

What's_Next__Podcast_Episode_Laura_Ann_Chong.mp3

[Snippet from Podcast] Laura-Ann: Being a gymnast, ever since I was two years old, I only really knew gymnastics and I kind of always only had to two goals. One was to go to the Olympics and one was to get a scholarship to the states. But at the same time, like at those gymnastics competitions, you always heard about Cirque du Soleil. You always heard about some gymnasts, maybe kind of like an outlier...

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

[Introduction] Welcome to the What's Next? podcast. Let me just start off by saying. Not everyone has the same background. There is no road-map for success. Life begins at the edge of your comfort zone. Leaning into your curiosities. It does suck when you grow up. We're all still figuring out who we are. You can't just sit back and be silent. Black lives matter. It is the little stuff that makes the biggest difference. Do you have another hour? [Laughs]

[Bouncy theme music fades.]

Cody: Hello, Beaver Nation, welcome to the What's Next podcast. I'm your host, Cody Stover. We're in for a great episode today. Joining us is a former two-time all-American PAC10 champion on the balance beam during her time on the Oregon State gymnastics team. She spent the last seven years with Cirque de Soleil as an acrobat, touring internationally. And of course, she's a 2011 OSU grad with a degree in exercise, sports science and a minor in psychology. And we are honored to welcome her to the show. Laura-Ann Chong, thanks for joining us on the What's the Next podcast.

Laura-Ann: Hi, Cody. Thank you so much for having me.

Cody: First off, where are you joining us from today?

Laura-Ann: Today I am in Vancouver, British Columbia, or my little town is called Coquitlam. So, across the border.

Cody: Yeah, across the border, but I feel like we're all, "closer" right now because we're just assume away from anyone down the street or across in a different country.

Laura-Ann: That's definitely - the technology during this time has been amazing, and I've actually been able to have way more conversations and connections with people that I haven't talked to in decades because everyone just wants to hop on zoom. So, it's kind of nice.

Cody: I know it's the way to socially connect. So totally not what I thought would be the case in 2019 going in 2020, but hey, we're glad to have you on the podcast.

Laura-Ann: I always said this year I was going to come down to Oregon State and visit again. So, I guess virtual visits are the best for now.

Cody: Yes, we'll count that. I was going to ask, maybe that's a good segway. I wanted to start before we get into all that you've been doing, with Cirque du Soleil and beyond, but maybe with the OSU experience. What was it like being on the OSU gymnastics team? And also a second part to that, what was it like performing and competing at Gill?

Laura-Ann: Oh, being part of Oregon State gymnastics was probably one of the highlights of my life. You know, everyone's like, here's the Cirque du Soleil and they go all goo-goo gaga over it. But at the same time, I definitely wouldn't be where I am or the person that I am without Oregon State, Tonya and Michael Chaplin are amazing people and amazing coaches and right from the get-go, they made you feel like you were at home, you were a family. It wasn't just about, you know, what skill you could do for them, it was about the all-around person that you can become. And they really helped you navigate those times.

And of course, just being able to do gymnastics in a different environment than elite gymnastics. I was on the Canadian national team and an alternate for the 2004 Olympics. And so, the world of elite was a lot more strict, a lot more isolated in ways as you were competing, quite individualized. And so, coming down to Oregon State to being with a team. And I think the largest team I had at the time was 16 girl, and it was just amazing to build those connections we've had. Some of us have had several zoom

calls together over the pandemic this year and this has been so nice to stay in touch. So, yeah, definitely a huge highlight and yeah, I miss my Oregon State family for sure.

Cody: That's awesome. I was a golfer growing up. I didn't play in college, but in high school, and I and it was such an individual sport. So, as you're saying, like the Oregon State experience added more of that team aspect, I don't know, that was playing in my mind is like when I played high school golf, it was like, wow, this is the one time in my sport that I get to be on kind of a team. And then so totally different experiences. But as you were saying, I was thinking back and being like, yeah, it's so amazing when a sport that maybe has a lot of individual aspects can actually come together in a team environment.

Laura-Ann: Definitely. And I think that was great about Oregon State being somewhat of a smaller campus is that all of the athletes got to see each other quite a bit. And so, it wasn't just like a community from your sport, it was literally the whole of Oregon State Athletics. You know, the second part to your question about competing in Gill, it was absolutely amazing. For me, I think the largest, even though I competed internationally, the largest audience that would come to our competition, especially at meets in Canada, were maybe 200 people. And so, I just remember the first pink out meet that we had, and Gill hit over 4,000 people. And it was just unreal, like, I still get chills thinking about it now because of the energy we felt. Everyone loved coming to the gymnastics meets, and you really felt that sense of community and it was just unreal to have that support from such a small town. And yeah, that totally has always been a huge gem in my heart. I miss it. And I just actually purchased one of the fan cutouts to be in Gill, they just put my picture up a couple of days ago and I'm so excited I can be there in a way for hopefully our athletes.

Cody: That's so cool. I got one of those for my dad for his birthday. It was in the football stadium, not in Gill. But yeah, that's a fun way to have some familiar faces in our arenas there, too.

