Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

NOAH WYLE INTERVIEW
*THE THREAD SEASON TWO*

**Noah Wyle, Actor**
**September 01, 2023**
**Interviewed by: David Bender**
**Total Running Time: 28 min and 28 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents

NOAH WYLE:
So that's kind of how I looked at Carter. He's born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and he doesn't feel deserving of it. He's looking at all these other people who are brilliant and smart and don't get half the breaks he's had, and he wants them to like him. He wants them to think he's good and hardworking and talented at his job. And if he can get their approbation and validation, that will be the stamp of credibility that he's looking for to move on and go back to the world that he was born into. And, I know I resemble that very much in my own life as well. I've sort of sought out fringe elements of society, and flirted with them to sort of see whether or not I can handle them, if I had been born into them instead of where I was born into.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
The Thread
Noah Wyle

Actor

00:01:01:00

INTERVIEWER:
Feel free to introduce yourself.

00:01:03:00

NOAH WYLE:
Hello. My name is Noah Wyle. I'm an actor, writer, director, Los Angeleno, and father and husband and half Jew, Gemini, 6'1", Brown and Brown.

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INTERVIEWER:
There we go. There are so many things I would like to ask you about, but you said you're an Angeleno, so let's start about that. You were born here. One of three children. So tell me about that.

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NOAH WYLE:
I am one of three children originally. My parents divorced when I was pretty young, and each of them remarried. And I have siblings from those subsequent marriages. So there's seven of us all together, which, you know, made for a fairly competitive dinner table, which I think went a long way to making me pursue a profession that you literally have to sing for your supper to get any kind of attention. Each of us was talented in their own way. Some were smarter and some were better athletes. Some were funnier, some were better storytellers. But we all kind of found our niche

as a survival instinct. So I credit that big Frankenstein family with a lot of my ambition, and drive early.

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NOAH WYLE:
I was also born into kind of a family of artists in a lot of ways. You know, my grandmother founded the Crafts and Folk Art Museum of Los Angeles in the late 50s. And, our house was a bit of a salon. You know, we always had people staying with us that were visiting artists or painters or sculptors. We were always being taken to the theater or to gallery openings. And, I was sort of marinated in a cultural soup that I didn't even know I was being marinated in until much later, when I realized how atypical of an upbringing that was. So, I was on the road to a lot of my destinations a lot earlier than I thought I was.

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INTERVIEWER:
Well, you were singing for your supper. Were you acting for your supper, too? I mean…

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NOAH WYLE:
We would put on a lot of plays. You know, we had a lot of cousins. We were always doing– putting on shows. My sister, my oldest sister, was sort of the ruler of the roost. She was an early director of mine, and I was extremely malleable and very directable, even back then. So, I was just sort of game for whatever was going on.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you have an epiphany moment that you can conjure of: Wait a minute. I really like this. I can see myself doing this was there a…

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NOAH WYLE:

That came later. That came in high school. I really didn't pursue or think about a career in the arts until my sophomore year of high school. I was going to a boarding school in Ojai, California, called Thatcher, which didn't really have a very strong theater department per se, but they were doing a production of Joe Orton's *Loot*, which is not your traditional high school fare. And there was a kid that had transferred to our school named Jacob Elliot, who was kind of a punk rock kid drummer, and I thought, skate kid. I thought it was really cool. We became friends, and he said we should go audition for the play. Kind of as a joke, you know? We'll make fun of all those guys. I said, yeah, let's go. Did the play and play was over. And I remember these, parents of some students who, it was a parent's weekend, came up and told me that I was really good. And that was sort of an epiphany because I hadn't really been complimented that many times in my life for anything, and I certainly not by anybody that was outside my family's sphere of relationships. And a couple of my peers also paid me the compliment. And I just chased that dopamine hit for the next 45 years. You know.

