

# Hotelier/entrepreneur Meryanne Loum-Martin: For the Love of Marrakech

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**Melissa Biggs-Bradley** Hi and welcome to Indagare Global Conversations, a podcast about how traveling the world shapes our lives and perspectives. I'm Melissa Biggs Bradley of Indagare, a company I founded on the belief that how you travel matters. I'm sitting down with some of the most inspiring and innovative people I've met while on the road. They are activists and conservationists, designers and filmmakers, writers, chefs and entrepreneurs. They will share stories about their travels and how they lead lives of passion and purpose. They inspire me, as I hope they will you. Welcome to the conversation.

Today, I am so excited to be speaking with my old friend Meryanne Loum-Martin, who is Marrakech's only black hotelier. We first met in the 1990s. Soon after, Meryanne had turned a riad into such a chic cafe and concept shop that it ignited the city's craze for Riad transformations. Having trained as a lawyer in France, Meryanne was an accidental hotelier. But she went on to create a beautiful villa style retreat in the city's palm oasis called Jnane Tamsna, which she still runs today. Meryanne designed the hotel, as well as its gorgeous boutique and all of the products within the boutique, which are made by local artisans and the nine acre garden created by her husband, ethnobotanist and cultural anthropologist Gary Martin. The hotel and the garden have served as the backdrop for many exquisite candlelit dinners on our Indagare insider journeys to Marrakech. But whenever I travel to Morocco, I spend time with Meryanne, who is a woman of a thousand interests and who is always pursuing new projects. We spoke about her international childhood, how it shaped her and how she landed in Marrakech, and why she's never really left, as well as about her upcoming design book and her newly launched cultural, collective and community, A Free Culture, which is a nonprofit supporting literary and film events and celebrating the African diaspora. So, Meryanne, when did you return from Berlin back to your home and Hotel Marrakech? Right before lockdown, right?

**Meryanne Loum-Martin** Hello, Melissa. Well, it's wonderful that this strange job of having a hotel makes me meet amazing people. Probably much more fun than if I was still a lawyer in Paris. And I'm sitting now in the courtyard of the hotel, which I built in 2001, and we built a lot in one year around the trees, which existed. So my husband is a very keen botanist and I had a map done of the existing palm trees and I designed the architecture around it. And he designed a garden. So this is why we got all the flora and fauna back and you can hear all the birds now.

**MBB** I assume you have no more guests at Jnane Tamsna and it's just family, correct?

**MLM** Yes, it is just family. So our house is on the other side of the property, I think you know our house also. So there's my husband who is diving into producing organic vegetables because he wants to start an organic food movement in Marrakech. And he's quite successful. He is into delivering vegetables to people who can pay and delivering vegetables free for poor people. So he's very active with this. And then we have our son who is here and our daughter who is here. Twenty nine and twenty six. And my father, who happens to be in Marrakech, is 96, who is 96. And we had a confinement birthday party for him like nine days ago. So here we are.

**MBB** Amazing. Are there certain routines or tricks that you've discovered for sort of helping manage through this sort of crisis time? Because I imagine life has changed.

**MLM** Well, what is wonderful is that we feel extremely safe because the government immediately took the right measures and also they arrest people if they don't respect it. I checked this morning. They arrested something like 30,700 people because they were not respecting the curfew and, you know, social distance, and the masks. And we have, compared to other countries like the US, for example, if we compare the population, you know, we have 1800 percent less cases, one-eight hundred, you know, so everybody seems to be respecting it. So the country is very, very quiet and everybody seems to be understanding the necessity of changing their habits.

**MBB** Now, I know both of your parents were lawyers, your father from Senegal. Right? And your mom from the West Indies?

**MLM** Yeah, I'm fourth generation on my mother's side and on my father's side, second, but there were French lawyers in Paris and they met in law school in Paris. It was before "Me Too" because my father was teaching my mother.

**MBB** Really?

**MLM** Yeah. Yeah.

**MBB** And then your dad became a diplomat when you were pretty young?

**MLM** Yes. So what happened is that he had studied law and politics and did a doctorate in political science. And then my mother had studied law. They got married and they moved to Ivory Coast where he started his law firm and where I was born. And it was going extremely well. Even though he's from Senegal, he had decided to do it in Ivory Coast. And when the African Independences happened in the 60s, the governments of both Senegal and Ivory Coast asked him to join the Foreign Affairs. And he joined the Senegalese government because he has a Senegalese name and he has a father and a mother from Senegal. And it totally changed our life. And I think I am what I am because of the childhood I had, because he first had training at the French Embassy in London and then he had the chance to be posted in key places. You know, in Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana was like the big leader of the Independence's. So my father's first ambassadorship was in Ghana. And then we lived in Moscow for three years which I will come back to. And then we lived in London for three years. But he had always said to the Seneglaese president, "I will stay in the Foreign Affairs as long as it's fine for my children's education. But if I want to stop, I will stop and go back to being a lawyer."

