them when they are in the middle of the exorcism;

it's too late. So, watch them when they're calm and they're starting to get a little stressed. Some kids, for little four-year-olds, they start having their feet go up and down. You watch your tween kid: very often the girls will start to have sweaty palms. Or I watch teens grind their teeth. Watch your spouse. Some of them, they start getting irritated, you can see their flush marks of their cheeks. Everybody, Winn, has their own unique stress signs. The gold mine says, "Navy SEALs, as identifying yours, we point them out to each other and then after a while we figure out the stress sign because the moment it starts to come, you have to keep that in control. The first thing we do is we come up with some kind of a positive statement to say inside our head, like *calm down* or *chill out* or *I got this*; not all of them but just one. And it takes us quite a while to practice it," they said. "And then the second thing is, once we say *calm down and chill out*, we do the fastest way to relax that is scientifically proven. We then immediately take a slow deep breath from way low in our abdomen, like we're riding up an elevator. Tell a kid it's like slow and deep. Get it up to the top of your head and hold it. Now slowly let it out but make sure the exhale is twice as long as the inhale." I just did that with you and, I'm telling you, I am so relaxed because I did it the right way and it took me a while to do it the right way. They practiced with me. It's unbelievable. I have seen moms try that with three-year-olds and it works. Obviously, they have to help the three-year-old try it but if you do that over and over and over and over with your teen, right before they go to take the test, or right before they start to get into a meltdown, or right before they feel like they're getting stressed out, it is scientifically proven to reduce stress. It is the best thing I swear that we should be teaching our kids because they're going to need that now for the rest of their lives. When push comes to shove, now they have a coping strategy. Winn, you know what? Many of the teens said the worst thing we do is try to teach them too many things. "You can't do too many things, you know. You've got to give us a repertoire of stuff and then you got to keep helping us practice it, over and over again, until it becomes a habit. That's what's going to help us the best and you might as well teach us the stuff that really works."

WC: I love it that this is so simple, and why do we try to complicate it so much? First of all, I was also excited about spending time with you because my husband George is so tuned into you and when George—

MB: Awe [*laughs*].

WC: —gets tuned into somebody, that means something. But I want to start getting into these seven essential character strengths that you go into in your book eloquently. It's incredible. This one Harvard study that you quote: 81 percent of kids believe their parents value achievement over caring.

MB: Ah, doesn't that hurt? Now—

WC: Oh my gosh!

MB: Here's the thing that was fascinating about this. Harvard asked kids—by the way, all of these studies are diverse populations of kids, across the U.S., middle school and high school and they asked them, "What matters most in your family: achievement, the grade, that you're happy, or that you're kind and caring?" At the bottom of the list—was tanking—was kind and caring. But the fascinating thing, Winn, is they also went back and asked the parents, "Hey, it sounds like your kid doesn't think kind and caring matters." Every parent sat there, "Well, of course it matters." But the problem was that the parents, we, are not emphasizing it nearly enough. The first thing when our kid comes home is, "What'd you get?" as opposed to, "What kind thing did you try?" So, what we forget is that our little everyday conversations with our children do matter. They do begin to figure out, "Oh, I guess this is what my parent is really looking for." Even though you may have a value system that addresses kind and caring, what are you modeling? What are you modeling? If your kid had only your behavior to watch each night, what would he say in terms of the seven character strengths that matter most in my own parents? Because modeling also is one of the fastest ways to teach kids character strengths. Not by, "Okay, it's 6 o'clock, let's talk empathy," but what you do on your day-to-day basis with your kids?

WC: Wow, you know, as you're talking here I'm easily translating all of this information in how does this apply to myself as a leader, as a boss. How do I manage my team members? How do they manage our customers. How do they treat our customers? And all of this rings true. And so, I know our listeners are smart enough to take your words, your information, which again is directed at parenting and at kids, and apply it to the business world. You say that thrivers are made not born, so let's get into these seven essential character strengths. We'll just touch on these because, again, I've just got so many other places that I want to take you today.

