

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH
SINGER, ACTRESS, AND MENTAL HEALTH/ANTI-BULLYING ADVOCATE
MEREDITH O'CONNOR

June 24, 2020

Host: Bryan Smith

Meredith O'Connor:

My work on anti-bullying has been this movement that started, obviously, through that song, "The Game," and then the world tour sort of came together through realizing that the principals, superintendents, teachers were saying, "Come speak at this school, this university." And then I would have fans say, "Do a concert in the UK." And so that's sort of turned into this situation where I was like, "This is a beyond our country thing. Like, this is a global thing." So, that led to the first world tour, which included Greece, the UK... It really... Just the places that I ended up going to, talking about, you know, on behalf of this message and this cause totally caught me by surprise. I didn't even know there were that many people within the US that had the kind of bullying I had. So, that part of my career opened my eyes to seeing lots of kids feel alone, but yet at the same time, lots of kids go through this. And if we all learned that we're not alone, that might help. Thus leading to this new song.

Bryan Smith:

Brian Smith here and welcome to the DreamPath podcast, where I try to get inside the heads of talented creatives from all over the world. My goal is to demystify and humanize the creative process, and make it accessible to everyone. Now let's jump in.

Bryan Smith:

Meredith Connor's on the show. Meredith grew up in Long Island, New York, where she danced, acted in theater, and took singing lessons as a child. She then made her way into modeling, and this is where she was discovered as a pop singer. As a singer, Meredith has played to packed audiences globally, and her music has been featured on Teen Nick and Radio Disney. Her hit song, "Celebrity," which went viral on YouTube in 2013 and has more than 2 million views, became an international hit, launching her singing career globally. After her hit song, "The Game," about bullying was released that same year, Meredith began speaking about bullying internationally and was eventually invited to speak at the United Nations. Meredith has also been recognized by the city of Los Angeles as an anti-bullying icon.

Bryan Smith:

This summer, Meredith is launching a mental health awareness campaign called, "You're Not Alone." With this campaign she's raising awareness for young people suffering from OCD, PTSD, and anxiety; something she's struggled with silently for the last decade, but is now ready to talk about publicly for the first time. As a leader in the cause of ending bullying and promoting mental health, Meredith has spoken alongside Charles Schwab, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and Khan Academy's Salman Khan. When I went into this interview, I thought we'd be talking more

about her music and songwriting, but I was pleasantly surprised to find the conversation diving into her anti-bullying and mental health awareness campaigns. Meredith is certainly a multidimensional artist who is focused on using her platform to make positive change. So, let's jump right into my talk with Meredith. O'Connor

Bryan Smith:

Meredith O'Connor, welcome to the podcast.

Meredith O'Connor:

Thank you so much! Thanks for having me; I'm excited to speak with you about some upcoming projects- Or, really just one big upcoming project. And I guess learning a little bit more about what you guys do at DreamPath, but yeah, thanks for having me.

Bryan Smith:

So, why don't we start off by just hearing about your upcoming project that you're excited about?

Meredith O'Connor:

Sure. So, "You're Not Alone," is a campaign with many celebrities that people from all audiences may have heard of, which is the exciting part. It's not... Although, it's not officially announced in terms of who's on it, and who's recorded, and who's filmed in the music video already, it is a new campaign that will be launched and announced, to my fans obviously, but also we'll be reaching the fans of the TV movie and recording stars that have jumped on this mental health campaign.

Meredith O'Connor:

And I'm- It's just, as you can tell, it's hard for me to not go into the details, but the exciting thing that I'm sharing with you, actually, the first time is... The Corona virus situation has been obviously a new development that is been really troubling to so many, and even just the concept of uncertainty can be really stressful. But just knowing that things can get better and that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, I think, can really help me get through a lot. Not even speaking about COVID, just any challenge in general. I had this debate on, you know, the original date to release. It was going to be with, "Each Mind Matters," in May- on May 19th. We have decided to postpone that, but at the same time we are going to release it in the near future, because I'm sort of thinking that it just, it really can help people who may be feeling hopeless, scared, or alone.

Meredith O'Connor:

And I think that it could be- That there's a good chance that it may be able to offer some solace to people who may otherwise be feeling alone. So, that is sort of the upcoming campaign that is going to be involving some familiar faces as well. And we anticipated it to come out in May, but it will be coming out soon. And so, yeah, so that's, that's the project it's basically, it's a song filmed with stars from all over the world in one music video. And the message is obviously that you're not alone, but also that things do get better. And this project started two years ago, the

idea for it, when I realized how many celebrities out there saw that this, you know, social-cause movement is important, especially when you have a following in the platform. But not only that, you know, I spoke a lot about anti-bullying for quite a while now, realizing that people all over are going through extreme forms of bullying, whether it's at home or at school.

Meredith O'Connor:

And I've just been really moved by how many celebrities have been inspired by the anti-bullying movement. And so that's sort of where it started as an idea. And I spoke to some friends who were on board with creating some sort of collaborative project, you know, just about the movement. And then it slowly, you know, I- With my co-writer Heather Holly, we worked together to create a song that would involve stars, ideally from all over the world. And it, you know, over the course of time, obviously this has been going on, this project, for a while. We've had more and more stars from different countries come on. So we're very, very excited about this whole thing. And that's, and that's pretty much the campaign, the gist of it.

Bryan Smith:

So, when you say it's a campaign, can you tell us more about what that means? It sounds like there's a song, there's a music video, there's a message. But how do you define a campaign and the goal of that campaign?