**MBB** And what was it like living in Moscow during those formative years when it was still very much a communist state?

**MLM** So we lived in Moscow when I was from the age of seven to 10. And it has totally changed my life because I had the chance to have a very intelligent mother who would tell...she was fascinated about what was happening to her, you know, because she had married a lawyer, they were going to have this law firm and suddenly she was living a different life, but she had the intelligence to make the most of it. And from the age of seven to the age of 10, every morning she would tell me, "Open your eyes and open your ears and remember everything." And so I'm the oldest of three children and I grew up, you know, the really important years I was under communist Russia and all the other diplomatic kids were living in the bubble. And my mother organized a room in the embassy...was like a little school, class or schoolroom. And there was a blackboard. And she managed to get Russian kids to come after their own school. So I learned Russian, which I spoke after...when I went to school in France, I studied Russian until the age of 16. So I had you know, I was really with Russian kids. And then

she puts me in a communist youth house. Every older Russian kid was having their cultural activities in these houses where, of course, I was the only black everywhere where we had a uniform. I had the brown uniform of the young communist children with the little brooch, with Marks, Angles and Lenin and a little beret and the little scarves. And I was learning balalaika like, you know, the triangular guitar. It was...what this has taught me...because I was living through three worlds...the birds are loud. I could see the communist world where there was no access to culture at all, and, except for very, how do you say...directed culture. And then I was living in our life of diplomats where we would have food being shipped from Germany because there was really no food. You could only have like, potatoes and cabbage and would be called kielbasa, which is some kind of sausage. And otherwise it was caviar. And you don't eat caviar everyday. And then, the third world was going to France to be with my grandparents, where suddenly everything was free and you could go and buy a chocolate cake and go to the cinema. And so since I was seven, I realized that culture is really something which is taken, I say taken for granted in the Western world. And I think it has to be totally oriented everything I have done since, you know, and it was interesting, also, to be, you know...Kennedy was assassinated. I remember very well. I was going to school. The driver put on the radio and I understood enough Russian and it was a big shock. And Brezhnev took over from Khrushchev while we were there. I mean, it was a really key moment in history. And it was wonderful to be able to catch it, even though I was seven, eight, nine, ten. You know?

**MBB** That's amazing. And Meryanne, what was it like being black in Russia then?

**MLM** Well, I think that it was you know, as I was saying, we were less in the bubble. For example, the only thing we could do was go to the Bolshoi. So, and my mother was telling me, "It doesn't matter if you have seen the same thing 10 times. Think about something you didn't notice the first time." You know, we were always the only black people anywhere. Also, because there were very few African embassies. And we could have questions like, "Oh, you must be happy to be here, because in your country, you still live in trees, don't you?" You know, so it would be things like this. But it was also because people were...I mean, they didn't know anything. They had access to nothing. And it went on and on. And I remember when I was in Paris, years later, a friend of mine from when I was in school in London had her mother... her mother was Russian and her father was French. And he was in the cabinet of Raymond Barre, the prime minister. And then we kept on seeing each other afterwards when we were students in Paris. And one day she told me, "Oh, there's a bunch of Russian coming for brunch. Come, you'll be happy." So people had started through something called Comité Sacharoff to go out. And she had married...my friend had married the grandson of a scientist... a French scientist for Louis Leprince-Ringuet, the French counterpart of Sacharoff and helping also people come out from Russia. So here I am at this brunch. I must be...I was probably like 22. And I hear Russian people. So they were kind of scientists, I mean they had found a way to get out, right? And I hear 2 of them talking about...one asked the other "How is your wife?" And he says "Well, she still has 5 kilos to lose." And I didn't understand, and then after I asked my friend "What are they talking about?" And she said...because, it is by the weight that some people can get out of Russia. So, the husband was already out and he had saved enough money for his wife to reach a certain weight so she was on a diet to get to the point that he could pay her passage...can you imagine? Do you understand? Isn't it crazy!