MB: Okay. I'm going to do a footnote for one minute on the seven strengths because everybody's going to go, "How'd you come up with these seven strengths?" Number one, they're science-backed evidence based on at least five different longitudinal studies on resilience. Why do some people have the ability to bounce back from adversity? I don't care if you're three or 95, these same seven strengths apply across the board in terms of age. But I was also worried about mental health needs of kids. These seven strengths also are highly correlated to mental wellness and well-being as opposed to reducing stress. And for every parent that goes, "Oh my gosh, but what about the kid in the classroom?" Okay, fine. The seven also address kids who are peak performers in a classroom as well as top employability factors when you leave. So, your kid is more likely to handle real life and get employed in wherever he wants to be. That said, that's where they came from. Now we can go through them. Thank you.

WC: Beautiful. What's the first one, then? Self-confidence.

MB: Number one is confidence, and confidence to me is a quiet, self-understanding of who you are, what your strengths are, and accepting your weaknesses. Those

people are more likely to have what is called a flow state, which means you are more likely to use those strengths to find employability. You're going to be more likely to enjoy what you're doing. You're more likely to have mental health and well-being. And when push comes to shove, a thriver is the kid who utilizes those strengths to be able to handle the adversity.

WC: Beautiful. Number two is empathy.

MB: Empathy, oh my gosh! That's the one that Harvard said is now the top employability factor. That's the one that's dipped 40 percent in American kids over 30 years. That's the one who's also, looking at Global Economic Summit, we're looking for them. Thrivers think *we*, not *me*. It's a global diverse world. We are less likely to be stressed out if we can think about another person and not about ourselves. We're also looking at the fact that, well, thrivers, they've got something else in common: they're more open to ideas and possibilities, they're more open to people. That's exactly who you want in your business, I would hope.

WC: You wrote an entire book about empathy: the *Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*. And I remember when I was sitting, listening to you speak for the first time, maybe a year or two ago, you really, really stressed that empathy, you're not born with empathy, it is something that you learn. Can you just talk about that, because I think that you were sharing with these parents that if a child or if an adult is staring at a screen all day, how are they going to be empathetic? Because learning how to be empathetic means that I look at you in the eyes, I know your body language, I know when your face changes, I know when your body language changes, and based on that I can start to understand how you're feeling, how you're thinking, but if I'm staring at a device texting you, then I'm not learning or experiencing any of those things.

MB: Yes. First. our children—we—are born hardwired to care but unless we cultivate it, it lies dormant. Cultures can either bring it up or bring it down. We're raising our children in a culture right now that's got a lot of commodities that bring it down. One of those reasons is technology. Because the gateway to empathy—that's feeling with another person. Sympathy is "I feel for you." Empathy is "I feel with you, I understand it, I've been there before." Well, you can't feel with somebody unless you can go, "Oh, she looks upset. Look at her face." Or, "Look at how he's holding his body. He looks stressed or his body language is that way or I'm listening to him and he sounds really frustrated." The more we look at a screen, a screen that is just an image that's not another human being, the less likely we are to have those language abilities. By the way, if you're an employer, deeper thinkers have stronger emotion vocabulary. Deeper thinkers also can step into the shoes of someone else. A four-year-old has the ability to have affective empathy, Winn. I remember my two-year-old—when my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, I was so upset and I remember my two-year-old crawling up into my lap and petting my face and putting a band aid on my tear.

WC: Oh gosh.

MB: Now, he didn't have this, "Oh my gosh, she looks really upset, I know how she feels" level but he had the ability at that particular point to feel with it and understand it. Affective empathy is the first way. The second one, though—these are called ABC's of empathy. The C kind is the cognitive capacity. That's what Harvard says is the top employee ability factor, to understand where the other person is coming from, to step into their shoes. One of the best ways we can help our children learn cognitive empathy is great old children's literature. Wonder, oh my gosh, that's why it's the top word, why everybody's reading that right now. Harry Potter books. For us, us, literary fiction for us, *All the Light We Cannot See*, *Bel Canto*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Stepping into the shoes of someone else. Watching the news on TV with a child and go, "How would you feel if you were in that home right now and your whole home had just come down with a hurricane?" Because now what you can do is go to the A to C to B, the behavior side of empathy. I don't care —

WC: Wow.