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INTERVIEWER:

It's funny because we've both known people and I can think of one, Stephen Stills. And Stephen, the more applause he gets, the less he trusted. So I've watched this with him for 35 years. The bigger the cheer, the more he thinks I'm not worthy of it. Did you ever have that dissonance of…

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NOAH WYLE:
Well, totally, because, you know, I expected a very slow and… satisfying career. You know, I didn't have any big expectations of fame and fortune. And the idea of being a journeyman seemed really attractive to me. That sort of citizen of the world, license to study anything because it might be applicable to the role you might be finding yourself in. The sort of circus life of creating family wherever you find it, on the job that you happen to be doing, and moving on and having variety be the spice of life was really, and still is, extremely attractive to me.

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NOAH WYLE:
And on my way to that career, I landed on a job that became, you know, a mega-hit globally. And I went from being totally obscure and anonymous to being a bit of a household name, way younger than I was prepared to be, and way earlier than I felt I deserved to be. So that early success fostered a huge sense of imposter syndrome in me, and I knew so many people that were more deserving of the success and the accolades and the money than I was at the time. People who had never gotten a break, still haven't gotten a break. And so I immediately thought, I need to democratize this success. I need to amortize this among everybody that I

know in order to feel a bit more deserving of it. And you know, at times that I've only recently started to unpack all that and sort of stop doing that as a means of deflecting something, you know, I was part of.

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INTERVIEWER:
Well, that's half a life ago. You were, what, 24 when you did ER?

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NOAH WYLE:
Yeah, I think I turned 22 when we shot the pilot. I used to say I was living in an apartment with a cat and, ficus, and, I walked off that show 15 years later, married with two kids, and know, like, every circumstance, every relationship, everything was totally different. Totally different. Jumped on one train, one man got off the train. Totally different guy.

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INTERVIEWER:
You know, television is something that reflects and effects as a medium. And I know that you had that thing that real actors go through, people coming up to you asking to be involved in causes related to health. And you didn't back away from that.

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NOAH WYLE:
Well, it was really a combination of things there. I remember when I was in fourth grade, there was an assignment from school that we had to tune in and watch a telethon for an organization called the End Hunger

Network. Must have been Ethiopia at the time. I think it was after Biafra. I don't know, it was a major famine happening in Africa, and this was an organization trying to make money. And it was the first time I was really exposed to those images, you know, like the Sally Struthers infomercials that they used to play. I had never seen them before, and I was really struck. And I picked up the phone, and my mother used to dine out on this story for years about how I pledged half of my allowance to the End Hunger Network in perpetuity.

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NOAH WYLE:
And I came to the table a bit of a humanist. Like, I can't help it. I look for the person who's unhappiest in the room, and I looked and tried to be of service if ever possible. It's just my nature. And then suddenly I found myself on a show that gave me a megaphone to talk about all sorts of things. And then it became much more about picking and choosing the ones that had resonance to me. And that I felt I could do the most good, because I didn't want to dilute the potency of that cachet. And I wanted to see if I could shine the most light on the issues that would get the least amount of attention, given the position I was in. So I aligned myself with a lot of different things that either affected people I knew personally or weren't getting enough of a national spotlight. And it was a nice way of sort of receiving and giving at the same time.

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INTERVIEWER:
We were talking about the fact that you had a platform, a megaphone, and again, you're 23 and with great power comes great responsibility. So

Spider-Man. One of the things you did I know was the American version of Doctors Without Borders. Can you talk about that?

