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The Incredible Backstory of Marisol Nichols, Star of CW's "Riverdale"



Yitzi Weiner

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of it is that most people don't even know it occurs. Good people don't know. And if good people don't know about it, we can't do anything about it."

I had the pleasure to interview Marisol Nichols. Marisol is an American actress known for her role in the sixth season of 24 as Special Agent Nadia Yassir and as Hermione Lodge in the CW show, "Riverdale" based on the Archie comic series. She also Starred on "GCB." Marisol is the Founder of FOUNDATION FOR A SLAVERY FREE WORLD and spokesperson for YOUTH FOR HUMAN RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL, non-profit organizations that fight modern slavery and human trafficking.

Yitzi: What is your "backstory"?

I had a pretty rough childhood. I was raised for a few years by my single mom until she married my step-dad a little later. We moved around a ton when I was a kid. I think we lived in 9 different houses before I was 15 — we moved from the City, back to the suburbs; different suburbs, different houses, all over the place.

I got into drugs at a very, very young age. I had had some certain inappropriate things happen to me when I was a kid and I think between not knowing how to deal with that and having somewhat of a turbulent home life, drugs were kind of an answer to those problems. So I started doing any kind of drug I could pretty much get my hands on starting with pot and cocaine at age 11.

I had something life-changing happen to me at 11 years old that kind of took me down that path and I didn't know how to deal with it, so I didn't. I became pretty rebellious. I ran away from home four or five times. I was in and out of a drug rehab at age 12. Did more drugs when I got out. I got kicked out of high school, went to 3 different high schools and summer school and extra night school just so I could maybe graduate and try to make it up, because I flunked pretty much my entire freshman year, mainly because I just never showed up. And then, after about 6, 7, 8 years of this, I was pretty miserable — really miserable.

Drugs are never the answer and home life got more tumultuous.

And I guess when I was 19 or something, I decided to maybe try out for a play in my little junior college that I was going to. I thought maybe I could be an extra. I had nothing to lose. I had just broken up with a punk rock boyfriend that I had been with for years and lost all my friends at that point. So I tried out for this play and I ended up

getting the lead role and I never thought that I was good for anything, to be honest; so when they gave me the role, I said — you don't want to give this to me. I'm a mess — you don't want to do this.

But fortunately there were 2 people, the speech & theater coach and the director of the play, who saw past all the noise that I had going on in my life and saw the good in me. They believed in me and took a chance on me. They invested in me and said I could do it.

So that kind of set me on my path towards acting. I joined the speech and theater team where we competed nationally with other colleges and within 3 months, I was one of the national champions. So it was at that point that I went — wow, you know, maybe I found something I'm pretty good at. I should probably get my shit together so I can really do this. I really loved acting and loved performing and had always been told my whole life that I was dramatic — “you're so dramatic”. So I went all right, well, “let's try to make a living out of this being dramatic.”

So I moved to the City. I had a job since I was 13 years old. I forged an ID so that I could work. I would worked as a cashier, at car washes, in gas stations, and pumped gas — all of these things, so I was used to scrambling. So when I moved to the City it was like, alright, get a job, get an apartment and just keep going, which is what I did and I worked so many waitress jobs I can't even count. Different odd jobs, hosting jobs and all that stuff and I still sort of played around with crappy relationships, crappy boyfriends. I still kind of had this violence in my life unfortunately; and at the same time, ironically I was doing really, really well in my career. I ended up getting two pilots, one for MTV and one for CBS.

They moved me to LA and when I got to LA, it was a sort of second chance to start over and so for a couple of years there, I started over — tried to at least. And then somewhere around my mid-twenties I just looked around and realized I needed to really get my life together otherwise I'm not going to make anything out of it. And so I quite drugs and all sorts of these bad habits and things I had been doing. I was fortunate enough to turn my life around and my career got better and better.

So I suppose I'm a bit of a success story, coming from not such a great environment in Chicago with drugs and all that stuff to a point where I'm now I'm really happy and have a really great career.

I have a non-profit that I'm PASSIONATE about to help others, I have a beautiful daughter. Life is pretty good. I've sort of used the lessons that I've learned to hopefully make a difference in the world and help others who didn't have any answers in their life like I did.

Yitzi: Can you share the funniest or most interesting story that occurred to you in the course of your career?

