

Laura Wilkinson

[00:00:01] This is your opportunity to tell a story. What story are you going to tell? How are you going to invite them in? And this is a way to build bridges. It's a way to teach people love and acceptance. It's a way to grow relationship. I mean, you may completely change that person's life just because you're willing to reach out and teach them something.

[00:00:21] This episode is sponsored by headquarters, which also happens to be where Lorelle media offices and produces this podcast. In our humble opinion, headquarters is the best co-working office space in Houston. It's creative, affordable and just plain fun to work here. Headquarters located just east of downtown Houston.

Linda [00:00:42] What a treat today Olympic gold medalist Laura Wilkinson on Our Voices Matter. It's so great to see you. It's been a little while.

Laura [00:00:54] Thanks for having me on I appreciate it.

Linda [00:00:57] Of course. And well, there's so much to talk about. So, of course, you won your your gold medal was in two thousand, two thousand and two thousand and you did it with an injury to your foot. I remember that. You think back to that time. What do you think?

Laura [00:01:13] Well, I'm glad I have it on video so I can remember that it was actually real. You know, I mean, I didn't just happen in my dreams, but it was it was a crazy time. I remember being in a lot of pain, but that it was all worth it.

Linda [00:01:25] How do you get through something like that?

Laura [00:01:27] I think, you know, when you come to something that's really scary or really painful or uncomfortable, you have to remember what your goals are, what your dreams are, what are you shooting for. And that has to be bigger than the thing that you're facing than the scariness or the uncomfot like that. That thing you're shooting for has to be more important.

Linda [00:01:44] And for you, it was. So let's let's backtrack a little bit, too. When you decided to become a diver because you started off as a gymnast, didn't and of course, grew up here in Houston. So what took you from gymnastics to diving? What was that journey?

Laura [00:02:03] I loved gymnastics. I wanted to be Mary Lou Retton, like most little gymnasts at that time. And I guess now it would be Simone Byles at which I'd like to be her, too. But yeah, I just I wanted that perfect 10 Olympic ending. I wanted to go to the Olympics. All the things. And I got to a point in 13, I realized I just wasn't I was good, but I knew I wasn't going to be at that level is kind of a reality check and said, I want to keep doing this through college or that I want to find something. I could really go to the Olympics. And the Olympics is what was really in my heart, what I really wanted to do. So I kept tumbling for a while because I loved it. But I tried a bunch of other sports for about two years until I finally found diving ran into an ex-gymnast friend who had started diving and said, you should come to the pool, you'd love this. And I mean, I walked to the pool deck and it was love at first sight. Gymnastics into the water like two of my favorite things. Music blaring outdoors in the sunshine in the trees is like, OK, I think I can do this.

Linda [00:02:56] Yeah, and you still are going to do this. So for those of you who don't know, Laura had retired and then decided to come out of retirement and you're now training for 2020 Tokyo.

Laura [00:03:09] I am, yes.

Linda [00:03:11] And how old are you?

Laura [00:03:12] A little older than I was back then. A little bit? Yes, older.

Linda [00:03:18] So not many Olympians or not many? Yeah. Olympians would train for something 20 years after they had won their first. What made you decide that you could do this whole thing?

Laura [00:03:32] I've ever followed a normal path. You know, I started diving when I was 15, which is really late, even though I had the gymnastics background is still late to start. And they told me I was old in 2008 when I was 30. It was my last Olympic Games and my competitors were, you know, 15 to 20. And I was already kind of mom by then. You know, and so, I mean. 10 years later, 11 years later, why not do it again. It just kind of it wasn't like one moment or one thing that made me say, hey, I want to do this. Like the reason I retired in 2008. I mean, I was definitely tired. It's been a long career and a lot of ten year platform has a lot of impact. So it's really hard on your body. So I definitely needed a break, but I also wanted to be mom. I was 30. I'd been married for six years. To that point, I was just ready to be a mom. And that was not as easy as I thought it would be. You know, it took time. We ended up having two biological kids. Now we've also adopted twice. And so that has been its own wild, awesome roller coaster. But kind of during that process, I worked for NBC and went to the 2012 and 2016 Olympic Games. And I remember watching the women's platform in London. And it wasn't hard to just sit there and watch. What was hard was that the quality had declined so much since the four years before when I was competing. And it was kind of one of those man if I kept diving. I could have totally been in that hunt and obviously didn't want to. I had a daughter at the time and we were about to get our second one. So it wasn't you know, it wasn't like I regretted that, but it was like, oh, maybe I could still do that. But then I got pregnant again and we are going to another kid. And so there wasn't really this time to go back. But in the back of my head, I kind of always promised myself. So, you know, once I have my kids, if I get back in shape, I'll go play and I'll just see. And, you know, it was a while after I had had my second biological child that I actually got back in the water because I had to put a suit back on.

