

# Redefining Health & Wellness

## #67

**Featured this episode:** Shohreh Davoodi & Riley Blanks

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**Shohreh Davoodi:** Welcome to episode #67 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. Today's episode features the lovely Riley Blanks. She is a storyteller, artist, photographer, and the creator of Woke Beauty. Riley and I had a meaningful conversation about defining beauty, identity as art, how to tap into our own stories, entrepreneurship, and more. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to [shohrehdavoodi.com/67](https://shohrehdavoodi.com/67). That's [shohrehdavoodi.com/67](https://shohrehdavoodi.com/67).

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[Music plays]

Welcome to the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. I'm your host and resident rainbow glitter bomb, Shohreh Davoodi. I started this project because I saw how black-and-white messaging about health harms everyone, and I wanted to paint a more honest and vibrant picture. This podcast is a space where we can reimagine health together by confronting

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limiting misconceptions, delving into aspects of well-being that are often ignored, and prioritizing conversations with marginalized individuals. I encourage you to take what you need and leave behind what you don't. Are you ready for this? Let's fucking go!

Riley, I am so excited to have you on the podcast, thank you for being here today.

**Riley Blanks:** Thank you! It's a pleasure! I love that we're kind of going back and forth here.

**Shohreh:** I know! Just to position this for listeners who may not know, Riley and I were introduced through a mutual friend. We both live here in Austin, Texas, and because of the coronavirus we haven't actually met in person at this moment when we're recording this. But Riley had asked if I would go on her podcast, and then I asked if she would come on my podcast, and tomorrow we finally get to meet because we are shooting because Riley is a photographer.

**Riley:** Yeah, I can't wait. And I love that that happened first. At least like the booking happened first. So thank you for trusting me before you even heard me speak. It means a lot to me.

**Shohreh:** Of course! I mean, now it's just fun 'cause we've gotten to talk to each other, hear each other's stories, and I think that'll bring a great new element into the actual shoot itself.

**Riley:** Yes, absolutely!

**Shohreh:** Awesome. Well, why don't you start just by telling me more about your journey to become the person you are today and to do the work you're currently called to do.

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**Riley:**

Yeah, thank you for the open-ended question. I feel like every time I'm asked that question it goes different directions [laughs], so I love kind of like waiting for myself to figure that out.

But yeah, basically I grew up all over the world. I mean, you can't really do that, but as literally as possible. I was born in Houston and lived there for 10 days before being carried over to Santa Barbara with my mom. My dad was drafted into the NBA the year I was born, so I had a very unconventional lifestyle and upbringing. Basically just like a super transient field. I've said that I'm a basketball brat, so a similar lifestyle to the military except for a lot more sweat, I think [laughs]. I guess there are a lot of similarities. It's a really high stress, high standard environment. You're around a lot of exceptional people.

And I had the blessing of picking up a tennis racquet when I was five and pursuing that. So I spent a lot of time with my dad travelling and kind of following along with his career in my teenage years, which really exposed me to just excellence. And that has, of course, seeped into my adult life.

But to give a little more background 'cause everyone is always like, "Where did you live," I lived in Cyprus in a town called Nicosia, so on the Mediterranean as a little girl.

**Shohreh:**

I have a good friend who is Cypriot.

**Riley:**

Oh cool! Yeah, it's a little island that's actually half Turkish, half Greek, and that's kind of an interesting history. So yeah, we were there and then we were in Giessen, Germany, just kind of like mountainside Germany. And we lived in Székesfehérvár, Hungary, about an hour from Budapest. And then I've lived pretty much in every corner of the country.

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So culturally I'm biracial. My mom is white; my dad is Black. And then I'd say I'm transnational. So I have a lot of entities living within me, and I kind of say that adaptability is my superpower. I can get along pretty much with anybody, which can be tricky when you're trying to nail your own identity because you're constantly codeswitching and navigating different spaces. But that's in part what's led me to where I am today.

I played tennis for 15 years. I pursued a professional career. I started online high school actually when I was 12, so it's kind of interesting to see how kids are navigating school today. I'm like, well, I did that, you know? [laughter] I did that before online high school was even a thing, so it was pretty insane. I don't know if you remember Ask Jeeves, but that was my main tool [laughter].

**Shohreh:** You were an early pioneer.

**Riley:** I went to University of Virginia which is a pretty high-tier school, and I'm kind of amazed at my younger self for getting through that. [Laughs] But yeah, I grew up really fast. I kind of went backwards. I had a full-on schedule, I had a nutritionist, I had a hitting partner, I had a technical coach. I was playing high-level tournaments and just training like a professional athlete before my parents separated when I was around 17.

And I spent one year in high school, [laughs] which is also kind of bizarre. And then I went off to college, played D-1 for a year, and then I quit. And when I quit, I almost immediately became obsessed with photography. And I was multi-obsessed.

So, I was in the fine art department, so it was all film. You worked with your hands, which is a really beautiful experience. I was really lucky to be in that department. And then alongside that, I was studying sociology, and thus I

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was obsessed with portraiture. So it was always how do I find a deeper connection with a person through photography. So while a lot of the fine art kids were kind of moody wallflowers, I was like super gregarious, always kind of, of course, sifting through different friend groups and just involved in every aspect of college, while spending nights in the dark room creating art. So it was kind of a beautiful delicate, messy balance of things.