Laura-Ann: Definitely. I think the first - I think it was a MLB baseball game that I first saw the cutouts in and I just died laughing this year because I honestly think they're one of the best things that have come out of this pandemic time is just being able to have cutouts in the stands, because at least it's something, especially for the athletes.

Sometimes it's hard to be in a stadium or arena and just have empty seats even as a performer now, it was never the same. So, to see something in those chairs really helps.

Cody: Yeah, I think one thing or point of growth for me this year was, you know, the first part of the year when the pandemic starts happening, you start to like sulk a little bit about the things that you were supposed to do or that were supposed to happen and now feel so far away. But I think like now that, you know, we've been through a lot of months of it, things like that, that make you smile and you realize, you know, there's been a lot of bad things that have happened this year, but also little things like that, that never would have maybe happened if it wasn't the case. So, you have to smile about the things you can smile about. But that's a good call out.

Laura-Ann: Yeah, I think everyone's going through waves like that, and so one of my jobs this year has been to really remind people that there has been some good and we need to focus on that. And we'll get into a little bit more about that later on.

Cody: Yeah, teaser right there, we're going to hit that later in the episode. Maybe this is a good point to jump too, so after OSU and like you said when you mentioned Cirque du Soleil, I think you said people get goo goo gaga over that big international name, but that maybe we can start there. How did you go from your time at OSU to then getting involved with Cirque du Soleil?

Laura-Ann: Right. Yeah. So being a gymnast, ever since I was two years old, I only really knew gymnastics. And, yeah, I didn't even know how to ride a bike until I was in college in Corvallis, and I was way more comfortable walking around being on my hands. And I kind of always only had two goals. One was to go to the Olympics, and one was to get a scholarship to the states for gymnastics. And being from Canada, we at the time didn't have a whole lot of resources on how to get to NCAA or what programs were suitable for that person or that gymnast, like I didn't know anything about the different schools or programs that were offered. But at the same time, like at gymnastics competitions, you always heard about Cirque du Soleil, you always heard about some gymnasts, maybe kind of like an outlier, though, going to Cirque du Soleil. There weren't a whole lot of people, but you knew that it happened.

And so, when I was in gymnastics, I honestly never thought even about joining Cirque. I just kind of was like, OK, I'm going to the Olympics, going to get a scholarship, and then I'm going into physiotherapy because that's what I had planned since high school, I think, hence my major in exercise, sports science. And it actually wasn't until after I graduated Oregon State, I had applied to two schools back in Canada for physio and we only had ten programs in all of Canada at the time, each only offering slots the 30 to 50 people. So, the competition for these programs are insanely high. And I found it difficult on the applications and in the interview processes to get them to understand that I did take this course for this curriculum, but in the state, they call it something different or the criteria is not exactly worded the same way, but we're learning the same things.

Cody: Right.

Laura-Ann: And so that was quite a challenge and a hurdle to leap over. So long story short, I didn't get into the grad schools that I had applied for, and so you have to wait a whole another year to apply again. So, I finally moved home after five years at Oregon State and I'm just kind of like, OK, so now what? I didn't get into grad school, that's kind of a bump in the road that I wasn't expecting, you know, I just kind of assumed I would have gotten in right away. And this was in 2011, so my body was actually in really good shape. I had a year off of gymnastics already, the last year I competed with in 2010, but I had been able to take care of my body not because I thought I'd go back to compete but just I had been an athlete my whole life, so it was kind of natural, I guess. And I started talking to my coach back home and he was like, you know what? 2012 Olympics is next year, and we really need bar workers and bars is one of your strengths. So that's when we started humming and hawing with the idea of me coming back to elite gymnastics. So eventually I did compete back in elite Canada and get back into the circuit a little bit, but it was about halfway through the season when I realized I don't think I have the mental discipline that it takes to be this high of caliber of an elite gymnast. I missed flipping and I miss being on the competition floor, but it's not the same.

Laura-Ann: Elite gymnastics is not the same as college gymnastics. And I just, college gym was honestly, it's so fun. You get to compete 12 to 15 times in a row during season, usually pre-COVID times, and yeah, it's just a blast. And I really miss that, and I think I was trying to recreate that- it wasn't happening. So halfway through the season, I

actually was in Montreal at a competition called Gymnasts International, and I'm starting to see a lot of Cirque du Soleil promos because obviously it's in Montreal and that's where the Cirque du Soleil International Headquarters is. And so, they were trying to recruit hard for CDS, and that's when I started talking to the physio that was there who actually used to be the head physio at the headquarters at Cirque du Soleil. And, you know, she was kind of like, you know, I think you could really transfer into it, if that's something you really wanted to do. And now at the time, I'm still like, yeah, but it's already, I think it was May or April of 2012. I hadn't 100% decided 2012 Olympics was - I wasn't going to go for it, but I was kind of halfway there and then at the time I was like, well in the fall I'm going to grad school for physio, like I'm reapplying. And then I started just kind of, I went home from that competition, and I was like, well what if? You know, I started to ask questions, and those are always either amazing questions to ask yourself or really dangerous questions to ask yourself.