Laura [00:05:16] You know, the last time I was in front of these kids, I was totally in shape going to the Olympics. You know, I looked awesome. And here I am now. Does the old lady try and put on this suit? And I feel fat and I don't like I don't know what to do this with my coach, just like you should just come when the kids are in preschool and just have a break. It'll be fun. And so I finally sucked it up. But I put the suit on and I went for like one hour on a Monday. And it just as soon as I hit the water is like I was home. And it's like I'll just keep coming and playing. And so I did that for one hour a week, every week for six months. And stuff started to come back. And I was like, I wonder if I could do this again. And I finally asked my coach one day, how would I be crazy to try to do this again? And he said, Platformer, springboarding. I said, platform. He goes, No, I mean, without hesitation. And that surprised me. I said, OK, but I didn't say a word after that because he was getting ready to go to Rio with one of our divers. CASSIDY Cook, you represent Woodlands diving really well in Greater Houston area. Honestly, really well. And so we were there to cheer her on. We all had a job to do. But when we came back, I was like, OK, I think I'm going to give this wirl. I started showing up every day. And, you know, it kind of snowballed.

Linda [00:06:25] Now, you also just had surgery on your neck. Yes. So that must've set you back a bit. How are you dealing with that?

Laura [00:06:34] Yeah, it's been a it's been a while. A couple of years, like. So I did come back about six months after getting up on the 10-meter. I competed at Nationals and got second, which that was a wild ride in itself because I had like relearned how to compete again. I had to remember all of those anxious feelings and, you know, doing something bad, how do I come back? So there's a lot of ups and downs at that nationals. A lot of great learning experience. And I was excited to kind of keep going and build on that. But then we had a really difficult adoption process in 2013. So I didn't really get a chance to do much diving at that point. We were just really focused on bringing our daughter home. And we finally did brought her home. I was all excited. Planning on competing last December and the trials, me and my arm kept collapsing. Every time I hit the water, it was collapsing. I don't get this. I'm in great shape. I feel really strong. I don't understand why I'm having all these difficulties. So we had an MRI done on my neck and I mean, immediately we had a couple of different surgeons look at it and they said, you you need to have a fusion. Then my discs were or my vertebrae. I guess we're kind of impinged on my spinal cord. And I was having all these issues down my arm because of it. And they said diving or not, like just to be a functioning mom, you need to have this done, because if you fall or you get a

slight car accident, it can be really catastrophic. So I was actually glad that that decision was taken out of my hands. I was worried I would have to say, yes, I want to do this major surgery in order to try to dive or I could not do it and be a mom like I thought that was going to be my decision. But when they said you have to have this done, it's like, OK, well, at least the decision is out of my hand and now I can try to come back if that works. You don't have to treat me again. So now I just got back in the water.

Linda [00:08:09] OK, so let's talk about being a mom, because you have a beautiful family, two natural children that you and your husband have, and then you've adopted two children. So tell us about your decision to adopt. And then I want to hear kind of what that family dynamic is like, because you've got a really beautiful family.

Laura [00:08:34] They're crazy too but fun. So when I retired, wanted to be a mom and that just wasn't happening. I think like a lot of people, they want to try. They're ready. And then it just it doesn't happen. And it's really upsetting. Month after month, you just realize that your dreams are being crushed. It's it's really draining. You know, and I I kind of came to a point where I had to grieve the fact that maybe this isn't in the cards for me, but it was hard. It was like, I can't have diving and do this. One other thing that I liked and the only other thing I want to do is be a mom and I can have that then, who am I? And it was a really difficult struggle, really relied on God and any kind of just begin to work on me and kind of saw me through this season and I wanted to adopt. I thought that would be a great option. My brother was adopted. For me, that was not like a new idea. I was like don't care how I have kids. I just selfishly want to be a mom. And my husband was not initially onboard with that. But God changed his heart and we had some conversations and that's actually how we started. The process was on our seventh wedding anniversary. We signed the papers to start adopting from China, a little girl from China. But that was a really long wait. And in that process, about a year later, we found out we were pregnant with my oldest. And that was a complete surprise. We thought after a couple of years, like I just wasn't going to happen at all. And so we could just might have two kids. Like this is really, really cool.