And I found a lot about myself just kind of in how I see the world. How I love the world. How maybe something so rigorous as a sport wasn't really for me on an emotional/spiritual level. It in many ways prepared me and aided me in navigating trauma and entrepreneurship and other obstacles in life.

People are like, oh where were you before Woke Beauty, like where'd you work? And I was like, well, I worked in the service industry. It wasn't like I went from a corporate job to solopreneurship. I actually left college, ended up moving to Nashville to be with my boyfriend, who we had been long distance for two years, and my first job was as a cocktail waitress at a speakeasy. A really popular Speakeasy in Nashville, Tennessee.

And I kind of just jumped around from waitress job to waitress job. I had a really hard time working. And, I mean, what's ironic is that's not really a traditional job. But for someone who was so used to a schedule that I could make on my own, it felt limiting. So I had a hard time staying anywhere. It was almost like I moved from country to country within a city.

While I was doing that I was trying to use my degree, and I was freelancing and just juggling all kinds of stuff, and it was pretty soul-crushing. I had this passion. I had this kind of abstract idea that I had no idea what it was. I wanted to have some kind of impact with what I'd learned, but I didn't know how that would look, you know?

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After a couple of years, after my now fiancé got his master's degree, I was like, we need to get out of here. I hate this city [laughter], and I want to go abroad, like I want to get out of this country. And so we landed on Nicaragua and Guatemala, and we lived between the two for six months. And that was a really beautiful experience. It was wild. Nica is very raw; it's actually the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere after Haiti. So our lifestyle, you know, compared to living in our little rinky-dink apartment in Nashville, was wildly different.

It was amazing to do that together. And there's a quote somewhere that says, like, if you travel abroad with your partner and you come back and you find yourself in the airport still enthralled with one another, just get married right then and there. Because if you can kinda go through that sort of unknown together, and navigate it, and find where you align and where you don't, then you can probably mirror that in your reality. So that was really good for us.

And then we moved to Austin. We kind of dropped our stuff off here and we were like, let's give that city a shot. I kind of had this gut feeling that this city could hold me and help me figure out who I wanted to be and what I wanted to do. My dad lives here, and I'm really close to him as well, and Jack, my fiancé, has developed a really beautiful relationship with him.

And you know, we were right. We've been here for four years, and two and a half years ago I kind of birthed Woke Beauty and have figured it out. And it's been beautiful. My mom is the catalyst. It's a photography movement and a self-actualization tool. It's basically everything that I tried to kind of reach for in college, but so much deeper. It's been really amazing. Every time I think about it, I give myself goosebumps, just because I feel like I'm doing what I'm meant to do. And I don't know if any of us are meant to do

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anything. I think we manifest it, and that's what makes it so much more powerful.

So that was a lot, but that was not everything. So here we are [laughs].

**Shohreh:**

I love it! I mean, clearly you have lived a very interesting life in a lot of different places doing a lot of different things, so I feel like that was an extremely shortened version of what you could have shared here on the podcast, and still got to share a lot with us. And I want to come back to Woke Beauty and we're gonna talk a lot about it, but first, because you mentioned kind of your journey of coming to Austin, I want to talk about your Manifest series.

Because you came to Austin as a person of color in a time where a lot of people, a lot of BIPOC people, are being either pushed out of the city or are choosing to leave because they have not found it to be a particularly welcoming place for them. And you created this self-portraiture series to reflect your own experiences within that dynamic, and I'd love for you to talk about more about that.

**Riley:**

Yeah, thank you for addressing that. I appreciate you kind of at the onset bringing it up because it's so close to my heart, and it really encapsulates my journey in this city, kind of as this symbol of my journey into my own identity as a woman of color. It's taken me a second [laughs] to figure it out.

Being biracial and presenting as Black is very complex. I have come to decide and to own that I am Black and I am also biracial and that my biracialness is a form of being Black—it's a subset of being Black. And that's been really empowering. I'm very proud of where I come from. I'm proud of the people who have come before who have been able to really

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create an environment in which I can live, like, a relatively safe place, you know?

I think in part, me taking hold of my identity and that identity is me paying homage to those who paved the way. And I think that's really important to say because a lot of biracial people have a hard time nailing who they are, and I would say you get to decide that no matter how the world treats you.

Manifest is really a representation of the collective. For me to say it's altruistic, I think, it in part still makes it about me. So I'm careful to use that word, but it really was intended as kind of a representation of women of color as a whole. It's claiming that we can claim space. That we can build space alone, independently. We have that power. And I did find when I first moved here that I felt alienated, I felt othered and other, and that was frustrating, and it can make you feel agitated.

And so then it was like, well how do I agitate the space? How do I disrupt? And I found that by assimilating, I could disrupt. And by disrupting, I could assimilate. And there's nothing wrong with being both and using both. Which is then, of course, a version of literally being both and finding a way to blend those together to be yourself. So, a lot of thought has gone into this [laughs].