Meredith O'Connor:

So yes, the... There are certain facets to the campaign that are not- That will be announced once the song is out. Which is exciting, and that of course involves some of the celebrity participants. I am excited about speaking with media outlets from all over the world that we have ready to discuss. Basically the goal of this campaign is... You know, what makes it such a new project is, something that I haven't spoken a lot to the media about, is my own struggles with mental health diagnosis. As recently, I've been diagnosed with PTSD and I had OCD and... You know, OCD has been incredibly crippling, but in learning how to handle it, I've sort of discovered that it is possible for things to get better, and you don't have to suffer in silence. So, that testimony- My own testimony, although it hasn't really been talked about much, just because I haven't- People know me as, you know, an anti bullying activist, but what they don't know is a lot of the mental turmoil that led to some of the situations I've been in.

Meredith O'Connor:

And also that resulted from the bullying, such as PTSD. I feel like it's really important that this is shared for people who may be going through it and may not know what to do, or may not realize that through therapy and through, you know, through taking the necessary steps to get better, they may not realize that it's possible. So, my goal through this campaign is really obviously the reach of the celebrities on the song from different countries. Some people that... Someone is a household name that all the- A lot of parents from all over the- I say parents, but a lot of people who, legendary singers that everyone would know that may not be in my demographic. But the goal is really to incorporate media outlets and populations who may be experiencing mental

anguish from all over the world to realize that, no matter what our circumstances, we do all experience certain mental anxieties, but most importantly things can get better.

Bryan Smith:

Yeah. Well, a couple of observations from what you just said. There's an approach to a campaign that, like this, that's different than just the launch of a single, or a launch of a music video.

Meredith O'Connor:

Right.

Bryan Smith:

It sounds like the song, and the music video, and the collaboration with all of these stars throughout the world is really designed to communicate an important message. And that's what's so cool about the work that you do, is that it's not designed to get more Instagram followers, or to become more popular, but you really have something to say, and you're trying to help people that are struggling with the same struggles that you have gone through. And what's so-

Meredith O'Connor:

What's-

Bryan Smith:

...so- go ahead.

Meredith O'Connor:

Oh, no, I just thought what's interesting is actually just to take it a step back. I was told, I mean, I first went viral on YouTube, what, seven years ago now? And when I realized I had this fame and there was- I remember there were tabloid-style interviews, there was being recognized in the street. And a lot of record executives had told me that putting out a positive message would essentially lose fans, it would lose media steam, it would lose relevance, because nobody cares about a good cause. And this was a long time ago. This was before social causes and media, or pop music was as common as you see now. But a while ago, several years ago, I was told not to do that. But at the same time, I sort of didn't rely on any... I didn't really want to put media relevancy or just doing things for shock value.

Meredith O'Connor:

I feel like- I felt like there was enough of that. I felt like what kids needed was a role model that would basically say things that I were- I was never told about growing up when I sort of needed- Like, I wanted to be the role model that I wish I had, essentially, in terms of pop music. And what happened was, despite people telling me it won't make you- It won't increase your popularity, it will actually make you less relevant. It was, you know, I was, I figured, let me go ahead and put out this message, because I feel like this is the only chance anyone will listen.

But to my surprise, the irony of, I guess, all of it was that is what led to a career that didn't require publicity stunts or tabloids. Or, some of my colleagues will say, you know, unfortunately the media is- We need each other. Like stars need the media, the media need the stars and vice versa.

Meredith O'Connor:

And I feel like, while that is true and while I love working with media, I think it's also important to stay true to your message. So, ironically I guess, in releasing this song that is what created, you know, hundreds of- Hundreds of thousands of people, and billions, you know, who've said, "This has helped change my life." Or, "This has saved my life." I've done meet and greets where people said, testimonies that have been like- That stick with me until today. And, I guess the point is no one expected it to strike as many chords as it did, especially not me. I grew up thinking I was like this freak of nature. And then I realized, after I put out this song that might help a couple thousand kids around a hundred kids around the world, I thought if I'm lucky; ended up impacting in large, very, very large numbers, very intensely.

Meredith O'Connor:

And so then, of course, I think the same record executives changed their perspective. They said, "Oh, well now it's great to talk about a good cause." So that was, that was ironic, you know, how that whole thing happened. And that was actually the beginning of that- I don't want to say that led to the idea of "You Are Not Alone," but the fact that a lot of people now are doing this cause, and are using their platform for a good cause, which I actually think is great. I felt like, why don't we all come together for this to actually create this campaign that, as you said, will impact and hopefully benefit the lives of millions.

Bryan Smith:

Yeah. I think it's important for young people and people who are in their twenties and thirties, because they're still suffering as well. But especially young people to know that people like you, who, you know, you started off as a model, then you became a viral sensation on YouTube with celebrity. From the outside looking in, probably to most young people, you're not someone who would look like someone suffering from OCD or PTSD or anxiety. But if you can get out there with a message that this is actually something that a lot of people suffer from, and it's just remarkable. I'm 48 years old, but, and I have three daughters and I know through my daughters, a lot of young people, and there's so many people that are suffering from OCD. I don't know what's going on, but it's really sad.

Meredith O'Connor:

It's sad. It's so crippling. It's like, it's so much more of a big deal than I mean, you know, the guy that locks the door three times, of course there's some OCD there, but what people don't commonly talk about is like the millions, such as the people you had mentioned that you may know who have it, just the millions of people who are like... You know, when I was 13, I was in all the AP classes and I had to drop out of all of them. Like it was like, I really couldn't function. But then I was able to go from that to, as you said, shortly after I began modeling, and then the

viral sensation thing happened and then the world tour, and like, this was all after therapy. But, you know, it was very kind of... You know, it was very scary to have OCD. And first of all, like no one knew what was going on.