MB: —if you feel with someone and you understand it. So, what are you going to do about it? That's the behavior kind. "Oh, right. I know you would be upset so what can we do? Great idea. Let's pack a box of all of our gently used toys and let's fly it off right now or let's deliver it to the mailman or let's give it to the post office so we can help those people." That's the best stress reducer there is.

WC: Wow.

MB: I'm interviewing kids across the country right now and they're really doomed and gloomed about what's going on in the world but one of the coolest things is a group of teens in Glenbard, Illinois. I said, "What are you doing?" "We're so concerned about some of our friends. They've been in Zoom all year long and they don't have access to the counselor; they're depressed." "So, what are you going to do about it?" I said. "Well, we're coming up with quarantine gift bags." I said, "Okay, what's a quarantine gift bag?" "Well, we're coming up with a text chain amongst each other—" Can you imagine? This is empathy! "—about the kids we're worried about. And then one kid is really good at home-baked cookies; she bakes the cookies. Another kid is really good at art; he's decorating the front of a lunch bag. Another kid is really good at handwritten notes and every day we put the bags together and one on one—we're social distancing Dr. Borba—one on one we're driving them and dropping them off at the end of a driveway to each child." I said, "Oh my gosh, how does that make you feel?" He goes, "Oh, you can't believe what it's doing. Everyday a different kid calls up sobbing, 'Thank you, we didn't know anybody cared,' and then every day we start to cry because we know we made a difference. That's what it's all about." I went, "Oh my gosh, that's the ABC all together in empathy."

WC: This is when I'm glad our podcast isn't video because I'm having to reapply, I'm having to wipe my tears right now —

MB: Oh, me too. *[laughs]*

WC: —as you tell the stories. When you were telling that story earlier, when our daughter was barely three and my father passed away and so we're at the funeral home for my dad's funeral. Again, she's barely three years old and my mom has 90 grandchildren and so at the funeral parlor there's all these kids running around the funeral parlor, as kids do. All the cousins are together and so they're focused on playing and connecting with each other and I can't find my daughter. I look over and there she is on the front row all by herself with my mother.

MB: Oh!

WC: There's my mom in front of my father's casket and my mom just sitting on the front row and there's Sofia just sitting next to her, holding her hand. Like Sofia knew that that was her place. Her place was not running around with her cousins. Where she needed to be was next to Grandma, holding her hand. And that just taught me so much and warmed my heart that this is the type of a child that I want to have. This is the type of child that I want to nurture, not just for my own daughter, but for others.

MB: Oh gosh, Winn, clone yourself because we put that at the bottom of our list too often. Just like what the Harvard study said: our kids are hardwired for it but it needs to be cultivated and those children who have what's called a caring mindset, who see themselves as a caring person, are more likely to do exactly what your daughter did. Now, how you get that way, all we need to do is start acknowledging it. "Thank you for being so kind. Did you see what Grandma's face looked like when you did that for her? Oh, sweetheart, that was so lovely." What happens is our children then repeat the behavior because they recognize the impact their gesture had on someone. If we keep praising, "What'd you get, what'd you get," as opposed to, "What kind thing did you do," after a while that just keeps going into dormant stage.

WC: Huh. Well, these seven essential character strengths—you call them superpowers, by the way, which love, love, love, love, love that. We've talked about the first one: self-confidence. The second one: empathy. The third one is self-control. Talk about that.

MB: Well, we talked a little bit about that one when we were talking about the Navy SEALs but self-control is clearly a superpower. It's one of the most highly correlated traits of achievement because one part of self-control is the ability to focus: maintain your attention. Each of these character strengths, Winn, is also made up of skills. What I did was try to figure out what are the most highly correlated skills that kids need in and out of a classroom, in life as well, but