But the series is a series of self-portraits, and they're taken all throughout the city of Austin. And I did that on purpose. First I thought of going to Central America, to even the Caribbean side of Nicaragua where there was a ton of mixing, and not in the best way, of course, like colonialism, right? And how interesting would it be to find myself there? And then it was like, no, I want to show this in an urban city, in a metropolis where we are literally being erased. Where we have what's called "Black flight." Our percentage is dropping at a high rate, and we are the only metropolitan

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city in the entire country to have that decline of Black people inhabiting the city, which is tragic. In many ways our culture, it's lost. And we are culture, literally, right? So it's detrimental to a city, and it's detrimental to the community.

There's a lot of irony in Austin, and I kind of wanted to wrap that up in a way that was hopeful. In a way that was colorful. So yeah, I went all over the city. I took all the pictures by myself. You know, when I first showed my mom the pictures, she was like, "So you took these?" And I was like, "Yes." And she was like, "And that's you?" And I was like, "Yes." She was like, "So who took them?" [Laughter]

So I took them. I found out a way to make it happen technically, so that I could be free to really lean into the solitude. And what I find typically with photography is that for me it's pretty active. It's sweaty. It's all-encompassing. I'm very vocal and directive with subjects and with clients. But with myself out in those spaces, it became meditative, which is typically how I find writing to feel. And that was a really beautiful experience. So while it was like, hey, let me create this series that represents women of color that's sort of like a pledge, like we can do this ourselves, it also became this sort of beautiful, peaceful experience of me kind of finding myself in solitude.

And that's morphed into different places now. Throughout the pandemic I've taken more self-portraits. At the beginning I took some, and I created this sort of little capsule of Manifest called "Slow. Steady. Still." and they were all inside, which as a natural light photographer, was really great for me. It challenged me to kind of push myself.

And so I kind of thought about space outside and inside and connected that to architecture and how in many ways that's a built environment. And

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walls can be literal or they can be figurative. They can mirror I-35, which is essentially thrown into the city to literally divide race. Or we can look at redlining and what happens to neighborhoods. But that can also happen in a pandemic when you literally can't leave your home. Or if you do, you're vulnerable, you're unsafe.

What's really been interesting is while creating this series and this dialect, also creating space for myself to live here and to flourish. And so when women approach me and they say, "Hey, I don't feel comfortable here," or when I go into the Black community and I hear the complaints, I often say, "Well, we have an opportunity. We can rise above, and we have and we will, and we can decide that we belong here." And that claim in and of itself is very powerful, and on an energetic level, it will be felt.

So I don't think the series will ever die [laughs]. I think it's a forever thing, and that's kind of the point. It's brought a lot of fulfillment to carry it out.

**Shohreh:** I know a lot of the photos are available at various places, so I'll definitely put a link so that people can see some of those in the show notes because they're absolutely gorgeous.

**Riley:** Thank you.

**Shohreh:** And they're so meaningful too with having the understanding of what is beneath these photos and what they're intended to represent. And I love the subject here because this is a conversation that I have had with a lot of people as well. And I have Black friends who have moved here and then subsequently left because they couldn't feel comfortable in this city. And I would never blame anyone for choosing to go anywhere else.

And then I've had people asking me, "Well, if Austin isn't as woke as they claim that they are, why would you want to stay? Why would you want to

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live in Texas?” And you used the word “opportunity,” and that’s how I view it as well, as if all of the people with values and who care about social justice leave this city, then the city is lost. If some of us stay, especially those of us who have more privilege, and do that work, and fight for those changes, then there’s an opportunity to really build here, and to create community, and to change the city.

And again, I think people come out different ways in what their choice is, but for me that’s been a driving force in staying.

**Riley:**

Yeah, I think that’s beautifully said. And I understand both sides, and I respect all sides. At the end of the day we all have our place. I’ve said the same thing about protesting. I took an image in front of the Capitol day after one of our largest turnouts around the protesting. It was a Monday morning at like 7:30 a.m., and there wasn’t a soul in sight. So it was just me in the middle of the road in front of the Capitol, and it was really a message. Like hey, my form of protesting might not be going to a protest, it might be writing a piece, taking a picture, starting a conversation, being vocal in a way that’s more communicative, right?

And so, I think it’s really important to find your place in society, in a community, in your neighborhood and to own it. I think we all have a role to play, and that’s what will really make change. We’re not in a monolith; we can’t come at this from one angle. We need all of us. If you choose to stay, good for you. If you choose to leave, good for you. I respect all of it.

**Shohreh:**

Yes, exactly. So, I want to come back to your business, Woke Beauty, and you’ve chosen to invoke beauty in the name. And so I want to talk about what is beauty to you, and how does your personal view of beauty differ from some of the mainstream societal ideas that we have out there about beauty?

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**Riley:**

Such a good question. Yeah, the name took a second to come up with, but I did find, out of all of the words that live in that category, that “beauty” was the best because I don’t think that it’s something that you can see.

Meaning it doesn’t live in physicality. Of course, society would tell you different, but society is wrong [laughs].

That’s the sociological thing, right? We’ve really built that up. I mean, if you look at the trajectory of beauty in mainstream media, it’s changed over the years. It’s not always been the same, which would be indicative that it’s not real, you know? It’s literally just decided by us as a collective. And we’re not always right. We have a lot of influence on each other, but all of that’s human made. And I think that real beauty is not.

I think that it’s intangible. I think that’s it’s something that can be created. I think it can be birthed. I think that it’s kind of similar to a plant or a flower. You can throw a seed down and see what happens, and if you nurture the seed, you know, if you take care of it, you’re more likely to see something that flourishes, and that’s nourished, and that’s fortified.