Meredith O'Connor:

Like my parents were like, we were trying to figure out what, what exactly it was. And being able to identify OCD and being like, you know, the reason that you're doing these compulsions, or the reason that you are, I don't know, having these intrusive thoughts of a bad day or whatever it is that causes anxiety. Right? Just being able to pinpoint that and say like, "We can work on this and it's fixable." Is... And also other people have it and they're fine. And you know what I mean, that sort of is a totally different ball game than the one of like, "We don't know what's going on with you," and you just don't know how to solve it. And you don't know anybody else who, especially in adolescents, you don't know anyone else who's going through that.

Meredith O'Connor:

That can be incredibly scary and isolating on top of everything. Plus the bullying didn't help either. But I do think that the idea of the concept of universality can really, can really help make it a lot less scary to some people. And the fact that you mentioned that it is really common is, to me, it's sad because it's just up until we've recently started talking about mental health more openly, I think, in this country and in the world. Up until then, I mean, think of all those people feeling scared and isolated. So that's part of why I'm really passionate about this song. A lot of the work I've done has really been motivated by: I have the fan base I have, what's something I wish a pop star did when I was 12, but nobody did? You know what I mean? That none of them did that I knew about.

Meredith O'Connor:

So, if I have people who are listening to my stuff, here's my chance to basically say stuff that I was never told by someone I thought was glamorous. And I think, I mean, I think that the notion of, like people may not know I have OCD because they don't know what it is, is really important. A lot of times people may think that they're just, they don't know why they do these things. They don't know why they freak out if they look at the color blue or whatever it is. I think it is important to go through that. I mean, another message in my music prior to "You Are Not"- the YANA campaign was the, what do you call it, was the song, "Just the Thing." And that was with Luke Billick. I mean, I feel like that was, you know, when you grow up with ADHD and OCD and learn differently, and you think it's a disability, which it is classified as today.

Meredith O'Connor:

You may think you're stupid. And then when you learn, when I- And I'm just speaking strictly to my own experience, but once I learned that I wasn't an idiot. Right? Like once I learned that I was actually smart just by being told that I- Essentially, by being called disabled, that I was less intelligent than most. Once I learned that that wasn't true, I became frustrated for all of the people who are told that when it's not true. So, a lot of that messaging in like my other songs, like "Just the Thing" was really just to say that just because you're different, you know what I

mean? Doesn't mean it's a setback. A lot of times it's just something that it could be a gift. It could just be you're bad at something and better at the other things. It could just mean that you have your own different set of skills, but oftentimes the things that make us different, whether we hate them because they- We get bullied for it as kids, whether we don't like it because we learn differently, whatever we don't like, our quirks, they oftentimes end up being what make us successful. And I think a lot of the proof is in people who have become billionaires off of ideas and off of things that were once considered- You know what I mean? So, that is also a lot of the messaging in it too.

Bryan Smith:

Yeah. The COVID situation seems to me to be a good opportunity, actually. I know that it's awful. And there's so many people suffering with feelings of isolation and anxiety because of the invisible virus that's just affecting so many people. But I would imagine that, what it's also doing it's sort of amplifying this sense of isolation and anxiety to the point where you have to do something about it. It's not sort of percolating in the background anymore. It's... Everybody is really feeling it. And also people that maybe have not suffered from anxiety and OCD before this, are now starting to be able to empathize with those who feel this every day, whether it's a pandemic or not.

Meredith O'Connor:

My cousin and I actually made a joke to each other. We were saying, you know, because we both deal with our own anxiety and we were on FaceTime. And I was talking about, I said, "I really, you know, I feel for the people who are anxious all the time." And she asks how I'm holding up. And I said, "You know, I'm personally with, pertaining to the COVID situation, I've been lucky enough to find- To have my family as my quaran-team, and I left Manhattan. And so we're sort of doing that whole thing, but regardless, I just, I don't feel any more stressed. And the joke was essentially that, like, a lot of the anxiety, from somebody who has anxiety, a lot of times people will see the rest of the world feeling something that they may feel every single day. And that was, you know, sort of from her words, because, you know, when you deal with anxiety, it definitely is a daily thing.

Meredith O'Connor:

But seeing that it's now like a widespread problem now, as you said, it's gotta be talked about and addressed on a level of, like, everybody's having it. And I think that's a good point. Like, now it may be the kind of thing that the stigma is forced away, because it's not even anything to be shameful of, like everybody's experiencing it. So, I think that that could be another, maybe silver lining in this situation that there's less of a stigma and talking about it. And so, you know that, but I think in this- My personal goal of the campaign for YANA is to get the people who hear it, to believe they can get better and get that help. You know what I mean? Like the first step I think we faced, just speaking towards maybe this country is like, can I talk about it? Is it embarrassing?

Meredith O'Connor:

And I know this is, this is similar in globally as well. Just like, I'm embarrassed to speak about something that really shouldn't be embarrassing to talk about, was sort of the first problem I think we had. And I think it looked a lot worse 10 years ago than it does now in terms of the mental health stigma. But I think now, I mean, thinking you can get better from serious issues is something a lot of people also face, and just realizing there's hope. No matter how stuck you feel, no matter how anxious or depressed or hopeless you feel, there is hope. And I think that that's an important sentiment that, if people feel they'll get the help they need and eventually see that progress.

Bryan Smith:

I think it's also important that the parents of those affected become educated about it, because I was just watching a couple of films on anxiety and OCD called, "Angst and Like." And they're one hour educational films about- They're documentaries basically, about these topics. The director is Scilla Andreen out of Seattle. I'll send you her information afterwards.

Meredith O'Connor:

Oh, I'd love that. Yeah.

Bryan Smith:

Yeah. So, she does a lot of outreach and work and messaging on anxiety, and also how it interconnects with social media-

Meredith O'Connor:

Right.