focusing abilities is one part of it. Another part of *Thrivers* is the ability to put the brakes on impulses so they can think straight and self-regulate. And one of those is certainly acknowledging what your strength areas are but clearly, also, what your stress levels look like. When it starts to “push comes to shove,” you can put the brakes on it. Now, I told you the Navy SEALs technique but what I wanted to do in throughout *Thrivers* is give dozens of actual ideas. Each activity, by the way, is grade level. Here’s what you can do for little ones, here’s what you can do for middle-size ones, here you could do for big ones, big kids. But the best way to learn any of these strengths, to be able to teach them to your child, is to learn them yourself. Because if you practice that deep breathing, or whatever strength it is—for instance, with teens, very often they don’t do the deep breathing slow enough, so put a feather on the top of a table and just say, “Breathe real slowly. Slow, slow, slow. No, no, no, don’t try to bounce the feather. Make it go slow and smooth. That’s going to take a lot of practice.” With little ones, it’s bubble blowers. You do that with your daughter: “Make the medium go slow, slow, slow. No, no, no. The big bubble: make it go slow, slow. If you breathe real slowly you get a real big bubble and it will go slowly far away, see?” so they can get the breath control. And then finally, it’s to be able to make good decisions along the way, so you can stop and think and problem solve along the way.

WC: By the way, in the back of your book *Thrivers*, I love the table that you share on the seven essential character strengths to help kids thrive. I mean, that was real, real effective in helping me understand this, so thank you for that.

MB: You’re welcome. I can give you a copy of that. Any listener can take that and download it. We finally said this is so critical that there’s another avenue if you’d like it.

WC: Well, the next one is integrity. Boy, let’s put a star next to that.

MB: I’m putting five stars next to it. I didn’t realize—I know it’s important and I think character is critical and ethical thinking patterns are critical, but I didn’t see the correlation to, unfortunately, thrivers until I began to realize that kids who can thrive or adults who can thrive have a real sense of their values. They know what they stand for, whatever it is. So, when push comes to shove and there’s a mental obstacle along the way, they don’t have to wivver or waver, they go, “Okay, here’s what I stand for, here’s who I am, so I can forge ahead and not get so stressed out about it.” Integrity is clearly instilled. One of the coolest ideas I’ve ever seen on that, Winn, I was interviewing kids and one of the groups of high school teachers said, “Would you go interview Marilyn Pearlman?” I said, “Why?” She said, “Because she’s got such integrity. Figure out how she became that way.” See, each one of these strengths you’re not born with. Some way along the way you learned it. So, I interviewed her. She’d graduated several years before from the high school but she was still renowned as having incredible integrity and I said, “Okay, how the heck did you form that integrity?” She laughed and said, “Oh, it was how I was raised.” So I said, “Okay, please do tell. How were you

raised?" She said, "I did something real simple," and by the way, this is the same thing you can do with kids but it's the same thing you can do in the business world, it's the same thing that schools now do to create a mission statement. "I was six. My brothers were young. We all came into the living room. My mother had all these chart papers and marking pens on the floor and Dad said, "Sit down, we're going to try to figure out how we want to be remembered as a family." How we want to be remembered as a family. I said, "So what did you do?" She said, "My dad said, 'There aren't any right or wrong answers, just start brainstorming. We're going to come up with character strengths or values.' So, in a very short amount of time," she said, "we had like honest and kind and caring and trusting and respectful and responsible. We filled out all the postures and Dad said, 'We can't be them all so let's vote as a family. What's the most important one we want to be remembered for? Who are we as a family?' Our last name is Pearlman, we all chose caring." I said, "So, what was your mantra?" She said, "Well, we became the caring Pearlands." I said, "Well, that's pretty easy. How'd you remember it?" She laughed and said, "It was impossible not to remember it. My mother must have said it 50 times a day. 'Remember, we're the caring Pearlands.' She'd drop us off at school: 'Remember, we're the caring Pearlands.' My dad would do these high five pacts, "Remember, we're the caring Pearlands.' We said it so much, we became it." I laughed and was thinking, *Oh my gosh, that's how you instill conscience in a child.* Sometimes, Winn, we don't repeat it nearly enough. We may have it on a poster but kids aren't going to learn it unless we embed it. We read children's literature: "Remember, we're the caring Pearlands. Were they a caring Pearland? We're watching the news: "Remember, we're the caring Pearlands. Was that a caring Pearland act?" You discipline your kid: "Hey, we're caring Pearlands. Was that a caring Pearland kind of an act?" until it becomes so internalized. Your children will learn that value the rest of their lives without you.