Laura [00:09:49] And after my biological daughter, about a year old, we were still the wait for China had slowed down dramatically from three years to 6 years. And it was just looking like it was going to be forever. So we actually decided to switch to special needs. And that was really scary because you have to decide what you're comfortable accepting any longer. Well, if God gives me a kid the special needs, I think I'll just he'll figure it. He'll help me figure out how to be equipped to handle that, you know? But choosing it. I don't know what I'm actually equipped for.

Laura [00:10:17] I don't know how to do this. So that was kind of an intimidating process to walk through. But once we did, we had a great pediatrician who also adopted from China and helped us kind of navigate what these medical terms mean and what we might be good with. We got matched within a month and then we're there three months later picking her up and the girls ended up being only six months apart. So it's almost like having twins with an 18 month old and twelve month old. So it's a little crazy going from one to two all of a sudden. But it was awesome. You know, it's awesome. Also, no sleep. But it was awesome. Her special needs. She does not have a left ear. She has atresia. What is it called? I forget the technical term for it, but she doesn't have like an ear canal. Like, there's just no opening and she just has a little ear. So we call her little ear. And so she has a little bit different jaw structure and stuff from it. But I mean, otherwise her right ear is fine, she can hear. Fine. And you had some speech issues at the beginning, but we've got that all the time.

Linda [00:11:10] So are you concerned about at all about how how your your children, your family is accepted in a world that sometimes looks at others as different?

Laura [00:11:22] Yeah. I mean, sometimes we fortunately in our community, in our church, we have a lot of friends that have fostered and adopted. So we know a lot of other families that look like us, that don't look like everybody else. And there's a lot more blended families these days, too. So I don't feel like we stick out as much in our community as maybe we would have 10 or 15 years ago or something. But I definitely got some I had some weird questions like at the Target check out and things like that. That is when people tend to ask you very random questions like

how many fathers are there or like how many? Yeah. You're asking this right in front of my children. Is that appropriate at all?

Linda [00:11:57] So, OK. So you have two natural children and then you have the daughter from China and then you adopted most recently a little girl from Ethiopia. OK. So tell us about that adoption that we'll go back to the target line.

Laura [00:12:11] Yes. So the Ethiopian process was not easy. We actually started it six months after we brought our daughter from China. We're like. That was an amazing process. We want more kids. Let's do this again. We had some friends who'd adopted three. Ethiopian had a great experience. So we decided to go that route. And three days later, I found out I was pregnant with my son. OK. We just went for like one kid. So are like 13 months. Oh, by the way, we're pregnant. I know. It's a little crazy. So good. Crazy, though.

Laura [00:12:41] But, you know, my son, he's five and we just brought our daughter home. So it was a really long process. And about three and half years into it, we finally got her picture. We got matched with her. And we were just so adorable. She was a year old, just this precious little thing. This is amazing. And then nine months later, the prime minister of Ethiopia decided to shut down international adoption completely. And we were just devastated. We have this little girl like, what are we supposed to do? She's our daughter. We've been praying for her for years. We know her now. Like there's no way we can just let this go. And we kind of united with a bunch of other parents trying to adopt. And we kind of just had everybody we knew. Call Congress. And it was really cool because this is the one time that I've seen in politics where people on both sides of the aisle came together and supported parents who wanted to bring their children home. And they told us it would be successful if we had 50 people from Congress and Senate signed this petition letter to the prime minister of Ethiopia. And we had one hundred and twenty two. So it was very awesome to watch that. Like just everybody set aside their political beliefs and said this isn't more important. And Ethiopian prime minister said, I will let the families who are already married with children finish their adoption. So at that point we were like, OK, we can bring her home, we can bring her home. But then our agency got shut down and then we had to come up with all of these thousands of dollars to transfer agencies. And then the orphanage director started to blackmail us, like all these things started happening. And just. It was it was one of the hardest struggles that I have ever been through in my life, and we actually ended up going to Ethiopia without a court date, without anything, trying to figure out how to get our case unstuck. And several families that our orphanage were having the same issues. So we just said we can't wait. We have to go try to fight this. And going over there was awesome. We got to meet her. We got to go spend time with her every single day. She was terrified of us and hated us. Nothing to do with us. But we got to see her. We got to see where she lived. We got to meet all the other little kids. We got to meet the nannies who are absolutely precious and taking such good care of these kids with literally nothing available, like they were still taking such loving, great care of them. But then we had to leave Empty-Handed without her. And that was that was really difficult because we didn't know at that point if we could if it was going to work or not. We just there were so many unknowns and there we were so close touching her and holding her and not able to bring her home. It was really dark. It was probably clinically depressed when we came home. But the awesome part was that we started to watch God move in that and things started to change. And about eight weeks later, we had the opportunity to go back again without a court date. But this time the judge told us, if we can get there. He thinks all be set in stone. And we found out on one of our legs from Germany to Ethiopia that we, in fact, had a court date and that we were gonna be able to bring her home this time. And so, yeah, we finally brought her home almost like four years and ten months later and we brought her home. And our family has just felt so complete. All of our kids that we had known her name since my son was born, you know that we. Jakaya Yeah. And so we we've been praying for her and talking about her. We've had her picture. We've had her bed up like four years. And now this little girl comes home and I get to meet her and touch her. And watching them react to her is probably the best thing that I've ever experienced.