Laura-Ann: I worked with sports psychologists my entire career and they were always like, oh, those what if questions, I think any athlete can attest to. They can either drive something really positive or steer you down a dark tunnel. But I did start asking myself, like, what if I do put a demo together? And so, I had actually reached out to one of the coaches in Montreal who actually was hired to create an uneven bars act for Cirque de Soleil, and since uneven bars was my specialty, she started talking to me, saying that I think you would be really great in this. And so, then it wasn't so crazy for me to grasp the fact that it was circus, it was just an uneven bars act, and so, I think that helped me kind of bridge that mental distinction between the two.

And so, I put together a demo and within a couple of months I got an invite from Cirque du Soleil to come and join them in Montreal for the general formation program that they had, where they would bring in a group of potential acrobats and train them in several different disciplines. You learn acting classes, doing character classes, dance, movement, makeup. So basically, you're not guaranteed a contract after, but you're more prepared to take one if one comes up. And so, I did that, it was about two and a half months. I had an amazing time in Montreal, and it kind of brought me back to that college field where you have this community of everyone having the exact same goal and doing everything they can to get you and themselves to, at this time it was a show.

Laura-Ann: And so, and plus it was so diverse that you had people from China, from Russia, from Uzbekistan, from Kazakhstan, from America, from Europe, like literally everywhere in the world. And I've always really loved diverse cultures, and so, it was it was honestly just a dream just to be there at the headquarters. Then once that happened, once that completed, I went home and basically, as I said, you're not guaranteed a contract after because it's all about timing in Cirque du Soleil, you know, they don't just create a spot for you on the show because you're good at it.

So, at the time, the show that I was on, it was called Amaluna and the character or the Uneven Bars Act was called an Amazon. And so, they had kind of flagged me to be a replacement for someone who was on that show, and it was just kind of a waiting game at that point. And so, I waited seven months and at the time it was kind of like, should I just you know, I did end up, actually I can't remember if I put in an application for physiotherapy that year or if I waited one more year. But yeah, so I still have that in the back of my mind. Should I go back to just trying to get into physio or, now I have this new goal of like wanting to be a part of this Cirque lifestyle.

Cody: And are you training like the full seven months you're waiting, you're like keeping up, ready to go?

Laura-Ann: Yes. So, after the general formation, you actually have to sign a contract saying that you'll stay fit and ready up to six months once you return home, because basically, Cirque spent all this time and money training you and prepping you, so you kind of have to give them a guarantee back that you're not going to go and take another contract or another job. So, yeah, so once that six-month mark hit, I'd still been training and doing whatever I could at home. But then it was kind of like, OK, I still don't have a contract right now. I'm waiting for nothing kind of thing, because they don't like give you updates or anything like that, you're just kind of in the dark.

So yeah, but luckily for me, I actually went to do the pro gymnastics challenge. It was on ESPN too, I believe, and they did like Teen World versus Team USA, where they were trying to stream gymnastics in a way to bring in more audience, and it was more of a skill for skill battle know, really rugged shows the tough part of gymnastics. And so, I was actually at that competition when I got the email saying, hey, we've got a contract for you. So that was in Pennsylvania. I got home, my parents were on this 40-day cruise

or something like that, and I just sent an email being like, hi, call me when you get off the plane like I think they were heading there or something like that. My mom still gives me heck because I guess I wrote it all in capitals, saying call me ASAP.

Cody: Their vacation is like suddenly off to a weird start, like what's happening?

Laura-Ann: Exactly. I'm just excited that Cirque du Soleil is calling me to come on to a show, and you know. And so, of course, my mom calls in panic, like, what's happening? I'm like, oh, nothing, I just, you know, I'm going I'm not going to be here when you get home, I'm going to go join the circus. And so, I accepted the contract, at the time it was a short contract, it was only three weeks. Yeah, which was kind of unheard of, but kind of made me into somewhat of a legend on tour because out of the seven years I was on the same show, I had signed 17 different contracts. And so that is unheard of because usually you either get a permanent contract, which is renewed annually, or you are brought in as a temporary artist. However, they're rarely as short as three weeks just because it takes so long to train you and get you integrated into the show. So, yeah, that was kind of an ordeal. And in a way, it taught me a lot about adaptability, and I think that's really helped me during this year, during this time.

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

Hey Beavs. The What's Next podcast is a production of OSU Next, an alumni community of recent Beaver grads. If you've been listening to the podcast, it's obvious that when it comes to life after college, the possibilities are limitless and we all have to find our own path. But you're not alone. We're here to support you along the way. Join us at osualum.com/osunext. Now let's get back to the show.

[Bouncy theme music fades.]

Cody: Probably most of us know of Cirque du Soleil, but just at a high level, too, it sounds like you were touring - I saw Cirque du Soleil in Vegas. At a high level, as a whole, Cirque du Soleil, is that kind of the structure, other shows are touring around and then ones that have residences in places? And are those all different artists and performers or is there an overlap or it sounds like you were on the same show for the full time?