Bryan Smith:

-And the pressures of social media. But one thing I've found watching these films is that, parents are so ignorant about their own child's dilemma. That they're just, they're not just unhelpful, they can actually set the kid back, because without that empathy in that- Well, it's not a lack of empathy, they have the capacity to be empathetic.

Meredith O'Connor:

Sure, sure.

Bryan Smith:

But they just don't know that it's a real debilitating, diagnosable thing. And I've actually said some of the same things that I saw parents in the film saying before, like, why don't you just put yourself out there? Why don't you just try? You know? And it rings hollow with your own children when their parents are saying things that have no connection to the reality that they are experiencing.

Meredith O'Connor:

Yeah.

Bryan Smith:

So, if the parent understands that this is real and debilitating, they need to get on that level with their own child and learn the workarounds and learn what the therapy routes are.

Meredith O'Connor:

Yeah. I think that like that, that is such a difference maker. And you're right. I mean, if you're like, if somebody has a problem that will be made worse from something and the parent does that, just out of thinking their kid is, let's just say typical.

Bryan Smith:

Right.

Meredith O'Connor:

You know what I mean? And they're going to do the thing that makes, that will make the kid worse. I mean that is obviously the- Not obviously, but that's often the format for a lot of problems that kids have and then parents, like, respond to it in ways that can, without even realizing it, make it worse. You know, my parents absolutely did that, you know. And I mean, it is to no fault of their own in the sense that they'd never had the opportunity to be presented with the information about OCD. It's sort of like when you get your high school diploma, your college diploma, even law school diploma, doesn't really- You know what I mean? Unless you specifically learn about mental disorders, the average educated person is not... Now, it may be slightly different, but at least, you know, 10 years ago, the average person wasn't going to understand the symptoms that OCD was presenting. But it is sort of a problem when so many people have it and- Or somebody has an issue that will get made worse without the proper therapy. So, I think it is something that, I think just simple education, realizing that this problem is not a choice; they're doing it because of whatever reason, you know?

Bryan Smith:

Yeah. Well, I'm glad that you're on this campaign and that you're continuing this positive messaging.

Meredith O'Connor:

Yeah. I think it's- I do hope- You make a good point, I do hope it does reach the parents. You know, I hope it does offer some insight to families who may be experiencing this as well. I mean, you brought up a great point. So thank you so much. Yeah.

Bryan Smith:

Yeah. So, how did you become an international spokesperson on this issue? And I noticed in doing some research about you, that you are involved with the United Nations and you're really doing, I mean, this is- The message that you are putting out there is reaching... It's a worldwide platform and it's pretty remarkable. So, how did you become an international spokesperson on this?

Meredith O'Connor:

Yeah, I mean, well I spoke at the UN with some NGOs on the incredible work that was done. And my work on anti-bullying has been this movement that started, obviously through that song, "The Game." And then one thing led to the next, and then the world tour sort of came together first before- The world tour came together through realizing that this was, you know, I remember principals, superintendents, teachers were saying, "Come speak at this school, this university." And then I would have fans say, "Do a concert in the UK," or "Do this..." You know what I mean? And, so that sort of turned into this situation where I was like, this is a beyond our country thing, like this is a global thing. So, that led to the first world tour, which included Greece, the UK- All over the UK. And we ended up, I remember doing something in The Bahamas as well.

Meredith O'Connor:

It really, like just the places that I ended up going to talking about, you know, on behalf of this message and this cause totally caught me by surprise. I just, I didn't even know there were that many people within the US that had the kind of bullying I had. So, that part of my career opened my eyes to seeing lots of kids feel alone, but yet at the same time lots of kids go through this. And if we all learned that we're not alone, that might help. Thus leading to this new song. So, I mean, I guess- And your question was, "How did I become an international star?" Through that world tour one thing sort of led to the next. We've partnered with organizations such as Hamogelo in Greece. They've done incredible work. I've worked with Kidscape in the UK.

Meredith O'Connor:

And really just social media, I actually have to say, can be really beneficial to everyone if used the right way. I mean, to people who have depression that may not know what it is or what to do, and maybe they see someone like me saying, go get a therapist. I have it too. You can get better. And you know what I mean? Like they may not- Because of social media, they know who I am and now they're a fan. And that's more just a way to say how it can connect people to messages that can help, it can connect to people to music that they, you know what I mean, that they would not have otherwise found. I mean, look at how I went viral, that never would have happened without social media. So, I think that social media did actually help with that connection element of it, for me.

Meredith O'Connor:

But I think that, the way it struck a chord with so many people, at least with the bullying part of it, is also contributed to, like, how it became this global thing. Which, trust me, that surprised all of us that no one expected the international part. If anything it's- My favorite part about the international platform and stuff has been just learning for myself how many people go through this and how many people feel alone, but don't have to. So that's sort of, kind of fueled the fire of really just sharing that message of universality to people who feel isolated. And I mean, yeah, and I just think that feeling isolated could definitely be dangerous for some people who are feeling particularly vulnerable, et, et cetera. But yeah, no, I mean, just to get back to your question, I think, yeah, that's pretty much how... It's pretty much how it happened.

Meredith O'Connor:

Oh, and then one more thing you mentioned bullying, I'm sorry. The mental health component of it was not as spoken about. But I have learned through international travel, through seeing hundreds of thousands of people tell me one way or another that they're getting bullied. I've learned that mental health does have a big relationship, whether it either comes from the bullying or causes the bullying, it plays a big role in it.

Bryan Smith:

As you may have noticed, there are great resources and advice mentioned in all our episodes. And for many of them, we actually collect all of these resources for you in one easy place: our newsletter! You can go to dreampathpod.com/newsletter to join. It's not fancy, just an email about each week's episode, featured artists, and resources to help you on your journey. Now, back to the interview.