I could probably pick from two. I had been in LA for about 6 months and one of the auditions I got sent on, they were making a new Vacation movie called Vegas Vacation with Chevy Chase, Randy Quaid and Beverly D'Angelo. The same people that are always in it. In each film they change the kids which I think is hilarious.

So I auditioned for the role of Audrey Griswold thinking there's no way I'm ever going to get this. I'm this little Latina girl from Chicago. This is like an all American white family. So anyway, I kept auditioning and kept on auditioning for 3 months. The whole time I kept thinking I'm never going to get this role. And I didn't. They gave it to this other actress. I was like "I get that."

Turns out I guess she didn't want to do it. So a couple of days later they called me and said they would like to fly me to Vegas to audition one last time. I thought, alright, but there's no way I'm going to get this but . . . what do have I to lose? So I flew to Vegas and auditioned for the director and the producer, who at the time was Jerry Weintraub, one of the biggest producers around. I didn't know who he was. I didn't know anybody. Anyway, I did this audition and flew back. My agent asked how the audition went and I said it went all right I guess. Then the next day I get this phone call at 8:30 in the morning from the Director. He goes — "Marisol? Are you ready to become a movie star?" And it was...to this day, probably the greatest phone call I've ever had. So any directors out there who want to make someone's day or make someone's life, do what that guy did because it was pretty amazing. And I went on to play Audrey Griswold and I had a blast. My first film I ever did in my life. It was an amazing time.

Yitzi: Are you working on any exciting projects now?

Obviously I'm on Riverdale and I'm really excited about what we've created as a cast from day one. It's the first time I've been able to be a part of something from the

beginning and watch it grow and people embrace it in such a giant way. I'm really honored and excited to be a part of that.

I'm also developing a show that's based on a true story. Over the years I've had the opportunity to do ride-alongs with law enforcement and see what they face every day and see that these guys — the majority of them are good. Look, there's "bad" in everything and I know that there are bad cops out there and bad lawmakers and bad politicians — all of that. But I have found through my own travels that the majority of people got into those professions because they want to help. They want to make a difference. And so, not only through trafficking but also through research for roles that I've done, I've discovered law enforcement wants to do nothing but help. So I'm developing a tv show that's based on true stories of the toll that it takes on particular individuals in law enforcement and what they face in how they are trying to make a difference in the world, but what it means to them and the prices that they've had to pay with seeing the worst of humanity day in and day out. I mean, I challenge anyone to see the worst of humanity day in and day out — all they see are criminals and cheating and murder and homicide and drugs — like that really tears down someone's spirit. So I want to make a show that shows both sides — both good and bad — of the price that is paid for that. So I'm developing a show with Todd Helbing under Greg Berlanti's umbrella and I'm really excited for that new chapter in my life of telling stories. I also have several other stories that I have the rights to that are individual's incredible stories. Overcoming odds and telling about real life obstacles that people have overcome. I want to tell the world about that. I believe that's inspiring. I want to be able to forward inspiring stories because I feel they would make a difference in anyone's life who saw them. The biggest challenge in that is finding an incredible story teller to do it justice and to do it right so you convey the right message and it doesn't get lost in "Hollywood." That's something I believe in and I want to do whatever I can to get those stories told.

Yitzi: How have you used your success to bring goodness to the world? Are you working on any meaningful nonprofit projects?

Yes, I have used my success to bring goodness to the world. Because I'm an actress, and I'm on someone's favorite show or whatever, I think maybe they will listen to me. I feel there's a responsibility to use that platform wisely.

I first heard whisperings of human trafficking and child sex trafficking years ago and couldn't confront it. Didn't believe it was real. Not that I denied it or anything. It was

just like “huh, what do you mean people are held in slavery today?” “Wow, that’s terrible.” I didn’t really know what it was. Then as I started learning more and more, and more specifically what was going on under our noses, all over the world, I was horrified, sick to my stomach that there is anything called the child sex trade. It’s unimaginable, truly, that children would be held against their will and sold to men to be used sexually. It’s horrific.

It’s something that I go “that’s the downfall of mankind,” that this goes on and we would allow it to go on. I was also even more motivated to do something about it when I learned how prolific this is and that it wasn’t just “over there” but it was in America as well and Canada and in almost every country.

In America children are being sold on the internet like a piece of pizza on places like backpage.com. If you don’t believe me, just google it yourself. Just google backpage.com and sex trafficking and you’ll see a thousand articles come up. It was horrific for me to learn about something called sex tourism that Thailand is very famous for and places like Cambodia where grown-ass men will travel to these countries to have sex with a child — and I mean ... a child.