I think what’s beautiful about beauty is that it’s something that we all have the ability to create, within ourselves and within our world. And to that end, I think that’s really empowering. Instead of looking in the mirror and thinking, oh my nose isn’t beautiful, right? That’s not something that you have effect over. And so therefore I don’t think that’s necessarily beautiful or not beautiful. But the way that you look at yourself when you look in the mirror, that can be beautiful. And that’s a decision.

And so I think that you have to take great responsibility over how you use the word. I think it’s crucial to really respect beauty, and I think it’s really important to validate those who make an effort to cultivate it. Because I do think in many ways it is what we need to survive and to thrive.

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So yeah, I don't know if there's one definitive definition of beauty, but I think more than anything, I really believe that, of course going back to the series, it's something that we manifest. And that's what makes it timeless and sacred.

**Shohreh:**

And one of the ways that you've talked about this is that you've said that through photography, you want to awaken the beauty within through things like authenticity, self-awareness, grace. And that's really attractive for me because I talk about authenticity, self-awareness, and grace all the time with my clients. They're such important concepts. And so as a photographer, how do you use photography as a medium to capture those things, given that photography, by its nature, is capturing the external?

**Riley:**

[Laughs] Right, I'm careful with those words too because of course now they're getting used so much. And I think when that happens we oftentimes lose what they actually mean.

With photography, I really seek to stir them up and then, therefore, it's not really about photography, which sounds so funny coming from a photographer. But I actually wouldn't say I'm a photographer first. I call myself a "communication artist." I think that the act of being together and finding commonality in each other and understanding in each other is most important. And if you can do that on a level that's human and on a level that's raw, then the photographs will happen because they'll capture that.

And so, when it comes to my photography and my sessions, even if they're condensed, what's most important to me is the experience and the interaction that I have with the person I'm with. And so I have to show up fully. I have to ensure that the person feels like they're being seen. And when I say that, I really mean it. Like I am actually giving you all that I have.

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If I don't do that, I have no ability to take your picture. It's just not gonna happen.

When I first created Woke Beauty, it actually was, in many ways, inspired by my work in college. My final thesis was called Stare, and it was all about how if you stare at someone longer, if you get more time with them, you're gonna get a better picture because you're going to have a better understanding of who they are and what makes them come alive. And so that became something that I used with my mom in kind of helping her through her own trauma and her own insecurities. I found that taking pictures of her got us further than a walk on the beach.

The first experience I developed with Woke Beauty, it's literally called The Experience. And it actually involves a 60-minute sort of soul reveal where I get together with the person—I like to call them the “subject” rather than the “client”—and I get to know them, and we define a rite of passage, an intention for their session so that when we're actually working together, we've now built this foundation. They feel comfortable opening themselves up to me, and they have something that they can fixate on, that's outside of themselves.

So whether they've had a breast reduction—these are all real examples—they've just graduated college, they just had a baby, they just lost their job, they're going through a divorce, they feel awful, they feel amazing. It's some kind of like pretty transcendental sort of phase of life that they want to capture. Through the pandemic a lot of people have wanted to really kind of encapsulate the insular experience that they've had indoors by going outside on a nature walk and really documenting who they are at this time in life.

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So in some ways it's building legacy. It's capturing a moment that can expand through time. And for that reason, it's a very different process that focuses much more on the human and less on the camera and the actual image.

**Shohreh:**

And one thing that I think about too when you're talking about that and the experience and getting to know your client or subject, is that when we look at photos that really move us, it's because the energy is captured there within the image. Like we're feeling something that was encapsulated in this photograph. So even though it is an external piece that you're looking at, the reality is that it's so beautiful and it's so wonderful because the energy is there and you can feel that.

**Riley:**

Yeah absolutely. It's an interesting thing. I think it's important for me to say that photographers have a very, a burden. They have a responsibility, not that it has to be heavy. It's a duty, right? Like when you are capturing someone, it's your responsibility to make it about them and not about you. The camera is a vehicle. It's a witness. It's not the main role. It's just there. You are the most important piece, and you are really showing up for the person, right? So then through you, they are the most important piece, right?

And I think now, unfortunately, in many spaces, that's just not the case, even if we look at mainstream media, we look at commercial photography, it's about the clothing, it's about the message, it's about the branding, the marketing. It's the model as the vehicle, not the camera as the vehicle. And that can steal someone's soul. I think it's bullshit! [Laughs]

I even think like these people who want to go out and use Black people and photograph them to enhance their portfolio or to show representation

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also bullshit. You're not creating that story for them, you're creating that story for you. Don't take advantage of us like that.

We look at brands right now, well, all throughout time, all their campaigns have a splash right across the cover, but you go into their buildings and who's working? Not us. So you'll hire us, you'll pay us \$200 for a campaign, but you won't give us a salary. So in that way you're using photography to rob us.

As you can hear, that makes me very angry. Kind of throughout the past six months I've lit people up and done my best to really educate and to explain that you need to take photographs for people, about people, not of people. That is crucial to really maintain the genuinity of humans.

**Shohreh:**

Because you're getting at, especially in this time, I know you said through all of time especially, but now in the last few months there's really been such blatant tokenism that is happening for BIPOC in wake of the civil rights uprising that we're going through right now, where people are rushing to create that representation out of thin air that they didn't have before, right?