WC: I love this. Again, a business needs to have this type of a mission statement. And oftentimes a mission statement was written by the boss 20 years ago and it's on a poster and nobody even knows where it came from or what it believes and they have zero connection to it. But the fact that it was created together as a group of people, as a family, as an organization, so everybody has some type of contribution in creating that. But then just the repetition of it, over and over and over again. I was talking to this one company and their mission statement or their theme was TLC and it stands for train, love, clean. *[laughs]*

MB: *[Laughs]* Oh, that's great, but it's memorable, isn't it?

WC: Yeah, so it was just TLC always. But they would say, on the clean side of it, "We have a clean business. Our facility is clean." And they would say, to back it up, "If you have time to lean, you have time to clean." I remember that one *[laughs]*.

MB: That's fabulous. Well, and it gets back to when you try to embed a character strength in your child. The best things are sticky and memorable and repeated over and over again and the best thing right this minute is put your kid down on a

couch, turn and say, ‘So what do we stand for in this house?’ Or, ‘What do we stand for in this company, without looking at the mission statement?’ If it isn’t internalized then that means it’s just a platitude and it isn’t really sticking.

WB: Well, I love this next essential character strength: curiosity. My brother was an art teacher in a high school for years and to this day, he’s over 70 years old and has just the most childlike curiosity about so many different things and it’s just so attractive and he talks about the importance of curiosity. How do we keep that alive and how do you instill curiosity?

MB: Well, number one is realize that every two-year-old is the most inquisitive thing in the entire world. Every single thing is glorious. What you want to do is continue with that. If you look at Steven Jobs, look at anybody out there in the real world, they’d say curiosity is the benchmark that really is going to help us thrive. Now, how you do it: first of all, let kids continue to ask why. We get bored with it after a while but it’s a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful question. And after a while, you flip it. “I don’t know but let’s go find out. I’m so glad you asked. Let’s dig deeper.” Because what we’re concerned about is what’s happening with our children as they get older. Bottom line, that just really was disturbing to me, is that our children are losing creativity faster than any other country in the world. At age five, they’re wonderfully curious and it’s already nosediving when they track our kids. And what happens is thrivers think outside the box. A thriver is a child who’s going to face adversity, or an adult who’s going to face adversity, but is going to be able to think around it and go, “Let me know what else I can do.” The best way to do that is start problem solving with your kids. Start problem solving. By the way, Fortune 500 companies are still teaching brainstorming because they realize that some of their employees aren’t doing this nearly enough. Idea number one: when your kid comes home and is upset, do not rob him by giving him what to do. Instead sit on the couch and say, “Thank you for telling me that problem. Let’s figure out a way through it. Let’s figure out a way around it,” and brainstorm, which means just spark your brain. “There’s something else in there, inside your brain, let’s keep going and going. What’s one way you can solve it, another way you can solve it, a third way you can solve it?” Do that as a family and do that as a team with your adults because that is what is going to help keep our possibilities alive. Idea number two is continue to help your children learn that mistakes are okay. “Mistakes are part of life, sweetie pie, so what are you going to do differently the next time?” That’s a possibility that is glorious because one of the things that disturbed me was talking to Ivy League professors that said, “This is the smartest generation but they’re the most risk averse. They’re afraid of failing. They’re afraid of thinking outside the box. They’re afraid of raising their hand and saying an idea that may ding their grade, and as a result that is robbing their potential.”

WC: Wow. You just gave me a little bit of hope here because one of the guiding principles in my company is “Failure is not fatal.” Now there are some things that are fatal. Theft can be fatal. You steal, you could get fired from the company. But

failure, why? Because you're using your creativity, your curiosity, to come up with a new way of how we do things around here, why should that ever be fatal?

MB: You know, Winn, I'm so with you. My head's nodding up and down and you can't see it but in the beginning of each chapter of *Thrivers*, my goal was to find the optimum classroom or school, someplace in the world, that was teaching it the right way. The most mind-boggling place I've ever been to, was the MIT multimedia lab outside Cambridge. These are the most gifted and talented, creative individuals we have. It's where Siri was invented, where artificial intelligence was invented, the top computer labs are invented. So I get to spend a day in the MIT multimedia lab. IQ points are off the ozone layer, but there's a couple of things that I noticed about why they're so incredible about creating the best inventions we have. First is that failure is an option and they tell you, "In this place, that's how you learn and failure is fine, so figure out a different way." The other thing they do is team building. Every team is—they don't have diverse groups of, "You're the neuroscientists so you're in that lab and you're the musicians so you're in that lab and, oh my gosh, you're the pediatricians over there." They join forces all together so they put all these minds together and the only thing that you must do is invent something that will better humanity. You sit—

WC: Wow!