Laura-Ann: Yeah. So, a lot of people don't realize that Cirque du Soleil has, or had, I'm going to talk pre-COVID terms this little segment, so it's going to go back to how it was. But yeah, so they had I think around 18-22 shows around the world going on all the time. So, some people think, you know, when they see Cirque du Soleil coming to town, they're like, oh yeah, it's dancers, but they don't realize that it's a completely different show. So, what happens is we've got the shows in Las Vegas, they build the theaters for that particular show, and they're much larger productions, of course, because they've got these huge, massive stages that they don't need to tear down every week or every night.

And then there's two different types of touring shows. You have the big top touring show which are in the tents, which is the type of show that I was on, those shows in a city every, I would say a month to two and a half or three months and everything gets set up. And you are performing, and then maybe two weeks later, they're already starting to tear down. And it's a lot of effort to do all that every three weeks, right, so they do try to stay a little bit longer for a couple of months.

Laura-Ann: And then you've got the third type of touring show or show, which is an arena where those lines will hit what we call the markets. So, they're not necessarily like the capital city, but they are still cities or towns that have a population that would come see Cirque. Literally like they set up Monday, and then I think Tuesday they're already doing training and shows that night, they go all the way to shows on Sunday and then Sunday night they're tearing down and moving to the next city. But for me, my heart lays in the big top. We had 120 people who were with us that split between our technicians, our artists, our directors, and everything in between we had a plumber, we had an electrician, we had three or four chefs on tour with us, you know, tour management. So, it really is its own little village that we pick up and move to another city.

And for me, because touring around the world can be quite challenging, and you're in different cultures, different places with food that you're not used to or languages that you don't understand. The big top and your tour family, is what we call each other, are really your only constant in life. And so, it's really everyone really depends on that, which is part of what's brought us to one of the projects that I started during the

pandemic, because that's all been taken away from us and we're having to deal with these challenges this year.

Cody: Ok, I want to hear more about that project, too. Before we jump to that, what were some of your favorite or maybe a couple of your favorite countries or cities that you got to tour or perform in?

Laura-Ann: Oh, that's such a hard question, and I honestly think about it all the time because I've been to 38 countries now. I'm so thankful that most of them have been Cirque du Soleil. If I wasn't performing there, it was kind of like we had two days off of work, which is called the double dark, which doesn't happen that often, usually we only have Mondays off and so are our little tour families are little insane. I think anyone in Cirque is like that where if you have two days off, you really take advantage of that, and people would literally fly to Easter Island from Ecuador because they have two days off or like from San Francisco to Hawaii because we have the two days off. Like you really take advantage.

Cody: No rest on those two days?

Laura-Ann: No, like your rest was your flight there, and then you turn around and or some people were just like, no, my body is just dying, my mind is done, I just want to be out for two days. And so, I had those things as well. But I was lucky where I joined Amaluna when they were doing their American tour in 2013, and so we stayed there until the end of 2014, 2015. Then we went over to Europe for two years and toured Europe all over. And then I went to South America with the show for about a year and a half and did most of the countries in South America as well, before returning to the states to close our show earlier this year.

And so, we really, you know, my favorite country, it was really hard because, as I mentioned, I love just exploring different cultures, but I also really, really love food. And so, I always had to just try, and I wanted to try everything. Even if I didn't know what I was eating, I'd try it. So that's always something really special. And also, just being able to have people on tour who may be from those countries is cool because then it's not so foreign that you're like, should I trust this? If you have a tour member, who was like, no,

this is really good, try it. So yeah, but I think for me, I mean Europe was the reason why I wanted to be on a show, of course, but South America really blew my mind.

Laura-Ann: I think coming from North America, we always hear about the more negative side of South America, and we hear about how dangerous it can be and the drug trafficking and all these issues that just kind of doesn't appeal to a lot of people to go down there, you know. Like before I went down, I can't even count how many people messaged me to be like, oh, be safe. But really, it's just like anywhere else, it's just in a different way. You have to have more street smarts, of course, like now that I'm home, it's weird when I see someone put their wallet and their phone on their table at a restaurant or something, I'm like, why would you do that? Someone's going to just come and sneak it away. But yeah, so there's just different things like that.

But I think Argentina and Chile really were countries that stood out to me - the people are amazing and they're such large countries, so everything's very diverse. You know, I went down to Patagonia and trekked on this ice glacier on the Moreno, an ice glacier down there. And then you're in Atacama Desert in Chile, where it's like the driest place on earth and you're stargazing out there. So, it's honestly, it's amazing. Besides performing in Cirque du Soleil, I'm just so thankful that I was able to tour with them to see all those places that I don't think I would have even considered going to.