Podcast hosts who didn't have diverse guests all of a sudden they're like, let me get every Black and Brown person that I can get my eyes on, you know. Photographers are doing the same thing. Companies are doing the same thing. And that is so surface level, and it doesn't get to true inclusivity. It doesn't get to true values and truly looking at yourself and your anti-racism. And it's a problem because it looks right, but it doesn't feel right.

**Riley:**

Yeah, I mean, I would say for me it doesn't look right either [laughs]. I mean, it's kind of like—

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**Shohreh:** Yes!

**Riley:** You know, I know what you mean. You know, it's like scrolling down a feed and all you saw up until June three was white people, and now we get all Black people. And then we go down, now we get sprinkled Black people.

**Shohreh:** Yeah, the singular photo by itself, if you don't look at the surrounding, is like, yes, there's representation here. But as soon as you zoom out, and you see what was there before, that's when it starts to immediately feel bad.

**Riley:** Right. On one hand, I have my own personal brand, so on that side, I work with brands a lot, and I have a couple of partnerships and I've heard a couple of people complain that they can't do anything right, and everyone is getting cancelled, and it's a disaster. And I get that. I mean, I don't know if I fully empathize because like, well, at least you're not Black, you know what I mean? [Laughs] I don't know.

But then on the other side, as a consumer, or as an influencer, or you know, kind of a representative or ambassador, I mean, I question everything. I question it all. Unless I know your motive, I don't know who you are. And I think that's fair. I think I, you, all of us have every right to do that because at the end of the day, we live in a capitalistic society, and what are people after, you know? They're after money, they're after fame and notoriety, and so how are they going to do that? They're gonna do anything they can to get that. If you're selling a product, if you're trying to make money, which we all are, I mean, you're gonna do everything you can, right?

So I think all of us need to be very discerning around who we work with and how we work with people. So yeah, it's complicated. And everything is

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beautiful, life is beautiful, everything is fine, right? I'm not a cynic, but I also want to make sure that I protect myself and I'm careful. And I say that also as advice to anyone out there kind of pursuing a career in this space. You have to be careful. And I also say that from my inexperience. I have worked with brands and been taken advantage of, and it's a horrible feeling. [Laughs]

**Shohreh:**

Yeah, yes! And thank you for saying that. I think that's such an important thing to say, especially right now. It's so timely. And I want to be clear too that I have also heard a lot of brands, and influencers, and whoever, saying, "It feels like I can't do anything right." And it's like, the reality is that there are ways of changing how you're doing business in the world, how you're representing in the world, to move in the right direction, without taking advantage of people.

And like you said, it does require going inward. It does require looking at your own motives. Why are you doing this? Why are you making these changes? Is it because you got called out? Is it because you feel like that's the only way to stay relevant and keep making money? Because those are the wrong reasons, and people will be able to see through that. And that is where that challenge is. So it's very complex. It's very nuanced.

I hate this idea that oh, there's nothing you can do, you're just screwed no matter what, because I don't think that's true. I think it just requires not, like trying to just quick put a magic fix to everything, and instead, actually really intentionally looking at what you're doing and where you want to go.

**Riley:**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Shohreh:**

Which is a good segue into talking about storytelling, which I'm very excited to talk to you about. So as a photographer, of course, there's an

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important storytelling element to what you do. I know you also write as well. So as an artist, stories are just part of who you are. So how do you figure out what stories to tell and what way you want to tell them? And for the rest of us, how do we do that, you know, even if we are not a photographer, we're not a writer, but we have stories to tell too?

**Riley:** I love your questions!

**Shohreh:** Thank you, I worked hard on them.

**Riley:** Yeah, so, I consider myself a multimedia storyteller. That doesn't mean that I put together graphics and videos. There are many different ways that multimedia can be perceived. It means that, you know, I don't just do photography. I show up in the space in different ways. And actually, my favorite way of creating stories is to blend mediums. To speak, and to write, and to photograph. Because I think then you can come at a story from different angles and different perspectives, and you can reach more people.

And at the end of the day, my hope is that I shift someone's perspective. I cause them to think deeper, to have maybe an epiphany, or a chuckle, or a thought that maybe they wouldn't have had otherwise. I believe that we all should surround ourselves with different kinds of people, different thought processes, different environments, and I think that's really how we grow. And I am hopeful that I can kind of contribute to that movement.

I would say how do I choose stories, how do I tell stories? I think Toni Morrison said something like, "Writers think a lot." [Laughter] I spend a lot of time thinking. You know, maybe sometimes too much time thinking.

**Shohreh:** Ain't that the truth, though? [Laughter]

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**Riley:** Yeah. My brain definitely needs a break sometimes. Of course, different quotes are coming to mind. There's also the quote that says, "What's more to writing, you just sit at the typewriter and bleed." I think it requires a lot of honesty and vulnerability.