MB: I'm telling you, you will cry by the time you leave because the hope is there. I left there going, "That's exactly how we should be putting our classrooms. That's exactly how we should help in our teen concepts." The coolest lab that they had there was called Lifelong Kindergarten. These are adults, you walk in and they're sitting on the floor playing with Legos. And the inventor of it says, "You've got to keep play alive because play is what instills creativity." And when you're sitting there listening to them create the most mind-boggling inventions while they're playing together, working things through, enjoying each other's company. And that is another fallacy that we have. We've extinguished play in our kids' lives. Sandbox is out the door. Age two, forget sandbox, you've got to start going to school, sweetie pie, and as a result there goes your kid's ability to thrive, already handicapped.

WC: Wow, thank goodness I became a dad because I tell people all the time, had I not become a dad, I'd just be this rich, mean idiot. But my daughter, again, I wonder who's raising who and times when we thought it was appropriate or we needed to scold her for making a mistake, she would then remind us that, "Well, you know, Daddy, Einstein failed and made a mistake 10,000 times before he got the lightbulb so, Daddy, I can make mistakes." I went, "Okay, okay got it."

MB: Got it. Got it. Exactly. We should just listen to the kids, right?

WC: Yeah, yeah. As long as we're still talking about this because I love this one. In your book, you said, "Want to raise creative kids? Leave them alone." What did you mean by that?

MB: I meant, obviously, supervise them and create the making safe but what we do know about creative kids is that the parent has stepped back. The parent is allowing the child to go off course. The parent is allowing the child to play, to be inventive, to come up with mistakes and then work it through. And as a result it creates that agency that thrivers have, the ability to say, "I got this, I'll get through it." And it also helps the child realize that the parent is confident in them to do so. I think we need to do a lot more "You got this, kid" kind of statements back to them so the child begins to realize "I can do it."

WC: The next one is perseverance.

MB: Perseverance is a child who keeps on going, has that grit, but doesn't need a gold star and a trophy in order to get there. It's hugely important but we now know that perseverance certainly can be stretched. One of the biggest reasons why perseverance stalls is that we reward it. The fascinating thing is Carol Dweck looked at businesses, she looked at classrooms, she looked at parenting and she realizes that those of us who endure, that keep on going, are those of us who have what's called a growth mindset. It's not fixed, that goes, "Okay, I can only do this so far but I can't keep going because my zip code isn't the right one, or my IQ isn't strong enough, or my GPA isn't at a high enough level." If you have this ability to say, "I can keep doing it, it's all a matter of how hard I practice or how often I give it my all," then the child is more likely to endure. And the best thing, says Carol Dweck in that research, is don't praise the outcome. "How many did you get? Oh, you got 100 percent. Oh, A-plus! That goes on the refrigerator." Yes, you're proud of it but instead Carol Dweck says keep encouraging the effort. "You're hanging in there, sweetie pie. I know this is hard but yesterday you were here, today you are here. You're getting there, just keep on going." That's what good coaches do. They don't say, "Give up and quit." They say, "Keep on going. You've got this. Just keep on going. You'll get better and better." Just keep helping the child realize that real success is a four-letter word spelled gain: G-A-I-N. Yesterday you were here, today you're here. Now, you may have to help the kid know, "Here's what that one little stumbler is. Here's how you can fix that one little thing to get over the top and keep on going," but when you do your child is going to have one of the most highly successful traits and that is a growth mindset that says "I can endure. It's all a matter of how hard I work."

WC: You said the word *trophy*. Are we a trophy society?