Bryan Smith:

Do you feel like the pressures of being a singer, a pop star, a spokesperson, create their own set of mental health issues that perhaps are layered on top of ones that you sort of came into the industry with?

Meredith O'Connor:

Yes. { laughs }

Bryan Smith:

I dunno if that makes sense, that question, but it just I'm concerned about the pressures of the business and how that interconnects to preexisting mental health issues.

Meredith O'Connor:

Yes, to answer your question. And that's with a capital Y. { laughs } You know, that... Make a long story short, this was something that I mentioned in the post on Instagram, I was dealing with a lot of stress and a lot of anxiety and a lot of pressures, that I thought I had not had a lot of problems that I thought didn't exist anymore. Because I, you know, because I was- I had OCD, and I thought I was cured and I thought everything was fine. And obviously things picked up with the world tours and with the new songs that had come out and my first album, and everything that followed resulted in me being really wanting to like- Caring a lot about my work and not paying as much attention to my mental health. So, the problem with that happened when I realized that there are some- There are still some, some issues there.

Meredith O'Connor:

And I took a break for awhile prior to "You Are Not Alone." I actually took a hiatus and I needed to... I needed to sort of prioritize my mental health. And in that time I sort of learned that, although I may have thought I was better from self-esteem and with my confidence, and I thought that my success in music had cured everything. I realized that there were still some

underlying issues regarding my coping mechanisms with stress and my self-esteem, and neglecting them and not giving them much of a voice sort of contributed to me feeling- Like, at one point, I remember feeling just like, just having these panic attacks that I haven't even had at any point in my life up until, maybe two years ago?

Meredith O'Connor:

So, it was a very new thing, and I still was... I did my second tour, my second world tour, but during that time it was really... I didn't have any coping mechanisms to deal with this new, with this new round of anxiety, that I think came about from the pressures I felt that come with maintaining a reputation, that come with maintaining... The pressures that you feel when you care about, you know, your work and a lot of it is very public. That's sort of- I internalized it, I think, a little bit too much. And I think it's important to definitely just maintain, you know, mental health for those reasons, obviously, within the industry. So, that is a, that is a very good question. And I've learned that, recently prior to- I don't know, if you'd asked me that a couple of years ago it would be a different, much more naive answer; but yes, is the answer to that.

Bryan Smith:

Well, it seems like the entertainment industry, in talking to a lot of celebrities and people that are putting out art for the love of the craft, they're also dealing with the pressures of the industry demanding certain things of them. Whether it's an appearance, or an endorsement, or "We need more content." Those types of pressures are really working against, I think, the artistic... Like the true artistic intent of what people got into the business to do.

Meredith O'Connor:

Yeah.

Bryan Smith:

Is that what you felt as a young person being pulled into...? I mean, it seems like you really got into singing and modeling very young. Were you conscious of that pull from the outside people? The representatives and-

Meredith O'Connor:

Just the business part.

Bryan Smith:

-The fans? Yeah, the business part of it, yeah.

Meredith O'Connor:

Yeah. No, that's... One thing I think that's important to- I mean, that is definitely a conflict that actually- The business versus the art part of it was something I faced for my first record label contract. That wasn't so internally mind-twisting as much as the fact that, if you think about a lawyer or an accountant who goes to work and comes home and gets a paycheck based off of their work, that's great. But if you think about somebody who, as you said, creates a song from

their heart, their art, whatever, and their face and appearances and their likeness and self is... I don't want to say income, but that is their job, like themselves. It becomes a lot more personal. So, work is no longer an office that you go to, to do a job or a task. It becomes... So, work is no longer a thing of like, you know, something that you do and then you come home and have- Whether it be a family or your friends or a beer or whatever.

Meredith O'Connor:

Work is more of a thing of who you are is your job. And so that can be- I've noticed that I've had these fears. I've... You know, I've had these sort of, I thought in Taylor Swift's movie reputation, which is really- I mean, it really tackled a concept that I think, you know, obviously she's one of the most prominent people in the industry. But the concept of being in the industry in general is just, if you're an artist your reputation definitely becomes something that, in some ways you can easily become obsessed with or, you know, afraid of losing or whatever it is. So anyway, I guess... So that really is one big part of it. I guess when entering for me, I used to love the art part of singing.

Meredith O'Connor:

Like, when I was a five year old in ballet classes begging my mom to... I'm like, "Oh, I want to be in the Nutcracker," and stuff. And, you know, my parents were not- They didn't know the show business world at all, but, you know, we still joke about that, but I ended up doing a theater company in my... As a kid in Long Island, and I did... I went to the school called Stars of Tomorrow. I did modeling... Finally got discovered by a modeling agent when I was 14, which was young. And then through there, ironically, that through modeling was how I got my first record contract and my first recording deal. So, I would have thought it was from the theater, but I guess the industry works in funny ways. So, that was all definitely, like the first time it got professional went from me singing on stage and loving to do it, to now it's a business, became a parent, really definitely with the first label. But I think a lot of the mental illness part and the stress, anxiety, panic attacks, I think a lot of that, for me personally, could be- Stem to confidence, and I am curious to learn a lot more about, like what causes those issues and those pressures, other than the external things.

Bryan Smith:

Yeah. So it sounds like you got started in the arts pretty young. Age five you're in ballet.

Meredith O'Connor:

Oh gosh, I wouldn't- No, I may have misspoke. I wish I was professionally in the arts since I was five; I was doing classes. I would've been willing to give my right arm to be in the industry since I was five. I was like, yeah, no, that was more clear. I was not good at ballet at all. I didn't make any of the auditions that I begged to go to. I shouldn't say it wasn't good at all, but I wasn't... Put it this way, I was never in any dance company that I wished I was as a kid. What ended up happening is I learned that I love to sing. Again, all really just going to classes, school plays, stuff like that.