A little side note—I was talking to my dad a couple of months ago about vulnerability, and he was like, "You know, I know that word is trending, but I really hate it." He was like, "The thing for me as a Black man is, every day when I walk outside of the house, I'm vulnerable, so why would I choose that? Why would I lean into that? I don't have a choice." And I was like—

**Shohreh:** Wow!

**Riley:** Damn, daddy, that's deep! Like I'm gonna be so careful with how I use that word now, you know?

**Shohreh:** Yeah, some people don't have a choice in being vulnerable. The world puts them in a vulnerable position.

**Riley:** Yeah. So when I say that, right, 'cause it has multiple definitions, but I mean really opening my mind and my heart to the paper. Like pouring everything I have, pen to paper. The issue with technology is that it's really easy to hit delete, or backspace, or whatever you want to call it, whereas with paper you can't do that. I mean, I suppose you could cross out, but I can still see it when I do that. There's something very crucial that happens when you physically write.

And so, when I talk to people about creative writing, which I think is kind of your segue to storytelling, I think it starts with writing. I urge them to pull out paper and pull out a pen and to not think about what they're gonna write. Like it could just be like shit-fuck-shit-fuck over and over again and

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that works. Eventually you're gonna get tired of writing that and something else is gonna come to the forefront.

I believe we're all writers, we're all creatives, we're all photographers, and I hate that [laughs]. You know, it makes what I do a little bit more difficult. But I also think, like, blades of grass, you know—we're all the same and we're all different. And so, it's kind of those little intricacies that make it interesting, and challenging, and to help us grow.

So how do I choose a story to tell? A lot of it stems from my own life, my own epiphanies. I call myself an "identity advocate." I believe that we can all determine who we are, and I find that really interesting. Like why do you think of yourself the way you think of yourself? Because ultimately that impacts the people around you and how they might think of themselves. So those kind of different aspects of life fascinate me.

And so in many ways I proliferate on who am I, who are you, and why. [Laughs] I also think that mental health is really important. Real, holistic wellness, like the real kind, not the bullshit kind, which is everywhere, is really important to talk about.

**Shohreh:** We talk about that a lot on this podcast.

**Riley:** I know you do. Thank you very much for doing that. I think it's important that people appreciate you for that, you know, because it's not an easy space to live in.

**Shohreh:** No, but it's so important because the mainstream conversations about wellness are just so shallow. Truly so shallow.

**Riley:** Oh yeah, they're a bummer! [Laughs] But yes, so then I also talk a lot about social impact, and I talk a lot about beauty—inherent beauty—and I talk a

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lot about race. I think, for me, my role is to use stories to reveal truth. It's my modality. So any way I can do that, no matter the expression, I don't care what it is, I'm here for it.

I recently launched a column with Camille Styles called Beyond Skin Deep. It's in collaboration with Woke Beauty. And I interview women on the podcast, and then I write about them, and then I photograph them out in a field somewhere. And coming at it from those different perspectives, it's like as close as we can get as real life. How can I get as close as possible? And what's cool is that it's been helpful for others, but it's also been nourishing and healing for the subjects to kind of pour themselves out in all those different spaces.

So yeah, gosh, there's just so much depth, and I don't know, the horizon is so, so wide, you know, when it comes to storytelling. And I think oftentimes that's why a lot of people have a hard time knowing where to start. And I guess what I would say is start with pen and paper and start with your life. One of my favorite activities is to write a love letter, like, to someone who I feel like really understands me and doesn't really pass judgment on me. And sometimes it's my grandma, sometimes it's my sister, my dog [laughs], and, you know, just sit there and write them a letter about your week.

**Shohreh:** What a beautiful practice.

**Riley:** Yeah, you won't believe what comes up, and you'll be like, wow, I should write about that.

**Shohreh:** I want to write to my dogs every damn day!

**Riley:** Aren't they amazing?

**Shohreh:** They are!

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**Riley:** They only love you, you know.

**Shohreh:** Yes, unconditionally.

**Riley:** Yeah.

**Shohreh:** I love so much of what you said there, especially this idea as like our identity as being our art, in a way. And that the best place to start is just with yourself, and really, again, to go inward. This is this external versus internal battle of who are you and why are you that way? Like those two questions alone you could write thousands of pages on.

**Riley:** Yeah, as simple as we'd like to be, and you know, I'm sure maybe we could be, but let's just face it, we're not [laughs]. As simple as we'd like to be, we're that much more complex. And so yeah, really the topics are never ending, and every day is a clean slate. So you kind of can never run out.

**Shohreh:** So I think of myself as both an artist and an entrepreneur, and I know that you see yourself that way too. And I have found that there's, of course, some tension between identifying with both of those things. And I'm wondering if you have also experienced any tension between your artistry and the fact that you also have to make a living.

**Riley:** Hmm. [laughs] Yeah, it's funny, I recently talked to somebody, and she was asking for advice and she was telling me she was doing a rebrand, and I was just like, no! Don't do that! Like your brand is constantly changing, it's constantly in flux. So to do a rebrand or a rebuild is like so overwhelming, especially if you are an artist. Of course, you might go through larger phases. Me myself right now, I'm kind of changing my website, right? But I'm sure in three months it'll have to change again, so I feel like, me—

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**Shohreh:** I change my website so much!

**Riley:** Yeah, like if I say I'm completely washing it, starting over, I mean, that's so overwhelming. And so I think a lot of it, of course, as the communication artist, it starts with language, you know? Like how do you talk about yourself, how do you talk about what you do? Of course that goes back to words, but describing my business in a way that feels poetic and that really resonates with how I speak is really important to me. And that fulfills my artist mind. And then when I can actually enter that into my website and kind of translate that into my Instagram and into my conversations with people, now I have ownership. Now I feel like a businesswoman. So there's kind of this cool dance that happens between the two.