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NOAH WYLE:

Sure. Yeah, that was an interesting organization. They were called Doctors of the World. They were based in New York City. And they were running project sites, as far ranging as Chiapas, Mexico to Saint Petersburg, Russia. And ostensibly it was an organization of American physicians that were going anywhere in the world where American physicians could be of service, mostly war zones in places that were being visited by tragedy. And this was in the early 90s during the war in Kosovo, when I got on their radar and they asked me if I would be willing to go to visit a camp that they were running, outside of Skopje, Macedonia, for these Kosovo Albanian refugees that were streaming across the border. And, I said yes. And I went and…

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NOAH WYLE:

Sorry, I get a little bit— It was a heavy… Yeah, it was heavy. They were running this camp that had like 4000 people in it. Mostly old people and kids because all the able bodied men were fighting, and it was horrific, you know, to see these elderly women who had survived in some cases, the end of World War I, World War II, only to be displaced from their homes and die in a foreign country with what they could carry on their back. It was horrible. And, and yet over here were these doctors that were working 24 hours a day with, like, a card table full of medical supplies to

do whatever they could to bring whatever kind of palliative care or medical care they could to this population.

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NOAH WYLE:
I remember standing at a bonfire in that camp, and there was an American journalist standing next to me who asked me why I was there. Another guy next to me said, use the starfish on the beach analogy. I hadn't heard it before, which is, you know, no kids on the beach, and it's littered with starfish that have washed up on the shore, and he's frantically throwing them back one at a time, as fast as he can to save them. And the guy walks up and says, “What are you doing? You can't possibly save all these starfish. There's so many of them. It doesn't make any difference what you're doing.” And the kid picks up another one and says, “It makes a difference to this one,” and throws it. And that's kind of how I've looked at it. Like, you know, I can't be Dolores Huerta. I can't be, you know, Mike Farrell. I can't be Martin Sheen. I'm trying as best I can, maybe when I grow up, but I can do what I can do in the environments that I find myself in, and the rooms I find myself in to look for that starfish.

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NOAH WYLE:
And I just thought, fuck, we got to do something about this on the show. And, I came back and raised a lot of money for the organization, personally bought two ambulances to send over there. And pitched a storyline to do on ER about international triage medicine, which led to our Belgian Congo storyline and our Darfur storyline.

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INTERVIEWER:
I also saw the interview you gave to the Academy about having the platform, and there is a conflict sometimes about whether actors should speak out and should be listened to. And God knows that there's sometimes backlash to that, particularly in politics. And you address that. Can you talk about that for a second? The dichotomy?

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NOAH WYLE:
Well, at the risk of offending, you know, I'm as wary as the will of the well-intentioned liberal as I am of anybody else. You know, the world is a complicated place, and I've worked with some people I really don't like very much to do some very noble work. And I've worked with some people I really love and wish they did more, you know, so I don't– it doesn't go… You can't divide this up evenly among populations. Yes, there's a blowback to being a Hollywood personality that gives a shit about the world, because your argument is so easily relegated to being that of a woke Hollywood commie liberal. You know, whatever. We have a population of people that have been consistently very active on social justice and the people that don't like it when we speak out, try to marginalize our voice and say it's a privileged class speaking out of its depth.

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NOAH WYLE:
And sometimes that's true. And sometimes it's just a propaganda talking point. In my particular case, I try to combat it by being as articulate and as

learned on the subject I'm speaking about as possible, so that when somebody wants to debate me, they get everything I know. To establish my credibility or, you know, validity. But I also, the older I get, I get less of a shit about having to defend my point of view against people who would make that argument. I'm trying to get to the substance. Right? I'm trying to get past those levels of infighting and, and squabbling to see where our commonalities and where we can fix this stuff. So, it's a blessing and a curse. Yes. You're given a microphone, and with it comes the weird optics of who you represent when you speak. But like we've already discussed, whether it's Mike Farrell or James Cromwell or Martin Sheen or Marlon Brando or, you know, you go back to Paul Newman, there were people that have been walking and marching and doing and fighting for social justice, going back to the beginning of our industry. And I would rather count myself in those ranks.

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INTERVIEWER:
And, Marlon Brando and, Harry Belafonte and Paul Newman went to the march on Washington and we remember Doctor King. But what we don't remember is that one of the reasons all the networks covered all of this is because all those stars were showing up.