Meredith O'Connor:

And I was good. I, you know, it was... And all the things that I wasn't good at in school, like I was... And all the things I was less than average in this way, I was more than average in. And so it was really cool to have something that I was better, you know, at than, as opposed to worse at, than others. That's sort of how I got the love for it, but my height and really getting discovered to model is what sort of gave me the luck. Unfortunately luck was involved- Is involved in this industry. And because I was tall, I was able to have the chance to meet my manager and then the first record label. And since then, obviously, I've switched labels. But, but yeah.

Bryan Smith:

When did you discover that you had a Broadway style voice? When I say that, I say that as a compliment completely. It's like... Who is the person who sang the Frozen song?

Meredith O'Connor:

Oh, Idina Menzel!

Bryan Smith:

Idina Menzel. I mean, it's like the-

Meredith O'Connor:

As a former theater geek-

Bryan Smith:

-Range that you have, oh, my gosh. Idina Menzel comes to mind.

Meredith O'Connor:

You gave me the highest compliment, I think, any theater geek can ever receive. And I don't know if I just answered your question, but I was raised and bred on, in terms of my vocal training and all the voice lessons, it was all for theater productions, because I was obsessed with being on Broadway one day. And that was sort of the whole- Because being a kid growing up in Long Island, New York, you go to- You know, gotten to see a Broadway show in the city. And I was sort of just like, "Oh my God, this is the greatest thing ever."

Meredith O'Connor:

And then I realized that there was this whole other industry of the recording industry. And then when I went viral, then it was like, you're a pop star kind of thing. And then, you know, going into a studio and changing my voice to pop style was absolutely totally different. But, with that being said, I have all the respect in the world for people who are trained -I'm a bit biased of course- but trained with the theater training, because I know how hard that really is. So, hearing you... Hearing... When people recognize that and compliment it, whether it's on my album reviews or whatever it is, I'm way too excited to get that compliment. So thank you so much.

Bryan Smith:
Yeah.

Meredith O'Connor:

There's many different opinions about, like if you enter the pop industry, it is... I like to say a defining thing, but it is definitely a... A different thing to have.

Bryan Smith:

Well, yeah, it sets you apart, definitely. There's so many pop singers out there that, as someone who's 48 years old I'm kind of an old man at this point, but it blends together. All of their voices. There's nothing distinctive about their voice necessarily, but someone like you... It's an effortlessness, that's the way I define it. There's an effortlessness to your approach to singing, and Idina Menzel has it. And there's just a few people on Broadway that have it, but you've successfully also taken that into the pop world, which is awesome.

Meredith O'Connor:

Thank you so much. I'm like, thank you so much. I'm... Yeah, that was actually a whole thing, internally, of people trying to teach me, record lab- Like the studio local engineers. Just when it came time to switch into that professional world of recording, I remember it from my first record label contract through all of- Through every EP album, there was a lot of that, here's how to not sound like you're singing an opera, but I mean, there's so much skill involved in that. So, they always say it is easier to switch from theater to pop than from pop to theater. So, thanks so much. Oh my God.

Bryan Smith:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, are you writing your own songs? Are you working with co-writers? How's that work?

Meredith O'Connor:

My main co-writer is Heather Holly. She and I were just able to write songs that I'm... I don't know, when I try to write... There's a couple of songs that I did write early in my career by myself that I, to this day, don't know how I did. But they, it was like they wrote themselves. Like, that would be the song about bullying, the anthem, "The Game," which was, which is super old now, now that I think about it. Yeah, that was by myself, and of course "Celebrity" was written on my own; as I cringe thinking about that { laughs }.

Meredith O'Connor:

No, but the other songs, like the song "Just the Thing" Heather and I wrote, and "You are Not Alone," Heather and I wrote, and it's just really awesome to work with her because she's been like... I don't know it's just sort of like she'll... A lot of the things that I want to say in the pop formula is not something I'm easily able to do, but I am able to write out the lyrics and do all the, you know, do all the work of songwriting. But to be able to make it that catchy so my songs are

on the radio, and she's really that, you know, helpful piece of that kind of creation. So, yeah, no that's- So, it's one co-writer that I usually stick with and that is sort of the formula for me.

Bryan Smith:

And it sounds like she helps you with some of the hooks and things that will help it be more well-received on pop radio.

Meredith O'Connor:

Well, actually for the song "Guardian Angel," though, I- The hook that I... It definitely, I have to say, really is a complete collaboration for all these songs, but for the song "Guardian Angel," I remember that was a hook that I- Is really Broadway, obviously. And that was something I had in my head. And, you know, whenever we write bridges she always, you know, she'll always say like, "Oh, your bridges are really dramatic and theatrical." That's why Queen is definitely an influence of mine, because I love how they connect theater with rock. I think it's one of the most talented bands ever to live. But yeah, no, I mean, so with "Guardian Angel" it was this theatrical sort of hook that I thought of, and then we kind of just came up with the rest of the song, which was about- Which was dedicated towards the Carol Galvin Foundation, but that was actually my most recent video. And that music video was very- The whole thing is very dramatic, but in a very good way, I think. I'm excited about that project.

Bryan Smith:

Nice. My oldest daughter, who's 28, her favorite band is Queen.

Meredith O'Connor:

Yes!

Bryan Smith:

Yeah, she loves it. And she's a theater kid too.

Meredith O'Connor:

Oh, that makes so much sense! I feel like that's definitely gotta be some sort of, like a pattern like that. That's amazing. No, yeah. Theater kids, we are own branch of special, I think. But I have not, I have not done theater in over a decade, but I do miss it so much.