**MBB** That's amazing. So then, Meryanne, you went back to Paris and studied law. Correct?

**MLM** So what happened is that after Moscow, my father was the ambassador in London and then he said, "OK, that's it. We are...we need to have more stability." And we moved back to Paris and he started his law firm there, restarted because when he was a professor, he had started his law firm there. By the way, like I think three years ago, he got a medal because the French Bar went around to see who had been sworn in 60 years before. And they were like

maybe two left. And he was one of them. So we went back to Paris...in fact, we moved to Paris really for the first time because before I was just visiting and I went to school there. And then I went and I had my baccalaureate, the French A-levels in advance. And then, I wanted to be an architect. So, I went to architecture school and everything was going extremely well except that to get into the third year, I needed some minor credits in math and physics and this is really just like...very difficult for me. So, unfortunately, I had to stop and then I went to law school.

**MBB** And then how did you meet Gary? Because Gary's American.

**MLM** Yes, Gary's American. So this is why my last name is Martin. So, he's American. I met him in Oaxaca in Mexico, because I had taken the New York Bar, so I had...it was intense. I had gone to Albany in New York to take the New York Bar and then I decided to treat myself to the closest country I didn't know. So the choice was between Canada and Mexico and obviously I chose Mexico; it was a bit more exotic. And, I just met him by coincidence at the cafe in Oaxaca on the main square called Zocaló.

**MBB** And then how did the both of you end up in Marrakech?

**MLM** Now I'm going to tell this because there's a lot of people who are now onto digital things and I can't imagine hearing some friends...some children of my friends saying "Oh I met this wonderful boy but you see, I'm not ready to get into a long distance relationship; he's in England and I'm in France. And while Gary was in Mexico and I was in Paris, and we would see each other every 6 months for 2 years, and writing to each other and there was no way we could talk because he was in the forest, right, working on his PhD for Berkeley. And there were no faxes, there was no FaceTime, there was no nothing so if we can make it, I think that young people now can make it too, with all of the technology! So I was in Paris but a frustrated architect. I had always wanted to...I was always helping friends organize their space just as a hobby without being paid. And because my mother was from the West Indies and my father from Senegal and we're living in Paris, they started saying we should have a holiday house, which would not be as far as our countries of origin. Maximum 3 hours flight so we can go there for the weekend. And I would hear this on Sunday family lunch and after a while I told them "Look, you know that I'm a frustrated architect...if you're serious about this project then I want to find the land and to be in charge of the project. And 3 hours flight, meeting all of your...you know...you want sun, you want the great culture, you want some sort of excitement. It's probably Marrakech." And we didn't know Marrakech but what we knew is that people who could choose anywhere in the world already had a house there. There were not many. You could count them on the hand.

**MBB** Yves Saint Laurent being one of them.

**MLM:** Yes, Yves Saint Laurent...and there were like 5 people really who could be trendsetters, you know? And by big chance, I had a very close friend... Pierro [indistinguishable] Piero...he passed away last year, who was in the first circle of Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé. So I called him and I said "You know, I'm considering coming to Marrakech to look for land to build a house, what do you think about it?" And he said "Oh yes, please come and I'll open the doors for you!" And this was in December of '85.

**MBB** So what was it about Marrakech that made you fall in love with the city immediately?

**MLM** I fell in love with Marrakech from the moment I set my foot on the tarmac. I knew it was the place for me because you see, I think that because of all these origins and, you know,

there's all these religions in the family. My mother is Catholic. She married my father who was Muslim. We're Catholic. Gary's mother was Protestant. She married a Catholic, which is a big thing when she did this. So you can be comfortable everywhere in the world, but at the same time, it's wonderful to have a place where you recreate your own home. And Marrakech was very much this because we had nothing to do with the Moroccan culture, really, but we felt that she had everything that could create the elements of a home. And so I came in '85, fell in love with it, came back with my parents. They bought a piece of land. And while I was doing the house for them, I realized that there was something strange here, which was there was no accommodation matching the expectation of the people. You had fabulous the big hotel La Mamounia, which was there. But, you know, a hotel cannot cater to a very private experience.