I think a lot of it is also lifestyle. Like how do you run your business? How do you schedule your day? Where do you put your time? How do you talk to yourself? What do things look like, like literally, visually? All of those elements contribute to kind of your identity, right, around how you own your business. And I think what's really been important for me is that people understand that I do have a business. A lot of people will mistake you for a starving entrepreneur.

**Shohreh:** Who will take their crumbs that they want to offer you for your work.

**Riley:** Oh yeah! You've got this giant dream and you're just kinda chasing it. And for me at this point, I'm like, no, I'm living it. I mean, yeah, the mountain is always getting taller and I'll never reach the peak 'cause that's my brain and I was raised in an environment like that, right? I'm never letting that go, sorry. But here I am, like, I'm making a living.

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And that exchange, if we go back to photography, is very important. People pay me to take pictures of them. That means they're showing up invested. I'm not taking advantage of them. They are here for themselves.

So yeah, I think it goes back to language, but it is a dance. And at the end of the day, it's all about you determining it for yourself. And that takes effort. It's not like you just wake up and you meditate and you're an artist and entrepreneur, you know what I mean? Like it's a journey, it's a process, and that's what makes it fascinating. And I think leaning into that and thinking of it in that way is really important, otherwise you can just kind of stress yourself out.

**Shohreh:**

I love what you pointed out about the importance of how you describe what you do and really allowing there to be an artistic and authentic element to that. In fact, listeners know that I recently had Kelly Diels on the podcast, and she's a feminist marketing consultant. She's incredible, and I actually just hired her, and that is one of the things that we're working on, is, you know, how I describe what I do. Because it's something that I've struggled with a lot over the years. It's morphed and it's changed, and I'm sure it will continue to change.

But one of the things I asked her in a recent session where we were talking about what do I do, how would other people describe it, how would I describe it, we were kind of coming to an idea, and it wasn't something that other people would recognize. And I said, "Is it a problem that when other people hear me describe myself in this way that they won't necessarily know what that is?" And she was like, no, because we want it to invoke curiosity in them to want to know more. To say, "Oh, that's interesting. I haven't heard that before, that speaks to me. Tell me what

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does that mean to you.” And that is what will get them more invested in the work you do.

And I thought that was such a beautiful way of thinking about it, and I had been thinking about it in the complete opposite way of, I have to put myself into these title boxes that people will immediately recognize, even if they don't fully describe who I am, and my expression, and what I do for people. And she broke me out of that box and I love it. And what you just said really aligned with that too.

**Riley:** Yeah, that's really great advice. It speaks to identity too. Like we're so concerned about the response and about the perception that then we get lost in ourselves, you know? So yeah, I love that she urged you to define it for yourself and live with it. [Laughs]

**Shohreh:** Right, I was so concerned about how will other people view this instead of being concerned with, what would be the thing that feels most true and authentic to me, and I was asking the wrong question. And it's so funny 'cause I do so much of that work with my clients, and sometimes you need someone else to point it out to you in your own brain [laughs].

**Riley:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean you can't just sit in a room and talk to yourself all the time, you know. It gets boring.

**Shohreh:** It does. It does get boring [laughter]. Alright, Riley, well, we have come to the final question of the podcast, which is a question that I ask to all of my guests. And that is, how do you define health and wellness for yourself at this moment in your life?

**Riley:** Ah, it's so funny, I was just talking to... well, I actually have been saying this a lot lately, so who knows who it was specifically, it was a few people. [Laughs] But I was telling them how much I attach my level of functionality

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as a human, like as a healthy person, like the level of my health is attached to the value of myself. If I'm not functioning at a high performance, if I'm not healthy, then my value is therefore decreased. And I think that in and of itself is not very healthy, you know? [laughs]

**Shohreh:** Yeah.

**Riley:** So I'm really working to show myself more grace and to surrender to the elements that are life. And I'm also paying close attention to what actually works for me. This is being vulnerable, sorry daddy, but this is vulnerability [laughter]. I recently did a panel—not like the kind that you speak, like a test—that tested my neurotransmitters and hormone balance and how they relate. It was super in-depth. And my cortisol levels were off the charts. My practitioner called them “remarkable,” and I was like, thank you!

**Shohreh:** Uh oh!

**Riley:** That's such a nice word to use to explain my cortisol levels, you know [laughter].

**Shohreh:** Oh dear!

**Riley:** But, of course, that directly affected my hormones, and that all directly affected my glutamate and my serotonin, you know?

**Shohreh:** Yeah.

**Riley:** But it was really good for me to talk to her, which I actually talked to her this morning, because she told me, not only, hey, here is the plan, right, around supplementation, diet, more clinical things. But also, hey, here's a lifestyle that will suit you and your needs optimally. And that lifestyle is not the one that I'm inclined to live. I am a go-getter, I love HIIT exercise, I want to just charge after life. I'm passionate—I'm a Scorpio—you know, like, let's

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go. Like I am here for it, let's go to the deepest, darkest waters, and I'm not afraid.