MB: Oh yeah, we are. At this point we're giving kids trophies for showing up, which after a while, the kid looks at you like, "Really?" I remember my own kid had a closet full of them because that was the thing, just keep giving the trophies out. And I remember when he finally went off to USC and at that point we were

packing and I said, “What would you like me to do with all these trophies?” and he looked at me like, “Well, dump them, Mom. They don’t have any meaning. The only thing that really has meaning,” and he showed me the USC certificate, “This is the thing I’ve worked the hardest for my whole life, because this is what I really wanted.” “Why?” I said. “Because I want to be a filmmaker, Mom. That’s what I’ve always wanted to be.” Well, I knew that along the way. He is a filmmaker, by the way, but I also realized: what the heck was I doing saving all those trophies?

WC: Wow. Okay, we have one more and then I have so many other questions, I’m so sorry. Optimism is the seventh strength here.

MB: Yeah, optimism is a child and an adult who can see the silver lining. Please don’t assume that this means that you’re a Pollyanna and a little Miss Sunshine and that you don’t have a reality base that these are tough times. But an optimist has this wonderful trained—listen carefully—trained, teachable ability to keep the negative, pessimistic thoughts from pervading and becoming permanent. And once they become permanent and pervasive, there goes depression, there goes anxiety. They’re going to rise, rise, rise and that’s exactly what’s happening. Some of the coolest things I’m seeing are actually now done at freshman year, first quarter—actually first week in Ivy League schools. They’re realizing that so many kids are lacking these skills that, now when the kid comes in—we’re talking Yale, Harvard, Stanford—what they’re now doing is training the kids on how to have optimistic thinking patterns because they haven’t learned them before. I’m going, “Why are we waiting so late?”

WC: Wow. And I love it how you talk about that parents need to reinforce these qualities in kids from sandbox to prom. I love that *[laughs]*.

MB: Yeah, because I think the most important thing, Winn, is realizing these are teachable. They’re not locked into DNA. They’re not fancy-dancy and too difficult. They’re everyday things that we can weave in, the skills that our children are going to need in a classroom and out, for employers and for the rest of their lives. They also instill healthier relationships. And the fascinating thing is they also create longer lives. Healthier, longer lives. So it’s just a win, win, win of why we must rethink our parenting and rethink, really, how we are as leaders so that we can really create the best, best performance of who we have under us.

WC: Michele, is there ever a time when it’s too late to train this?

MB: No, that’s the best thing in the whole wide world. I discovered that empathetic people are most empathetic during middle age. I’m like, yeeha, there’s hope for us all, because we finally have all that wisdom. We’re reading more and we keep thinking more about others. It’s never too late. Listen, Winn, if it was too late, the entire counseling industry would go out of business. What we’ve just got to do is put it onto our agendas and plates and realize this is what we’ve got to do.

WC: So, I'm going to take you in a couple other directions here. You say that, in your book, "A parent's voice becomes a child's inner voice." I put a star next to that, I underlined it. Can you expand on that?

MB: Yes, there are so many simple things that we can do but one of the simplest ways to instill any of the traits I'm talking about in *Thrivers*—for instance, optimism. One of the things that we've got to do, the Navy SEALs taught me this one, is come up with a phrase to counter the negative. So, it's maybe "We've got this" or "We'll get through it" or "We're strong together." Do you have a phrase in your teambuilding as an employer? Do you have a phrase as a parent for your children? Because if you keep saying it over and over again, "I got this, we'll get through it," after a while what happens is your kid actually does listen. Believe it or not, they do.

WC: [Laughs]

MB: And your voice becomes your child's inner voice and that means they've got one more skill that they've learned and they'll be able to do without you.

WC: Okay, so as we start to wrap this up—but trust me we're not done yet, because here's a topic that I think is a very, very obvious necessary topic and that is screen time and social media.