**MBB** But you clearly knew that you were on to something.

**MLM** In Paris, all my friends knew that I was coming to Marrakech once a month. I was a lawyer for 3 weeks and a constructor-architect one week a month, and everybody thought I was totally crazy, but it worked out and so my friends would just say "Ok, I'll be on your trip in June..." Every time I would come with people. Every month. I would rarely come alone. And all of them were saying...so I'm talking about well-traveled, very educated people, quite international. It's like 86, 87...they would always say, "So, how come we don't find holidays we like? We remember when we were children going to the grandparent's property and it was so wonderful, or traveling with our parents. It was so nice. And now we only have big hotels everywhere we go, or we can rent villas but it's too much work." So I kept on hearing this and then they would come and visit Marrakech and we'd go to the medina and my friend had opened the doors of very few houses and suddenly I thought, well it's very simple, I should try to integrate the real experience of the cultures into accommodation. So I did a little survey with people in Europe. My friends who were in various places. And then we went back to my father and I said, "How often are you going to be on holidays? Don't you think that we could buy another piece of land next to it and do another property and try to put together an experience concept, where people would stay in like a family home with good service, good food and be connected to the culture of the country and have a real experience as if they had their own house there? And if it doesn't work, you can sell the house and you'll keep the other one." So he thought it was a good idea. And that's how we went on to start Jnane Tamsna. But because we were...it was a first...I mean, we opened in 89. No one, no one was doing this here. I would hear crazy things like, "Why do you think that people would be interested in going in a small place when they can go to a hotel of 200 rooms?" So, you see, you still had some people who didn't understand this opportunity of a small experience.

**MBB** And how was the property received immediately following the opening?

**MLM** If the internet had existed, then we could have said that it went viral because it truly was so busy all the time, that my mother would call me exasperated, saying, "When can I go on holidays in my own house?" And I would tell her, well, I would look at the books and say, "Maybe in eight months. I have two nights." I mean, it was crazy. Crazy. And you mentioned that Tom Cruise had come, but he had to try. His secretary tried four times before we could find space for him. And she would tell me and, you know, we had royals', we had movie stars, we had famous people, and we had Mr. and Mrs. Jones and Mr. and Mrs. Smith. We had everybody because you could rent one house or both houses, but it was not a room by room experience. And so when she would call us -- Tom Cruise's assistant -- telling me, "Do you know who he is? Well, it's already the third time we tried." And I would say, "Yes, but you know who we have? So he'll just have to wait, you know?" And so it was a wonderful time where we had no competition at all, you know? And then so after that, I was still living in Paris. And then we had a lot of press done -- *Town & Country* -- and we had press everywhere. And then when you're a lawyer and I was still a lawyer and doing this as a little hobby, like getting the calls and

the faxes and the TV in Marrakech, it was all very well organized. I just needed to tell them to go and pick people at the airport. So when I started having all this press, I decided that I had to quit the bar because in France you're not allowed to have a job on the side of being a lawyer. It's totally forbidden. And a very good friend of mine whose mother is 104 now and is Olivia de Havilland, the actress of *Gone with the Wind*, so Olivia had married a French man and their daughter is a childhood friend of mine. And she was a model and a lawyer. And a lawyer recognized her on a billboard and he denounced her to the Ethics. So, she was called, and they told her "You have to choose." Of course, I knew what had happened to her. And I didn't want the same thing to happen to me if they could put two and two together and see that all this press was me. You know, we had 8 pages in *Vogue*. We had the front cover of *[indistinguishable]*. We had *Architectural Digest*. I mean, everywhere, everywhere. And, it's just because, I think it was timely...the place was nice, but it was timely and innovative. That's all.

**MBB** It was very beautiful. And, but as I said, this sort of mix of exoticism and warmth and, you know, the style wasn't as prevalent as it is today. I think you started that before. It was shocking to me how and to many others how really inclusive and global it was.

**MLM** Well, thank you. Thank you. I think that, you know, even when I did this place here, it is because, you know, most of the time hospitality places, you have people in finance behind and they hire an interior designer and they hire an architect, but no one does it like if it was their own home. It's quite rare. So I think this is a difference because I just design places where I'd like to be myself.

**MBB** And you feel it in the objects that you picked. I mean, I still can, in my memory, see some of the rooms in those first houses because some of the objects were so clearly things that had been picked with love and arranged with...your fingerprints are on them. So that comes through in the space. It feels truly personal.

**MLM** Yes. And it was a holiday house. You know, we would keep one in summer and we would all be there -- my sister, brother, the kids, my parents, you know, so it was...I think that people could feel that it was very much a home.