Cody: Hmm. That's so incredible. I appreciate you sharing all of that, too, and taking us a little bit behind the scenes of, what goes into a Cirque, not only performance, but the whole you know, if you were there for seven years, that whole cycle. I want to jump up to now also, because I know the start of 2020. The live performance industry kind of had a tough break with COVID coming through and canceling a lot of the scheduled events for this year. And I know that there's a project, too, called Project Lumière that you were a part of when that all went down. Talk to us about that - when COVID happened, what it did to the industry and then how you responded with this project.

Laura-Ann: Yeah, so let's go back to March, my how Amaluna was actually told last year that our show was going to be closing and ending its tour. At the time, we had already been told that we were supposed to finish the show in Hong Kong in May of 2020. Now this was the fall of 2019, so at the time, the protests that were happening in Hong Kong were at its peak, and it was quite dangerous because where our tents would

be set up was right downtown where the protests were happening. So, it was on the radar of Cirque, looking at the safety of it all and the logistics of course. Unfortunately, those are things that we don't have control over, so it was really uneasy. We didn't know, OK, are we finishing in May in Hong Kong or are we finishing in Sacramento, in California? And that would have been in March. And so, you know, for me, I was like, I mean, it's been such an epic run, like, I want to finish in Hong Kong. No offense, the Sacramento guys for those from there, but it's not like one of the visitor, tourist, go-getter type places. And so, yeah, I just kind of wanted to go out with this huge Big Bang City.

And then, lo and behold, early/mid-February and we were told that Hong Kong was canceled officially and that this would be our last city on our tour. So, everything happens quite fast when you close the show. It's quite you know, it's emotionally draining, but also just logistics of like, how do I get my stuff home, you know with tour, some people have 2-4 suitcases that we're living out of and you have stuff in your locker or wherever. So luckily, in a way, I was thankful that we were finishing the tour in Sacramento because my parents and family who are in Vancouver all flew at different times to come visit me, and I happened to be able to ship stuff home with them.

Laura-Ann: Whereas had we been in Hong Kong, I don't think that would have happened. And then two weeks later, all of a sudden, I was actually in Florida at the time and literally during that week leading up to it is when things started happening. And I flew out a few days early to visit some friends there. And that's when, you know, literally every hour is getting updates of, oh, this family member is not coming anymore, oh, I don't know if it's safe to fly anymore, are you going to get stuck down there? And yeah, things just kept getting shut down and my phone's going off with Cirque shows being shut down mid-show, artists being sent home right away. No one's knowing what's happening, no one's able to grab their things from the site or anything like that.

And some people were just stuck, like everyone was just stuck where they were, you know, like they couldn't get flights out to go back home. They didn't have a home necessarily to go back to, a lot of people who have been living on tour don't own places. And so, yeah, everyone's scrambling to try and find Airbnb's. Yeah, it was very, very chaotic for that whole week. No one knew what was happening. But at the same time,

we all just kind of had the outlook that this will pass in three weeks, maybe a month max. So, no one really was fussing about not being able to return.

Cody: Just a pause, not a stop.

Laura-Ann: Exactly. That was the exact language that we used, too, it's just a pause in our industry. And then, so this was in March, and I think by July, Cirque had filed for bankruptcy and most in entertainment industry, Broadway was closing shows, the West End in London was closing shows, like iconic shows like I think I heard Phantom of the Opera was closing there, which is insane. So, yeah, it was really just the devastation of entire performing arts industry, live entertainment industry. And you have all these amazing artists, all these amazing technicians and support staff, who were used to this life as a gypsy, basically, and now we're all told to stay home, but we don't have a home to stay in. So, we don't have a home and we don't have our support system either. As I mentioned earlier, my tour family, now we're all dispersed and people to this day, people's belongings are still stuck in trucks around the world and they don't have access to get their personal items back, which is crazy. And so, yeah, it's been really huge challenge, which kind of brought us to the need for this project, Lumière.

Cody: Yeah, and I imagine, too, like you're saying, that's not something that necessarily everybody in the general public thinks about when you use the words, just stay home. Like, what if you are on tour, like you said, the concept of home maybe is where you are at that very moment. So, yeah, that's such an interesting thing to point out, and I'm assuming, too, that being a live performer and being part of the tour, you're used to the energy and the routine of performing and practicing and like you said, going from city to city. So then what kind of impact does that have, when it's stripped away? And how does Project Lumière kind of help with that?

Laura-Ann: It devastates you, to be honest, it's not only about losing your job, it's about a lot of people felt like they've lost their identity. They don't know who they are anymore. Not only did they lose their job, they lost their home, they lost their tour family, they lost their purpose in life. If you know anyone who's been in the performing arts industry or live entertainment industry and they are harping on all the precautions of wearing a mask, staying at home, limiting your gatherings, is because this is literally driving our livelihood, and many people don't qualify for unemployment or EI. We don't have health

insurance, we don't have food on our table because they've lost everything and they're having to pay for a hotel or an Airbnb or couch surf during these last nine months. My job on tour was to help keep the morale up, find different ways to keep each other connected. So, during the pandemic, it was really hard to see all my friends who may have had this amazing energy on tour all of a sudden losing everything and losing their stability because of it.