I learned that the profiles of men who travel for this are white American males. I learned that America is the number one producer, distributor and consumer of child pornography. I became even more sick to my stomach that “a country that is as free as America is” could be so responsible for things like this occurring, for things like this occurring all over the world.

And so I couldn’t sleep as a mom, as a woman, as a human being. I couldn’t sleep. So I felt that I had a responsibility because I’m an actress, because people have seen the things I do, because people follow me on social media, that I should use it for a better voice than just fluff. So I started my own non-profit called Foundation for a Slavery Free World because that’s the end product that I’m going for — a slavery free world — a world where a child can just grow up and be safe and not have to worry about these atrocities that so many children in the world face today.

There’s over 2 million children caught up the child sex trade worldwide. What the hell? What the hell? It’s unbelievable.

So through my travels I would meet with parents who have had this happen to their kid, or kids that escaped and grew up and someone somehow made it out alive and now is trying to build a life for themselves. I met with individuals who go out and rescue children from these atrocities. I've met with people who do nothing but rehabilitate the children who have come out the other end of it.

Once you dive down this rabbit hole, it's hard to turn it off; you can't un-know it at all. And so I've tried and will continue to try to give a voice to this issue, lend whatever I can to help make a difference and to mobilize people to stand together to put an end to this because to me, the biggest problem of it is that most people don't even know it occurs. Good people don't know. And if good people don't know about it, we can't do anything about it.

Yitzi: Wow! Can you tell me a story about a person who was impacted by your cause?

Yes, I could tell you about a lot of people who have been impacted. I had the opportunity to go under cover in a small county in California. When I say go under cover, I mean I was deputized as an informant by the DA's office. I mean really undercover, with an organization that I can't name now, although I would happily do it.

We brought in a professional makeup artist who put scars on my face and made me look like a drugged-out, methed-out mom who was married to a white guy, a couple who was selling our children for sex. A 9 year old and 12 year old girl. We put an ad on Craigslist and within 15 minutes we had 30 guys scrambling to make appointments to have sex with my "9 year old and 12 year old kids." Horrific.

We had full-on recording equipment and hidden cameras and all of that stuff so when these pedophiles would call up, the operative I was working with would put me on the phone. Because I'm an actress I have an ability to make my voice sound a lot younger. So I would talk as the 9 year old and 12 year old. The stuff that would come out of these pedophiles mouths of what they want to do to what they think is a 9 year old, would make you want to throw up. I wanted to throw up.

We did this for 3 days and gathered evidence. Everything was recorded so when they would show up at the hotel, if we didn't have enough evidence on audio recordings, they would come into the hotel room where we had all this hidden camera equipment. I

would then pretend to be a methed-out mom, all drugged up selling her kids. The guys would be on camera saying what they wanted to do to these kids. After 3 days of doing this, we arrested the men that showed up and we took these Sexual predators off the streets.

It's great because one of the lead vice detectives who was the lead investigator on these cases called me about a year later when the cases finally went to court. He told me that when they played the phone calls and played the footage for the judge and jury, these guys had no defense anymore and they couldn't argue that they didn't know it was a kid. So the judge and jury gave them the maximum sentence they could give and each one of these men had to register as a sex offender, and they did time.

So it makes me very, very proud that we took these would-be sexual predators of the streets — and believe me these men had been doing this for a long time — this was none of their first times. They had been doing this most of their lives — preying on children. We took them off the streets, away from vulnerable children and put an end to that.

By bringing justice and making them accountable for their crimes I feel that we were able to save hopefully many more future children from being victims of these sexual predators. That's the thing I'm probably most proud of.



Yitzi: What are your “5 things I wish someone told me when I first started” and why.