Bryan Smith:

So, tell us how that songwriting process works with you and Heather, and how it starts, and how you collaborate, and are you together physically, and just give us the specifics if you can?

Meredith O'Connor:

Yeah, no, I mean, so for the first... We... She's... We've sort of done it bicoastally where a lot of my first EP, the stuff on "All That." Like, for example, the song- The earlier stuff like "Just the Thing," the songs, the other sing- Not singles, the other songs on the album, that was done in both New York and LA. And then more recently "You Are Not Alone" was... We were in LA. So,

that was all in person. But I have to say it depends from song to song who comes up with what. It's usually a discussion of concepts, for some songs I'll already have a lot and then she'll be like- You know, and for other songs she'll suggest a beat or- You know what I mean? And then I'll say, "Okay, and then let's do this."

Meredith O'Connor:

It's really that sort of a... "Okay, and then let's add kind of a thing back and forth," until you have the song, which I think is great. Personally, I think working with one person is like easier than having a staff of five writers, or whatever it is that a lot of people, you know, labels have pitched songs to me written by teams, or pitch various teams of writers and sessions. Which I'm not opposed to, I just feel very passionately about, if I can write the songs and if I like them and there- And other people like them, then I feel like that's... I think the best, my personal preferred way to get songs down.

Bryan Smith:

What I envision is you sitting down at a keyboard and maybe laying down a simple track and then emailing that track after recording it to your laptop to Heather. But is that accurate, or is there a different approach that you use to start the process?

Meredith O'Connor:

Yeah, I like to say the in-person sessions are a lot stranger and funnier and less... I don't know... and less technical than that, because a lot of it is her. We always have a voice- Somebody is always recording something obviously, but a lot of the ideas that I'll have in terms of the early stage ideas, if there's something that I already thought of, either I'll play it on guitar. Right? Or the new idea, the spur of the moment idea, ends up looking a lot like, "And then what if we do a na-na-na thing?" And then she'll know what I'm talking about. And then we'll, you know, she'll either play it on the piano or I'll play it on the guitar. And she's more fluent in piano than me, obviously.

Meredith O'Connor:

So, that's sort of what it looks like. I'm definitely a big, like describe the sound I'm thinking of kind of a person, because my... you know, I'm a singer and I've been a singer for, since I was eight- Or I've been able to sing since I was eight. Musical... You know, the- I sort of learned the guitar the minute I got a recording contract. So, I'm more comfortable describing things which sounds reasonable, but when you hear it in person, it sounds a little bit more hilarious. Because I'll be saying the weirdest- Like, think of a water faucet, you know? And then- For this part, you know what I mean? Just stuff like that is oftentimes how to- The quickest and most efficient way for me to compose and, you know, put music together. But luckily I've worked with some great producers that are able to actually do the technical part that you're talking about.

Bryan Smith:

How did you learn how to play guitar?

Meredith O'Connor:

How did I...? I think my cousin Danielle taught me. She loved Taylor Swift and taught me who Taylor Swift was. And I thought that was just, I thought the whole thing was so cool. And this was when Taylor Swift was, she was like the breakout country artist

Bryan Smith:

Um-hmmm.

Meredith O'Connor:

And I'm like, "Oh, that's awesome." And so I sort of, I don't know, I think that I just sort of learned a couple chords that I was not good at. And it was just like a fun thing that I thought was really cool that Dani did. And then from, after I was modeling and I got my first record deal, I was like, "I may have overstated." I'm like, "Yeah, I can write songs and all this stuff." And I'm like, "I'm totally prepared for this." When I never honestly expected in a million years to have this kind of an opportunity, but I was able to go home and write a breakup song. Conveniently had my first breakup about, you know, right around then too, and wrote a song about it. And you know, influenced by Taylor Swift. I don't know. So, that was sort of the one that went viral. And I've been hearing about that song ever since.

Bryan Smith:

Right.

Meredith O'Connor:

It haunts me to this day; no.

Bryan Smith:

So, if you were giving advice to a room full of young people, just about either they're entering high school or maybe graduated from high school and they really want to sing, and maybe they think they have an inherent talent, maybe they need to take lessons to get there. They want to sing and they want to write songs. What advice would you have for them?

Meredith O'Connor:

I would say that songwriting is like the biggest life hack I didn't know about until I was a teenager. So, that's really, really a good one to work on. I think that singing can be fostered and owned, just the skill itself, there's so many ways to get- To be a good singer that are not as hard. It's like, you'll hear these people who are like, "Oh, they have a good voice. That sounds impossible." But it's kind of... It's not. There's just some techniques that you could learn, whether it's like your chorus teacher or you get voice lessons or whatever it is. I mean, a chorus teacher in school or whatever, you know, means you have to learning. Now there's YouTube videos on it. So, I would say that learning the skill of singing is obviously helpful to songwriting, and songwriting is helpful to so many things. Not even career-wise, but just sorting out your own issues yourself.

Meredith O'Connor:

A lot of people will use it as a tool just for their own wellbeing. And then also, you know, it's just, it's such a good tool in terms of becoming a singer and, you know, getting a- You know, now record deals have completely changed what they look like. I remember getting in at the internet age where record deals were sort of like figuring out how to become now. Now we have to go after internet people. And luckily I was an internet person. So it was, there was a lot of changes in that industry. So it's... definitely something to consider. I would say that using the internet to your benefit is the best advice I would have towards young aspiring professionals, whether it be music, whether it be acting or anything like that. Because I think that, although we do have to be really careful about the dangers of social media, I see it more as a car or like a vehicle that can cause mass destruction, or it can get you to where you need to go.