**MBB** And then explain why you sold them?

**MLM** Oh, it was a bit complicated. Family matters. And then after you know, I also had the Riad in the medina, which was the first concept store. And it was a wonderful place where I started organizing cultural events. You know, I was designing most of the things there. And I'll tell you something also about that. So I had the front cover with things I had designed of the magazine *Departures*. And it was written "The Essence of Chic in Marrakech." And unfortunately, the issue was September 2001. So you can imagine how no one paid attention to this. But talking about September 2001, we were doing these amazing big shawls who were handmade, hand-dyed, with big Arabic calligraphy and one side velvet, one side silk. And they were made in South Carolina. And the American ambassador was a brilliant lady called Margaret Tutwiler, and every time she would come from Rabat she would stop at my shop and in November 2001, she came and she said "Meryanne, I came to buy one of your big shawls with Arabic calligraphy because I'm going to the American Embassy in Paris this Thanksgiving. There will be a big dinner and I want to make a statement to wrap myself in Arabic calligraphy." And I thought it was very, you know, very moving.

**MBB** Let's talk a little bit about the culture in Marrakech, specifically the different types of homes and architecture that can be found.

**MLM** So, the traditional house in Marrakech is called a riad and it is in the medina, and it has a courtyard because all the life was indoors because of the Muslim culture, they would not show the women. So, in most Moroccan cities you have a former Jewish quarter which is called the Mela. You can notice it because there are windows on the outside walls and as soon as you have like, blind walls, you can be sure that it's Muslim Moroccan house. So, people had rooms which, in which they would be...how do you say...you could eat and sleep in the same room. They have these long benches around and the rooms were multi-functional. And, in fact, there's something quite striking about the Marrakech medina renewal. It is because these houses were built for, let's say, one family and three generations later because people stay at home when they get married and they have children...a house which was maybe for 10 people at the origin, they were 50. And when the foreigners started coming and looking for old houses to restore, it was wonderful for these families to be able to capitalize and move to a much better house, because the Moroccans were not interested in buying the riads so the foreigners created the market which really benefited the growth of the general Marrakech.

**MBB** Over all the years now that you've been in Marrakech, what are some of the ways that the city has changed for the better and for the worse?

**MLM** Well, I would say that it has changed for the better, because, you know, the culture is so strong here that even if there's a McDonalds or Pizza Hut, it doesn't change anything. It's very good because it attracts people; it attracts backpackers, who can only afford this, and who also need to travel within their own means. It attracts, also, the local young people who want to have this kind of international flavor. But, the culture is so strong. We are really in a country with monarchy, with architecture since the middle ages, a country where, you know, the Moors were in Spain for 7 centuries, so 7 centuries made Andalucia which is the first place that the world visits. So, you know, I don't think...what has changed the best is that it's better known now and more and more people are coming. There are more and more hotels. I was very moved that CNN said that everything started with this woman, when they interviewed me. Because apparently, there's 1500 riads now and I opened the first kind of boutique accommodation in '89 and 1500 now. It really shows that I didn't do it on purpose but it has an economic impact, you know? Just a coincidence and a chronology coincidence. And then I think that also, you know the culture, the cultural thing happening here is very strong now. We have, thanks to Vanessa Branson, who started the Biennale. We really had a movement of every 2 years, a lot of people coming from various parts of the world to attend Marrakech's Biennale, on which board I sat for about 10 years. But the Biennale is finished now. And, then we had also...we have "154" which is the Contemporary African Art Fair, which is doing very well and it has been the third time last February.

**MBB** The Contemporary Art Museum is very interesting.

**MLM** Exactly. Yes, exactly...there's some very interesting African...so there's the YSL Museum, there's the African Art Museum. And there's a lot of galleries which have started coming up. I started my own event, which is, which did quite well. I'm happy with it. It's called "A Free Culture" - free like freedom - and it's about celebrating the creativity of diasporas in literature, cinema and entrepreneurship. And, we have an instagram called @afreeculture and I just started another one called @afreecultureforum, where we host authors and I post audio presentations of authors and when we have a lot of followers we will organize dinner parties with authors talking about their books. For the moment, they just talk about their books, but it's also about justice and culture and art, so the first one was about justice because I'm always very interested in justice matters. And it was about an American, Harvard-educated African American, working on something called restorative justice. It's a very interesting concept; it's representation. Tonight, we have the story of a blind slave who was the first African American who played at the White House. He was a musical prodigy of the 19th Century, and a former professor of creative writing at the University of Virginia published a book on him and he will

speaking about his book tonight on my page called @afreecultureforum. All of this is in fact, influenced and inspired by the magma that Marrakech has started being in terms of culture in the last, I would say, 10 years.