1. Hands down — don't worry, it gets better. In acting, every single audition I would go on meant the world to me and if I didn't get the job I was crushed. Then I would be like “oh, I'm never going to make it, and I shouldn't be an actor.” I would take it so personally. If I would have known that there was another role right around the corner that I would fall in love with, and the numerous opportunities that I would have, I wouldn't have taken it so seriously and probably could have saved myself a lot of heart ache.
2. The second thing I wish someone would have told me is probably — work hard; your hard work will pay off. There were times in my career that I felt it would never pay off. I would see people who were handed the dream role just because of who they knew, or whatever; that it would seem unfair, and that's not okay, and I worked so hard, and blah, blah, blah! Throughout the years of doing this I am happy to say that I've seen hard work pay off — period! And will always believe that if you work hard on something and you don't give up, that good things will come. Good things come to those who earn it. I will always believe that. So I wish I knew that when I was first starting out.
3. Next would be — don't get distracted. I've gotten so distracted over the years with different things that I didn't realize were distracting me. I would have saved myself a lot of heartache with whatever, if I could have been more stream-lined and more focused and not so distracted along the way. Throughout the years I've learned those lessons obviously, and honed my skills better and believed in myself more. But if I would have believed in myself more first starting out, I would have saved myself more heartache. As I said, hard work does pay of and I know if I have given my all in something, whatever it is, I can be proud of myself. I can hold my head high and go to sleep at night knowing I am not being a dilettante. Hard work makes me happy, keeps me alive.
4. And probably that goes into the next one which is — believe in yourself, you can do this. I realized there were so many people I was surrounded by that would forward this thinking that you're never going to make it; it's so hard to make it as an actress. You're too old; you're too thin; you're too ethnic, you're too white; you're not ethnic enough. All of these things were around me. You know, if I had just said you don't

know what you're talking about. I would have liked to tell myself that starting out. There's going to be a lot of people that are around you that are just there to make you or any other artist feel like they just can't do it; they can't make it; they're not good enough; you're too this or too that. I would have said "don't listen to them." It's something that I've learned so that now I don't listen to anyone who says I can't do anything. Like who are you to tell me I can't do something. So I would have liked to tell myself back then.

5. Being a mom is going to change you forever. Don't be afraid of it. You can do this. Don't be afraid of putting in that next chapter in your life. When I got pregnant, I was like "oh no, my career." "Can I be a good mom?" "Can I do this, and can I not?" I would have liked to know that I can have faith and I can have my career, be a mom and have a family at the same time. I don't have to give up one for the other.





Yitzi: Is there a person in the world, or in the US whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might see this, or I might be able to introduce you.

That's a really good question. I don't know who they are but I know that there are people out there who have a ton of wealth that they've accumulated and that those same people want to make a difference in the world. They want to use their wealth to help give energy to issues that need energy and need help.

I would give anything to sit down in front of those people and tell them what I know about what's happening on this planet right now. What I know, what I've seen, what people that I've been with have seen. And I'd like to bring certain individuals with me and go — look, give us 3 hours of your time to open your eyes and let us tell you what's happening. And can you possibly see it in your heart to help us put an end to these things that are happening. I hate to say that at the end it, it always comes down to money . . . but it comes down to money. It just does. If you need to fund a trip to Haiti or a trip to the Dominican Republic to save some kids. . . that takes money. If you need to run an organization that does nothing but dedicate their lives to rehabilitating these kids or people that come out of these horrific situations and help them build a life again . . . that takes money. If you need to fund others to go to DC to educate or collaborate with legislators and those in power about what's happening and what laws can be passed to make a giant difference . . . it takes money. At the end of the day, I wish it didn't, but it does.

I want to fund ads. I want to make PSA's that show people what's happening — in a good light — and what they can do to help . . . but that takes money. It takes money to do all of that so I know there are good people out there who want to help and want to make a difference in the world. They may not know what's happening and they may not know how to help. I would love to sit down and have several hours of their time and

bring some amazing, incredible and heroic individuals with me so we can show them how they can help. That would be a dream come true. So I would say that.

From another selfish point of view, Steven Spielberg is one of the most incredible film makers of our time and he has lent his voice over the years, over the decades, to tell stories of the holocaust, to tell stories of the terrorists activities that happened at the Olympic Games, to tell stories in film that change people's lives and change people's viewpoints of war and the holocaust and terrorism, and all of these things.

I am a huge admirer of his work not only as a film maker but also as a philanthropic man, the organizations that he has started; that he has believed in. I've had the opportunity to briefly meet him on a set, briefly sit next to greatness — I would say just to pick his brain; just to sit there and listen to the stories he has wanted to tell and how he's gone about them as a film maker, as an artist and as a man.

I would say sitting down with him and gleaning from him everything that he has to say about all of the above, would be an opportunity that I would truly be in awe of . . . period. Because as artists we all want to tell stories and we all want to lend our voice. At the end of the day, if you don't tell a great story, you're not going to move people. You're not going to inspire them. To me the king of all story telling is Spielberg, so that would be an incredible opportunity.

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