MB: Screen time and social media. Let's get a grip on it right now because the latest reports have said something that we knew was going to happen, is that our children are even more addicted to screen time, social media, and cell phones because they've had those as their lifeline during a pandemic. Now is the time to realize a couple of things. First of all, the more you are on that screen, the more likely you are to have your stress increase, the more likely you are to have your empathy diminish, the less likely you are to be able to learn feelings and emotions, to be able to read one another, and the less likely you are to learn a hobby or what your other strengths in life are that build confidence. So this is the time to do a couple of things in a home. If you are with someone on the screen—you're Zooming with Grandma, you're FaceTiming with your friend, you're doing your lessons on the screen with your buddy, you're doing that virtual book club with a friend, that's okay. But if you're just facing a screen and doing nothing more, that's when we're going to have some reestablishing limits as a household. You figure out what the limits are, but stick to them because the *New York Times* article just a couple of weeks ago warned us that now is the time to start pulling back and regaining control over those digital devices because they are demolishing our kids' ability to thrive.

WC: Yeah, I underlined that in your book as well, where you said, "Screen time should be with another person," and that was really good advice, by the way. I'm sure I'm going to get my house egged for this question and asking you to comment on it, but at what age do you feel it's appropriate for a child to have an iPhone in their hands or to have social media?

MB: Well, there isn't a form out there on social media from Facebook to Instagram that warns you that your child should not be on it, at least until they're 13. That said, I do know the majority of parents are allowing it so you've got to ask yourself why. What is the value and what would the reason for it? In terms of a digital device, in terms of a cell phone, what I have learned is there are certain reasons why certain kids need them for connection with a parent, to making sure that you know where your child is. That said, get a device that just has access to you and your child. It's just your number that they're pushing so that they can reach you. And then slowly, slowly, slowly allow your child to have the device. The most interesting thing, when I was interviewing teens, they said over and over again, "Parents need to be stricter with our siblings. Our younger siblings are going to lose it. They're going to really lose how to connect with one another because they are giving them the devices way too soon." [Laughs] Now that's a teen saying parents need to be stricter.

WC: Wow.

MB: You know, if there's anything of a parent, I think we need to be savvier and we need to have what the evidence says. Parents, the most critical thing that you can do is put Common Sense Media on your phone or write it down because they are tracking the best research there is on digital devices. Anytime you are asking yourself, *Is that particular game or app appropriate for my kid? That movie, is it appropriate?* You go to Common Sense Media and they'll give you guidelines of what experts on child development will say, what age is appropriate, what's not. If you could read anything, read the stats on empathy in *Thrivers* because it will tell you that what's happening with, particularly our tween-age girls, their stress levels and depression levels are up into horrific levels because they are more concerned about what they look like and it's doing them, really, a tragedy.

WC: Wow. Well, to wrap things up, again, do I get a commission because I know at least 10 of my friends this week bought your book?

MB: [Laughs] Thank you.

WC: Literally, because I've been taking the screenshot and the link to that and just texting, texting, texting to multiple people because I'll read a chapter, "Oh my gosh, Keri needs this. Oh my gosh, Michelle needs to read this," and everybody, the book is *Thrivers: The Surprising Reasons Why Some Kids Struggle and Others Shine*. How can people get a hold of your book? Obviously through Amazon. How else can they learn more about you?

MB: Oh, thank you. Well, my website is micheleborba.com. I'm a one-L Michele. My last name rhymes with Zorba, so it's micheleborba.com. There's free downloads for parents. There's also an educator discussion guide that I just created that's free because I want us to start getting on the same page together, with schools and homes and businesses. We've got to shrink the village and start talking the

same talk and we'll discover that there's a lot more like-minded parents and employers out there and that's how we'll raise up a group of thrivers.

WC: Well, one more final question or final message that you have for our audience, Michele?

MB: Thrivers are made, not born. I think that's the bottom line. We are living in a very, very uncertain world and I think we need to reset our parenting so that we can raise a group of kids who can handle life without us. This is something we can do and we must do. Our children are hurting. We have never seen such rises in stress prior to the pandemic. One in five American kids will suffer from some kind of a mental health disorder and then came the pandemic. That only amplifies preexisting issues. We've got to get our acts together. There's no rewind button on parenting. One moment only. This is our moment so let's rise up and start raising thrivers.

WC: And listeners, this is not doom and gloom, this is hope. This brilliant woman is bringing solution and hope and that's why I love you, Michele, so much and your message of it's not too late, it's not too late. Thank you, Michele, so, so much. You are again changing and saving lives and for that I love you and I'm so grateful.

MB: Oh, Winn, thank you, thank you. It's been an honor.