**MBB** Not everyone is aware of Morocco's long history of religious tolerance. Can you talk about its tradition of having people in very different backgrounds and faiths coexist?

**MLM** What is really interesting is that here we have a museum called Musee de Confluences which celebrates the very harmonious and peaceful cohabitation of all the big religions in Morocco. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. It's a museum decided by the King, it's a beautiful museum which was designed by Patti Burch, the American lady who was the Islamic Art Curator at the Met, and who had a house here and she left part of her collection to this museum. So, when I went to the opening, it was very moving because you had a Rabbi, you had an Imam and you had French priests, and they were all celebrating the fact that it's such a country of tolerance. And I remember that many years ago, the head of the minister of tourism was the head of the Jewish community. In a country in like Morocco, which is Muslim, the fact that something so important as tourism is headed by the head of the Jewish community is a very strong statement. And I was told that at some point he was shortlisted to become the Moroccan ambassador in Washington. We're talking about like, in the 90s. So it also would have shown the extraordinary country we live in, where there's absolute tolerance. You can go...I can go to church on Sunday and people can go to the Synagogue and, you know, people go to the Mosque. It's really not a problem here.

**MBB** Yeah. And the tradition is incredibly old. I mean, since the Roman times when Jews settled in Morocco among the Berbers, but they were also important contributors to the rise of Fez in the eighth and ninth centuries. And I believe in the 15th century, Morocco was seen as a safe haven for Jews fleeing persecution from the Spanish. I know many have emigrated to Israel in the past 50 years, but there's still a strong Jewish community in Casablanca.

**MLM** Yes, yes.

**MBB** So shifting gears a bit, I'd love for you to talk a little bit about your book that's coming out this fall.

**MLM** Yes, so my book is called *Inside Marrakech*. It's published by Rizzoli. I'm very proud because, as you know, Rizzoli is such a prestigious publishing house, which has published beautiful books. And it is a book which is like a celebration, an homage, a celebration towards Marrakech by foreigners. So there's...all the houses belong to foreigners and we have about 30 houses and nine gardens and the idea is to say "Thank you Marrakech for allowing us to be in such an inspiring and creative place, where we can all create the house of our dreams, totally inspired by the place and at the same time, so much ourselves." You know? There's some British houses, there's some Belgian houses, French, Italian, and everywhere you can see that it's not the same thread, but everywhere you can see that it is in Marrakech.

**MBB** Fantastic. I can't wait to see it.

**MLM** And the book says that there are some people who know Marrakech probably better than me. And it's your name there!

**MBB** Well, that's very nice. I'm not so sure. You've definitely introduced me to a lot of what I know about it. But I want to ask you a couple of quick questions. First one is, Meryanne, is there a charitable organization that you feel connected to if people would like to make a donation to have a positive impact on Marrakech at this moment that you would recommend?

**MLM** So my husband has the Global Diversity Foundation, which is an American charity, charitable organization, so it's a nonprofit in the U.S. And they do a lot of things to allow people in the mountains to move towards organic farming. So this is something which is even more important now that we can see that immune systems are so connected to bad food, too much pesticide and all of that. So they are also distributing food to people who can't afford food anymore, because as we all know, when people don't have extensive means, they tend to buy cheap products. And cheap products are, in general, not very good for the house. So it's called the Global Diversity Foundation. It is the first one I'm thinking about because it's an established organization, when the others are just, you know, this friend getting some money to buy wheat and flour and rice and couscous. They're not organized things and they will stop as soon as the virus is over.

**MBB** Thank you for sharing information on the Global Diversity Foundation. Can I also ask you what you're reading right now?

**MLM** I'm reading *Anarchy* of William Dalrymple. I'm speaking with William about him being one of the hosts on my page, A Free Culture Forum. You know, he, I think, he's one of the best historians, and specialists of India. He's the best because his books are riveting, like a thriller, you know. And he does amazing research. And the subject of the book is on the East India Company, who in his own terms, was [indistinguishable] in India for three centuries. And we always think that colonization is connected first to governments. But this was a private company. So this is what I'm reading.

**MBB** I have that book as well because I love all of his books, but it is a bit daunting, so I haven't opened it yet. So what are you watching?