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NOAH WYLE:
And when the cameras were off, Tony Bennett was doing concerts for people, you know, for free on the march on Selma. You know, people have shown up. They've shown up when the cameras were on and they showed

up when the cameras were off. It's just easier to make fun of them when the cameras are on.

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INTERVIEWER:

I think the whole point about where we find ourselves right now is about the inability to communicate using the same frame of reference, literally an absence of shared facts. And that's a phenomenon that's relatively new. You did a medical show where there was no real debate about whether doctors were lying to you about your condition, and yet we've just gone through an experience where patients tell the doctors that they're lying. “I can't have Covid.” From watching that evolution of going from science and fact as accepted consensus to a place where we are now. What's your take on that?

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NOAH WYLE:

Again, at the risk of sounding controversial, I think it's part and parcel to this war on intellectualism that we've been experiencing for the last 25 years, this sort of notion that the expert class, you know, is out of touch and is, somehow in an ivory tower that's detached from real life and real people and real values. And I think that we've embraced that at our peril. We need really smart people. We need really smart, thoughtful, educated people in these jobs. And we need to respect what they say, and we need to believe what they say. And unfortunately, we've got into a situation where it's been so easy to monetize counter arguments that I think is more at root than the individual having clouded judgment. I think it's more part and parcel to a sort of manipulation campaign to sort of sow

doubt in the seeds of people about their leaders, whether those leaders be doctors, politicians, lawyers, you know, sometimes with good reason.

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NOAH WYLE:
But that suspicion has become so pervasive that everybody's an amateur conspiracy theorist. And there is such a thing as empirical data. There is such a thing as an objective fact. There is such a thing as a scientific finding. These things aren't open to debate or interpretation. They're open to review and further analysis and refinement. But they're— The nature of their existence is a fact or not is not is not called into question. It's that great line. You're entitled to your own opinions but not your own facts. We're living in a world where everybody feels that those are synonymous terms, that because I have the feeling it is established fact.

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INTERVIEWER:
Have you ever thought about going into public life as an elected?

NOAH WYLE:
No.

INTERVIEWER:
And why?

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NOAH WYLE:

That's a great question. Why not me, right? Why not me? Well. I find the process altered my ultimately compromising in a way that would make me uncomfortable. I find the salesmanship and the self-promotional aspect of it to be distasteful. I… See the inefficiency and the infighting and the necessity to fundraise and be reelected take precedence over the issues being really talked about. And so it just doesn't seem attractive to me. It seems… I'm not interested in power. I'm interested in change. And I'm interested in the most effective way to get there. So I don't see that as the most effective way for me to be part of it.

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INTERVIEWER:
There's a lot of starfish out there, though.

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NOAH WYLE:
There are. You know, my taste in politics came with a three year term on the Hollywood executive board of the Screen Actors Guild. I ran for a one year term. I didn't realize that the top vote getters immediately get a three year term. And from my very first meeting, I hated it. I just hated it. I hated seeing people that I really loved and respected fighting with each other over points of pettiness. I hated seeing, you know, just all the mismanagement and the bloat, and unnecessary stuff going on, and it really depressed me. And we were really trying to push some really progressive stuff way earlier than it finally got passed. And when it got passed, it didn't have any teeth and it didn't look anything like we wanted it to. It was a perfect microcosm of a bill making its way through and

ending up pork laden and sort of almost counterproductive to the exercise. And… You know, I'd rather figure out a more effective way.

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INTERVIEWER:
Well, you talked before, and I do want to come back to it about using ER as an opportunity and your character's arc.

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NOAH WYLE:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
I've seen you say that, Carter felt rather like you describe yourself as someone who came from a background where he was very lucky and hadn't been tested in reality. So you suggested that the character go to the Congo, go to Darfur, and he changed and you changed. Right?

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NOAH WYLE:
It's sort of I mean, if, you know, you're Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part 1, he's going to be Henry V eventually. He knows he's going to be Henry the Fifth. But until he embraces his inheritance, he wants legitimacy. And he can only find that in the taverns with the drunks and the thieves and the pickpockets in the Falstaffs of the world. Those are the real people. And if he can show them that he's of them, understands them, then he can come into his inheritance.