And she's like, hey, you should do some barre, you should go on long, long walks, you should listen to Afrobeats music. And I was like, what? This is so wildly different than what I'm inclined to do. But what I'm inclined to do is, in large part, nurture. I was raised in an athletic space. We live in a go-go-go-go world, and so sometimes what we're taught, or the status quo, whatever that is, or whatever you're Instagram algorithm tells you, is not what's best for you.

And so, I think health and wellness, in large part, is sort of just like, this forever figuring out of what aligns with who you are. And the fact is, you will change. "Change is the only constant," according to Heraclitus, and I think he said true, it's one of my favorite quotes. Every day we're different, every week, every month we go through different phases, we need different things, we want different things. And I think adjusting to that, you know, finding adaptability in that is really important.

And right now, at this phase in my life—I'm turning 30 in November, right, and I'm getting married, I'm growing in my business, all these things are happening—I need to soothe myself. I need to go on long walks, you know—

**Shohreh:** Yes.

**Riley:** —maybe it's not Afrobeats, you know, but it's something in that genre of music. And I need to be okay with that. And I think kind of that blend of surrender, acceptance, grace, is important for everyone. Even if you actually need HIIT or you actually need to go kickbox, of course those are

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symbols, let's not make it all about exercise [laughs]. I think really giving into that is sort of a beautiful little potion.

**Shohreh:**

So I was stifling some giggles over here because I work with a lot of former athletes who have come to this moment in their lives [laughs] where they realize how some of the training that they had and the mindset that they were given when they were younger and when they needed that, right, when they were in competition, has really seeped so deeply into their brains. And they've continued to see the world through that lens, even when it's not serving them anymore.

In fact, I was looking at your website as I was preparing for this interview, and you have a blog post about running where you talk about how you're like, I don't need movement that is fun or joyful, I want the hard, intensive stuff. And just, my coaching hat, the first thing that I thought of was, this comes from you being a former athlete and feeling like that's the only exercise that counts, or that matters, or that's good enough. Again, not to clientize you, but it just makes me laugh because you mentioned that today, and I was like, oh yes, there's all the threads coming together [laughter].

**Riley:**

Yeah, no. It's so funny you read that. I think on a philosophical level, like, I resonate somewhere with that. I'm careful to say, like, rest is the only way, and nourish yourself, and I think all that's really important. But I also know that what got me to where I am today is a high level of work ethic and a lot of resilience. So I'm grateful for all of the different ideologies, and I think, like, what I know that you live by is really just intuitively leaning in to what resonates with your mind/body/spirit.

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So, I'm forever figuring it out, and I love that all that's kind of out there because it really just speaks to growth, and evolution, and fallback, and all of it mixed together.

**Shohreh:** It does, and that's why I ask this question as "at this moment in your life," because it is always changing and there may be times where that's exactly what you need. Like you said, the running, the HIIT, that mentality that has gotten you through so much. *And* there are gonna be times where you need those Afrobeats, and you need the walking, and you need the sleep.

And so, being open to the fact that it can change is a lot of the work that I do with people in helping them to see, like, you don't reach some peak where this is the way it is forever and that's gonna give you the things you want—happiness, healthiness, whatever those things may be. The reality is it's always in flux, and we just have to learn to adjust as we go.

**Riley:** Yeah. So true.

**Shohreh:** Thank you so much for being here. This was delightful. How can people find you, Riley, and what can my listeners do to best support your vision and your passions right now?

**Riley:** Mm, thank you. Yeah, so, if you want to kind of "get to know me," I highly recommend my personal Instagram, which is @rileyblanks. There is an "s" on the end. A lot of people think it's Blank, I'm not sure why. Draw a blank, add an "s." [Laughter]

My personal website is going to launch early October and that will give a really good peak into all of the different facets of who I am and what I do.

You can find Woke Beauty on Instagram, Woke, like awaken, and [www.wokebeauty.com](http://www.wokebeauty.com). I also have a podcast called Woke Beauty, and I

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have a column and contributions around health and wellness on [www.camillestyles.com](http://www.camillestyles.com).

I have a piece in Tribeza right now, the Fall issue on style and architecture, all about Manifest. And if you're in Austin, you can actually go see the series on the walls at Miranda Bennett Studio on the East Side. So that was a lot, pick your poison.

I always love to connect with people in any way possible, so please reach out, tell me who you are, how you identify, and [laughs] let's connect.

If you want to support a wonderful local non-profit that's based out of Austin, led by Sheleiah Fox, Fresh Chefs Society is a great place to start. They teach young adults in foster care how to cook, work, and just exist in the food industry, and how to create a life that they own and value through food. It's a really beautiful movement, and what I love is that it really teaches youth who have grown up in a difficult space to take ownership over food, which you know, is what fuels us. So highly recommend starting there, and they have a great website where you can get in touch.

**Shohreh:** Lovely. I will be sure to post the information for that as well as all of your personal information in the show notes. Y'all, if you enjoyed this episode, got something out of it, definitely go follow Riley, both in her personal Instagram account and the Woke Beauty Instagram account, and go give that organization a look. Maybe throw some dollars their way. And thank you again, Riley. I really appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule for this today.

**Riley:** Absolutely. It was a pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

**Shohreh:** Of course. And that's our show for today! If this podcast has taught you anything or helped you in any way, I hope you'll consider supporting me in

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