**MLM** Well, we just finished watching "Uncorked." I don't know if you know of this. It's on Netflix, and it's very interesting because it's this African-American family where the son is obsessed by becoming a sommelier. And the rest of the family doesn't even know how to pronounce the name. They think "Sommelier, Somalia. What is this? It's an African country," you know, and it's very interesting because, so I think it's happening in the South, and his father has a barbecue joint. And they feel that they have achieved something and that the son could continue and grow and the father is buying more space. But he's only obsessed about being a sommelier. It's on Netflix and it's very interesting. And my children and I and my husband, too, we're very interested in all the things which have a clash of culture, you know, because we were joking about it with my friends. You know, I have a lot of friends, Nigeria, Ghana, they all have gone to the best Ivy League schools. And they were always saying that being sons of, you know, second, third generation of immigrants, you are only allowed to be a medical doctor, a lawyer, an engineer. But there's no way you could be creative like an architect or an art dealer. It did not exist for a certain generation and now it's changing. So, you know, if you were to transfer this onto this series, it's very interesting to see how parents have ideas because they think they're making it. And why do you have a strange idea? You know, so it was a great thing. "Uncorked," and it has great reviews.

**MBB** Oh, great. I'll watch that. Okay, favorite memento brought back from a trip?

**MLM** Well, I'm not very much....well, it's not true. I have probably bought objects in antique places which were not too difficult to carry home. But I think that it's probably books because the first thing I do when I travel, I go to a bookstore.

**MBB** Okay, favorite destination for relaxing?

**MLM** Mountains in summer. I like places outside of the big season, you know, so it could be sea in winter. But mountains in summer in Europe, I think it's fantastic.

**MBB** I agree with you! Your favorite destination for exploring?

**MLM** India. Always. I always. If reincarnation exists, I was probably Indian in another life.

**MBB** Always in your carry on?

**MLM** Good books. You know, I always take a thriller for the plane, always. And an interesting book on history for when I arrive. I think that's the most important thing. Yeah.

**MBB** And what's the next place on their wish list to travel to?

**MLM** Well, you know, I would love to go to Sri Lanka.

**MBB** I'm curious what else is next for you? I know you've got your book tour. But do you have any other big projects in the works that you can talk about?

**MLM** Yes, I have the projects of my life called The Datai Langkawi. And it was a hotel, probably the first hotel who dared face the investors because it's on an island with an incredible forest. And the investors wanted to build the hotel on the beach. And the architects, my partner now said, "No, we'll build the hotel in the forest and people would walk to the wild beach." So the big project in my life, because I have been lucky to, you know, as I said, I had this idea. I opened in 89 and now there's fifteen-hundred. Now I want to create a model of social integration, sustainable integration, and show that luxury can also have the best impact for the local population, which are not educated in the Western sense of the world. So I have a very big, a very big piece of land. I'm creating a new hotel, which is I mean, you name it. Everything which is about green architecture is going to be there from, you know, green roofing to waste water gardens. In fact, it's like on a farming estate because we grow our own food. There's going to be a gorgeous hotel. And then villas to sell, but in the sense of farms. Everybody has their own and can grow their own food. And this is really the big project I'm working on. I've been working on this for ages, but it's only now that I have the right partners. So I hope that this is going to go ahead.

**MBB** Thank you so much, Meryanne. And I am wishing that I was sitting in that garden that I know well with you. But it's such a treat to get to spend time with you. I know that we all want to support our local businesses as we emerge from this lockdown. But I also think it's really important to remember how cities like Marrakech that we love and that provide a truly unique perspective in the world are also going to need our help when we come out of this. We will be excited to figure out how to show you our love and affection when travel becomes safe again.

**MLM** Thank you so much. You must hear the call to prayer now, no? There was a call to prayer a minute ago. That's happening now.

**MBB** Well, there's nothing more meaningful than ending an episode with a serendipitous call to prayer. Which brings me to my next guest who heard not a call to prayer, but a call to action that led him to completely transform his life. Almost 20 years ago, Scott Neeson had achieved the mail room to mogul dream, rising from very humble beginnings to being a major Hollywood executive. But he traded in his high flying life with a mega salary and, yes, even a yacht to move to a much simpler existence in Cambodia, where he could save children who were living on a garbage dump. Today, Scott is the founder and executive director of the Cambodia

Children's Fund in Nahm Penn, where he works miracles so regularly that People Magazine has dubbed him a hero among us. I hope you'll listen.

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