Meredith O'Connor:

So it's, so it's sorta like you give that advice even, you know, within the last five years it's just- The tough part to an advice giving in that industry is everything changes so much with the digital age. Like YouTube, when I first went viral on YouTube, it's changed since then. And now I'm working. I am a YouTube partner, but that looks different than it was before. And it's fine. Everybody's just slowly, obviously now with COVID-19, I'm sure there's going to be more changes too. So, I think that it's important to just be able to adapt, but also if you truly love it, don't take no for an answer.

Bryan Smith:

Yeah. It seems like social media is now, as you're saying, it's being used as a vehicle to put out content and people are not being precious about it anymore. They're just... And I'm talking about big stars too, in the age of COVID and the pandemic and quarantine, people are putting out music and songwriting without worrying about whether they have the right mic or the right look. I mean, they're just putting it out there. And I find that kind of endearing about social media now, and how accessible it is to be able to put your work out there.

Meredith O'Connor:

Absolutely. Yeah, the part, the one part of me is really, you know, like the anti.... The fight the man rebel in me when I was a kid, that's like, you know, like no label would have signed me at 14. If I wasn't, you know, if it weren't for the internet, I wouldn't have had this, this, and the other thing. And then the other part of me is sort of like, well, now those companies are figuring out how to do the same studio system with the internet, which I think, I actually think it's improved, as you said, because the internet does allow for people who may not have lived in LA with their mom or moved when they were little to do the whole audition scene. Maybe like they're living in, who knows where they're living, but because of the internet, they have the same- Not the same chances, there's still obvious luck that plays into everything, but it is more accessible for people to have that following, to have that break. And... Yeah.

Bryan Smith:

Yeah. Well you mentioned Taylor Swift, was she an influence for you growing up?

Meredith O'Connor:

I think that just, yeah, there were a couple, there were a couple people in the pop music industry. I mean, Taylor Swift is, like when she broke onto the scene, I don't want to say... I was like.. Not when she... She broke onto the scene pretty early, like in 2006, but by the time I had heard of her and was being influenced by her, I was.... 2006? I was in elementary school, but in 2000.... I don't know. I was, I think I was just like... I remember going through that phase of trying to learn the guitar, and... I don't know. I mean, it was around the time I had a breakup, and so I do think that she definitely influenced that first song "Celebrity." And then the fact that she also was sort of, she had obviously, I mean, she's one of the biggest entertainers in the world. I'm really like- It's really cool to see that there is somebody who is as big as it gets, essentially, that does... That doesn't really care about anything.

Meredith O'Connor:

I mean, that really they want to help others. Like, they use their name to be a good role model and they put that- And they prioritize that. And I feel like that's really cool, because kids can be influenced by their favorite singer. And I think that, as someone who was bullied who didn't know others were bullied, I felt really, really drawn and... Like, it was my responsibility to use whatever fame I had for that reason. So, I'm really... I think it's really inspiring too. It's just, it's great to see that there are others in the industry that have made it as big as it gets doing causes that are really important.

Bryan Smith:

All right. One final question, Meredith. Are there any mistakes that you made looking back on your career that you would go back and do differently? Make a different decision about business or your approach to the craft?

Meredith O'Connor:

Yes, I think... I feel like it's way too vague to say the word caring. But I feel like a lot of people, I don't know, I feel like anytime somebody reflects on something and what they would change or- And not anyone, but at least in my case, things that I regret usually are things that just... They're usually things that just consist of me freaking out over stuff that doesn't have to be freaked out over. So it's really just me saying, I could have done a lot of this without freaking out the whole time. And that's more just like in the past two, three years when I've been seeing these panic attacks out of nowhere, trying to figure out what was going on. But I would say that something I really would try to consider is... I try to keep myself separate from the craft, if that makes sense.

Meredith O'Connor:

Which is hard because, you know, I get on stage and sing a message that was, that I- The story of my life to help other people, because of these things that I care about. You know, how do you separate yourself from something that's that personal? But I would try to, just for the sake of my own confidence. Realizing my true friends love me, my family loves me, and bunch of strangers'

approval is not what I need to be happy. And that's something I would just try to consider. And, yeah.

Bryan Smith:

Nice. Well, thanks. Thanks for sharing your story with us and the listeners. And can you tell us where listeners can find you on social media, and also when to expect the "You Are Not Alone" campaign to launch?

Meredith O'Connor:

Sure. Well, I think it's best if we email you the date and details of that, because I don't have them.

Bryan Smith:

Okay!

Meredith O'Connor:

I would totally tell you if I had them, but I don't.

Bryan Smith:

I will put it up on my show notes when you send it over.

Meredith O'Connor:

Okay. Perfect, perfect. Yes. What was the other question?

Bryan Smith:

And social media, where can listeners find you on social media?

Meredith O'Connor:

I- My favorite is Instagram just because I had- I've always had this 'I answered everyone, myself' rule, which is- And of course exaggerate, I don't answer everyone, but it is all by myself. Which is, I think, fun. I dunno. I think it's important to talk to somebody who sends me a message wanting to talk to me, because that's sort of part of why I'm still doing this and passionate about it. I love- It's my favorite part of the job, essentially. So, that's Instagram. Yeah. Feel free to, you know, reach me, follow me, comment, all that stuff there. And of course I'm on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter. I can be reached, I'm on that as well. But I'm personally checking my Instagram DMS a lot.

Bryan Smith:

It was so great talking to you, Meredith. Thank you.

Meredith O'Connor:

Thanks so much. Everyone stay safe!

Bryan Smith:

Hey, thank you for listening. And I hope you enjoy today's episode. If so, I have a favorite ask. Can you go to wherever you listen to podcasts and leave me a review? Your feedback is what keeps this podcast going. You can also check us out on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook with the handle @dreampathpod. And, as always, go find your dream path.