Laura-Ann: So, I actually had a colleague, she was the casting director at Cirque du Soleil, Stacy Clark. She reached out to me, I think it was in June, and was like, hey, we are wanting to start this initiative called Project Lumière and basically the main goal is to connect our communities of performing arts and circus people, reduce the feeling of isolation and help people find a purpose and navigate these challenging times. And I was like, yes, 100%, yes, count me in, this is exactly what we need. And I was on Zoom calls not knowing what zoom was at the time. I think back, we had a discussion about this, like whatever happened to Skype and all that stuff?

But project Lumière was created in July, and we have over 1,000 members now. It's just a Facebook group, so I'm not sure if you're able, Cody, to link the project on your Facebook to the website, to this podcast. So, if there's anyone that's listening too, who knows who's in the circus or performing arts industry who are still needing a community, please go check that out or share it with them. And yeah, it was just really a sense of wanting to create some kind of stability and an outreach, you know, occasionally we'll get a message from someone just thanking us for the content that we're putting out. And, yeah, it's just this is about trying to stay connected during this time.

Cody: Yeah, that's such important work, and really cool that you're able to collaborate on that and get that going because, yeah, it can be so isolating and each industry is different. But the feeling of isolation is one that nobody should have to feel, so really cool that you put that together. And also, yeah, to listeners out there, we'll make sure to put that link to the Facebook group in the show notes so you can easily click through there and get involved or support in whatever way you can too.

Laura-Ann: Thank you. Yeah, it's been amazing, the support from people who are industry as well have reached out. And it's just really nice you know, because in the news, in the media, we hear of like, oh, this show is closing or this Broadway show is no

longer, the theater's closing or whatever and definitely hits people differently. Right. Like for someone who's not in the industry, may just be thinking like, oh, man, I wanted to see that show. But for us it's literally like, that means there's 150 jobs that just got lost and will not be returning. So, we actually have just released another series through Project Lumière and in collaboration with Circus Talk, it's called The Pivot. I know that word has kind of being a buzz word as of late, but we really wanted to highlight individuals who have been in our industry, who have taken the last few months to actually been able to pivot their purpose a little bit further to other careers, because a lot of people, like artists, especially, they may have only been wanting to be in performing arts and they don't even have a resume and they don't know how to put that together.

Laura-Ann: Or when we're talking about transferable skills, what are like, you know, if you ask them, they're like, I don't know what I can do, I can do like contortion. How's that going to help me at a desk job? So, we've done quite a few articles and some panel discussions, as well, on how to identify those and make yourself feel worthy of something other than performing arts. Well, it's not there, so the Pivot has been great. That's also linked on our Facebook page or go to Circus Talk. And we've also done motivational panels with a company called Theatre Art Life, which is more about it's not just circus, it's about all of performing arts. And if you're one of those people who feel like you could offer something for us, like, please, please reach out to me, I would love to have a conversation with you and either see what your services are that you could offer and help us out with.

Cody: Totally, yeah, we'll make sure to put that down there in the show notes, so, yeah, any listeners that want to check it out or get involved in any way, would love for you all to click through there. Laura-Ann, I appreciate you sharing all of that and talking about your journey and then also these next projects. But this podcast is called What's Next? What is next for you?

Laura-Ann: Well, the last few years I was on tour, I actually started getting really interested in public relations. I ended up shadowing, had a program called Cross Department Training. And basically what it did was it allowed artists, like current performing artists, they were kind of like internships because we have such a village and a community in so many different trades and careers right there on our show, this program allowed us to have basically an internship with someone who was on tour, who

was working in that field. And so, I was actually shadowing our publicist on tour, I really enjoyed all the media relations that she would have to do, and I was amazed with the fact that you're in different countries and you're still making things happen. You know, you might not speak the language, so how do you communicate with that or how do you know that this population in this city is going to react to whatever technique we're trying to use?

Cody: Mm hmm.

Laura-Ann: And so, I actually took a sabbatical last year, in 2019. Had I known that I would have had nine months off now, I don't think I would have done that, but I took a sabbatical and actually went to London. There was another tour, another show there, performing in the Royal Albert Hall at the time. And so, I published this on that show. And that was really amazing because they got to premiere in London, which meant members of the royal family came to see it, and so obviously the media frenzy was crazy. So, I got a lot of experience through that, and then we also had Cirque du Soleil open for the BAFAs, which is the British Academy Film Awards, basically like the Oscars, but more Brit films. And again, royalty was there and of course, all the A-list celebrities you can think of. So, I got to work on those two huge events, which was really amazing and it was you know, I wasn't the center, I wasn't performing or anything like that, but it still gave me that adrenaline euphoria, I would say. And so, it kind of was like, yeah, this is what I want to do.