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INTERVIEWER:
So you pitch that, and as you were doing that, you know, it was part of your own evolution by definition. It's got to be you can't do that without learning from it. Even if it's on a set. You talked before about the doctor's organization, but you were on the board of Human Rights Watch. That became something important.

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NOAH WYLE:
I joined the board of Human Rights Watch not that long after I got back from Macedonia with Doctors of the World, because I was able to observe the work they were doing in the camps as well. You know, the way the work in the camp is conducted as a family would be brought in off of a bus and they'd be immediately medically assessed, and then they would be given a tent and they'd be given some food. And once they were settled, then a doctor along with a representative from Human Rights Watch in this case, would go to the tent and do an interview of sorts. And the interview would start off very generic, you know: How do you feel? And do you have everything you need? And then it would say, you know, is all your family here with us today? And then you'd get the beginning of the story of who's not there. And then you get the beginning of the story of the journey, and then you get the beginning of the story of what happened to them before they left.

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NOAH WYLE:

And the purpose of those interviews was to basically document the war crimes that were taking place, to use them in the upcoming trial against Milošević. And, so this was law and medicine working hand in hand to bring justice. And I really loved the way that they conducted those interviews, because there was a psychiatrist there, too to make sure that, first and foremost, this wasn't triggering, that this was part of a healing process, and that it was a part of a justice process, and that they understood that very clearly. So I came back and through a writer friend of mine, Jonathan Mark Feldman, who I'd worked with, I'd been invited to the Human Rights Watch dinners many times and been a donor. But they asked me to be on the California board, and I jumped at the chance, and was an active member and fundraiser for them for years.

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INTERVIEWER:
It takes a village of people who can get the attention of an increasingly bifurcated group of people. But let's not talk about people. Let's talk about my favorite sentient beings, animals, who I discovered at this stage I like better than people generally.

NOAH WYLE:
Yeah. Took you long enough.

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INTERVIEWER:
So you worked a lot, your work with the World Wildlife Fund. You've been an activist in that…

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NOAH WYLE:
Well, let's start with my name. When you're born with the name Noah kind of goes with the territory. I apparently told my mother, when I was a young man, the only ambition I had in life was to live by myself on top of a mountain with a Billy goat. And I married a Capricorn, and I live on top of a mountain with her. And we've got a lot of animals. So, dream fulfilled. Yeah, I, you know, we have always had pets growing up. Dogs, cats, you know, hamsters, catch snakes, that kind of thing. But I didn't get into animal rights and animal rescue until much later. And…

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INTERVIEWER:
What did that? What got you there?

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NOAH WYLE:
Well, it may have been James Cromwell, maybe. Jamie. Jamie got me involved pretty early on with an organization, and they were basically going and shutting down meat processing plants, and rescuing animals, and finding places to put them. And I had this big piece of property up and sending in. So I was taking all these animals that were being rescued off of highways and things. So I had cows and chickens, and pigs, and emus and all sorts of shit. And I still have a few.

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INTERVIEWER:

If this is the message to your kids as adults and maybe the grandkids, what do you hope they're hearing and seeing and feeling? What's your hope? Are you optimistic?

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NOAH WYLE:
I would love… I was just listening to this thing this morning and sort of a meditation this morning about how, you know, if you could be as curious about other people as you are about yourself and, and see that we're all connected, really, we're all connected, that there is no separateness at all, really. And there is no sense of finite source. It's, it's there's abundance and there's it's there, it's it's I would love for my theories about the way the world works to be proven correct. And I would love to have future generations of my line look back and go, oh, he wasn't just an actor.

00:27:03:00

INTERVIEWER:
He had an arc.

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NOAH WYLE:
He had an arc. ARC.

END TC: 00:27:28:00