Laura-Ann: But I got a random Facebook ad that popped up for a public relations certificate program, and it was offered through Simon Fraser University here in Vancouver, and it was going to be offered online because of the pandemic. But this, I was like, oh, nine weeks? I can do that. It was six weeks of courses, three weeks with a practicum even so, we actually got to work in the field with clients and agencies who need a publicist or intern. You know, I haven't closed the door on Cirque quite yet. Also in the summer, I decided to get an ankle surgery that I had been putting off for five years because I didn't want to take time off work, off shows and take care of it, because it was a little bit major of a surgery with a long recovery time. So, once I found out that shows are closing and the reality is we're not coming back for the rest of this year, I decided to get the cut, and yes, I've been on disability recovering from ankle surgery. And then, yeah, now I'm certified, I have my public relations certificate. And so, yeah, I

could do some, like, freelance stuff or find a job. I think that's something I'm looking into in the New Year.

Cody: Thanks for sharing all that, that's so cool. And getting experience as a publicist, talking about working on shows where the royal family was going to be there and things like that, like what an amazing intro to that industry and that field. Like, I think that just goes to show that sometimes to for folks listening out there, even if you don't have that formal program inside of your work culture, even just asking folks outside of your own department if you could pick their brain or shadow them for a little bit, usually that's something that companies can make time for or value you as an employee wanting to have that broader landscape or even check out a different thing. So, I want to jump here to our final few segments here as we wrap up the episode, which are fun segments, as we like to call them. OK, so this first one is called New Year's resolution. So, 2020 was a year unlike any other, and a lot of resolutions that we had at the end of 2019 looking into 2020, didn't necessarily come to fruition, just like we thought. But looking forward to 2021, do you have a New Year's resolution?

Laura-Ann: To be honest, I'm not a huge believer in New Year's resolution, because I, in some ways, I know that some people need that start date, like, OK, I have this huge goal. So, if that's your case, then you need to have a plan and have, it's not so much about having the plan either, it's also having that support and knowing that you have that community around you who will support you in that plan. So, for me personally, my New Year's resolution is to continue to work, to be more patient with myself. This year has taught me a lot about that, with my recovery from my ankle surgery, it was non-weight bearing for almost two months, and for a gymnast slash acrobat that's so annoying. And just like celebrating every, I think everyone kind of had to do this this year is like celebrating the little things, really, whether it's, oh my gosh, I showered today, you know, success, and it just makes me feel so much better. Like I went out for a half an hour lot today and got some fresh air, and it really can just rejuvenate you. And then professionally, I think it's so hard for me because honestly, I don't know when Cirque will be returning. We had a meeting recently and it was very hopeful. But at the same time, there's so many outliers that can affect that. So, you can't put all your beans in a basket.

Laura-Ann: So, my goal is to just continue reaching out to my network and my community. I've revamped my LinkedIn this year, my profile, because I kind of left it. I don't even know the last time I used it prior to this year, it still had stuff from like when I was in Oregon State or at Oregon State almost 10 years ago now. Oh wow, that makes me feel so, wow, where did the time go? But yeah, and so I just always want to find people's stories and assist them, which helps me find that affiliation as well within myself. And so just be there for people, be there for myself, be a presence - I think those are my main goals. And to be honest, like this is the longest time I've been home in Vancouver since before coming to Oregon State. And it's been really Eye-Opening. But you know, I'm currently living back with my mom and she's just so happy to have me home, and we're making up for lost time because I haven't been home. So, yeah, whether it's last night we made a charcuterie house instead of a gingerbread house, finding little things to like make one thing a little bit more special really helps, you know.

Cody: Right, that's so true. OK, this next one is called If I weren't a blank, I'd be blank. And the point of this one is to say, if you weren't an acrobat and or a PR professional, as you're going towards now, what else would you be or what would that 2nd blank be? And this could be like realistic, this could be something you dream about, et cetera, et cetera. So, I'll let you take it wherever you want.

Laura-Ann: Cody, realistically speaking, that's the exact question I ask myself every day. I'm trying to figure that out. But OK, if I weren't an acrobat or PR enthusiast, I would be a...

Cody: The charcuterie gingerbread house.

Laura-Ann: If that was an actual profession, to just go around and taste different foods around the world, and not even critique them, but just be like, here, check this out. I do that on my Instagram sometimes. If I find something weird in like the Korean market or whatever, I'll buy it. And I'm like, oh my gosh, you guys, we have to try this like, yeah, I'm a sucker for that. So, definitely that's what I will do.

Cody: Foodie, I love it, I love it. OK, this final fun segment is called Dinner for Four. So if you could have dinner with any four people, past, present, future, and this is non-covid

time, so it wouldn't have to be takeout at a park, this could be around the dinner table. Who would they be and why?

Laura-Ann: Ok, I'm going to assume that I can speak any language possible.

Cody: Yes, OK. There's no limitations to this, this is completely ideal situation.

Laura-Ann: Number one would be my grandpa. He was my mom's dad and he never learned English when he came to Canada, but he had lived a very full life. I think he passed away when he was 95 years old. But every conversation we ever had to have was always translated, so I never felt like I could just sit down and talk with him and find out all these amazing stories about being in the Cold War, immigration to Canada, you know, all of that. So, for sure, that's always been a regret for me is not learning Chinese to be able to speak with him, so that would be really interesting for me. Number two, Jackie Chan has always been like one of my idols when I was growing up, because I loved his humor and I love his stunting ability and yeah, just finding out how he made it as a Chinese descendant and how he made it into the American film industry and breaking barriers when so many people would tell him no. That's always something because, yeah, I am a minority in that sense. And whether I believe it or not, this year, unfortunately, has made me see that a lot more, I've even had to personally deal with some cases of racism, especially when the virus was breaking out and unfortunately got dubbed as the China virus, the Chinese virus. And so, yeah, there was a lot of negative connotations that I had to deal with throughout this year regarding that sense, so having idols like Jackie Chan or Lucy Liu, I always got compared to Lucy Liu as well.

Laura-Ann: But OK, so that's two. So, three would be Princess Diana. We are birthday twins, and I just think she's an amazing humanitarian and I absolutely love her and I remember bawling my eyes out the day she passed. And let's see, the fourth one. The fourth one, actually a little bit more, I've always wanted to sit down with people who.. It's not really like one person, but someone who has maybe was homeless, who's really struggled. I've always wanted to just like go around and talk to people on the streets and find out their stories, find out how they got there, what may have happened to lead them to this isolation there. That's always been something that's really interesting to me. And yes, some people might be like, why don't you go do it? I mean, there's a lot of safety concerns as well, and you have to make sure that, you know, you can't just walk in their

community as well. They created their own street community, and there's certain things you need to know that you don't disrespect that they are people, too. But, yeah, I would think that would be a really interesting conversation as well.

Cody: Mm hmm.

Laura-Ann: I don't know if, like, all four of them would want to sit there with each other, but I mean,

Cody: This is your world.

Laura-Ann: Princess Diana,

Cody: And your grandpa and Jackie Chan to do. Yeah, that would be an incredible conversation.

Laura-Ann: I would pay to see that for sure.

Cody: Well, Laura-Ann, we so much appreciate your time and for talking us through both your time at OSU, time with Cirque, and what you've been up to now and how you're sharing so much positivity with those in the performing arts community as well. So, thanks so much for coming on the show.

Laura-Ann: Thank you so much Cody. And as I mentioned earlier, it's amazing to reconnect with my Beaver Nation family. A couple of months ago, I actually was on Josh Gordon's podcast, Beavertail, and he took the initiative to interview former student athletes and, yeah, and just find out, like, what their experiences were like at Oregon State and where they're going or anything like that now. So, feel free to check that one out, too. And I think it's awesome that some Oregon State alum are doing podcasts and hopefully you guys can maybe do a joint one, one day. But yeah, I think I was episode 67, so if you want to know a little bit more about, I think I talked more about my Oregon state experience, so you can definitely check that one out. But yeah, it's just been great, and I love the feeling of being connected, even a decade later, to my alma mater. And I really, really hope that everyone's staying healthy and safe, and eventually I'll be able to cross the Canadian US border again to come down to Corvallis and Portland. I know my

mom is dying to get some tax-free shopping. Yes, our whole family, honestly, like I chose Oregon State because of Tonya and Michael and the beautiful campus, and also because they didn't have tornadoes and hurricanes, that was actually on my list.

Cody: Yeah.

Laura-Ann: But I think they were more ecstatic with the fact that they'd be able to come down and visit and have tax-free shopping. And literally every year since I graduated, they still go down once or twice a year. So, this year has been quite devastating for them because we haven't been able to have our annual Oregon State trip.

Cody: So, everybody's got their thing that they're missing.

Laura-Ann: Oh, yeah. It's amazing how much you miss like a good Café Yumm bowl. Yeah, me and Mandy Rodriguez always go when I come down, so, soon.

Cody: Yes, TBD. Well, again, Laura-Ann, thank you so much and yes, shout out to Josh Warden and in the Beaver Tales Podcast, another great podcast that gets together Beaver alums. And yeah, I mean that you're as strong as your community and Oregon State community is one that supports you and everyone else. So, we invite everyone, whatever avenue you have to get connected or reconnected to Oregon State and the folks that are out there to support you, take advantage of it.

Laura-Ann: Definitely. Beaver Nation, if any of you are in Vancouver, please reach out to me on LinkedIn or I'll give you my social, my Instagram or Twitter. Those are great ways to connect with me, because I also am needing a community here in Vancouver since I haven't been here, I don't know, a little plead for some Oregon State connections here as well.

Cody: So awesome. And we'll make sure to throw those social media handles in the show notes as well, so you all can connect with Laura-Ann. But yeah, Laura-Ann, thanks so much for hopping on here and sharing with us.

Laura-Ann: Thank you so much Cody, and Go Beavs!

Cody: Go Beavs!

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

Cody: Hey, listeners, our goal at LSU next to the alumni association is to build community, and that includes creating connections and sharing these unique stories with the rest of the nation. If you found this episode of the What's Next podcast valuable, you can help us achieve this goal by writing a quick review, leaving a rating and subscribing to the show in your preferred podcast player. We're thankful for your support.

[Bouncy theme music fades.]