Linda [00:16:01] That is. Wow, such a beautiful story. So clearly, you and your husband have so much love in your in your heart for humanity and you see past color and ethnicity and all of that. And just want to bring a family together and and just bring more love into the world. And I think that's just incredible.

Linda [00:16:24] So I want to go back to the target line to kind of breaks down. So tell me what what kinds of questions do you ask when people see your blended family? And what do they what did they say? And then how do you respond?

Laura [00:16:40] Yeah, I don't get as much of it. Now, maybe people just use the thing I speak at the beginning. I remember getting asked a lot of like, oh, are all those yours? Are they real? And I'm like fake children. Yes, they're very real children. Yeah, I think they. Are they really yours? Are they all your children? I've been asked how many fathers there are. Like people asked really snarky things sometimes. And it just depends on my mood. I responded. I try to think it is they just they just don't know. They're just ignorance. This is my opportunity to educate them and teach them appropriate words to use, like biological or adopted or, you know, are they your children? Are they real children? Because they are obviously very real people, you know. But my kids can hear these things, you know, and most of the time, I mean, it does happen a lot when they were really little, now that they're older and they would actually hear more. It doesn't happen as much. But yeah, it was it was really interesting.

Linda [00:17:31] Really? Yes. You know, if you said something that I think is really important and that's part of the reason that this podcast exists, is to educate through stories like yours. And you said that, you know, mostly it's just people are ignorant. They just don't know. So whether it's they don't know and understand about adoption, especially international adoption, or whether they don't know an African-American person because they've never been exposed to it or they don't know a gay person or they don't know. You know, pick a label, whatever it is, it's ignorance. Most yeah, most more often than not. And the best way to fight that is through education. You agree?

Laura [00:18:18] Yeah. It takes a lot of humility, though, to not just react out of anger or frustration, especially if you're having a rough day. I mean, so I I get where people can, you know, get really hostile when they're when they're, you know, handling a situation like that. But if you can just take a deep breath, have a little humility and try to reach out and educate, encourage that person, it makes a world of difference, really, cause most people are like, oh, I mean, they're really interested and excited to know it's not out of this mean place. Even though the question may come out that way. It's usually just out of like I'm curious, I'm actually asking the question. But we have a great there's a great video out there that says if you wouldn't ask it about a boob job, you don't ask it about adoption. Like, are they real? How long have you had those? How much did they cost? I have been asked that before. How much did they cost? And it's like I know that's not a mean statement, but it comes off very odd. But like, they just want to know, like, how does that work? This process where, you know, so it's just. Yeah. So if you wouldn't say it about a boob job. Don't say it a kid.

Linda [00:19:17] I love that. Never, never heard that before. But that's a good analogy. Yeah. It really is. So as you think about your children growing up in this sort of divisive environment that we're living in right now, what are your your greatest fears for them?

Laura [00:19:34] I don't know, that I have a lot of fears. I just I really want to equip them to understand what people are like and that it is a lot of just not knowing. It's in a lot of naivete or ignorance, like people just don't know. So you have to educate them like my my daughter who has the little ear, like, she gets very frustrated when kids ask her a lot. And it's she's not embarrassed about it. She's quite proud of it. She'll tell you all about her little ear. But she she just gets annoyed because they ask her over and over and over again even when they know about it. But that's why I have to say. I know, sweetie, but they just don't get it. They don't see that every day. It's new. This is your opportunity to tell a story. What story are you going to tell? How are you going to invite them in? And this is a way to build bridges. It's a way to teach people love and acceptance. It's a way to grow relationship. I mean, you may completely change that person's life just because you're willing to reach out and teach them something, you know, that somebody else is not going to teach them because they don't have an opportunity. This is an opportunity.

Linda [00:20:29] That's such a beautiful way to look at it and in such an important lesson to impart to your children that, you know, building the bridge and looking at it as an opportunity. You also mentioned during your story that it was the one time that you saw politicians in Congress put

their political differences aside for a common goal of making sure that these families who were going through adoption could bring their families together. Wow.

Laura [00:21:02] It was awesome and it was just it was eye-opening for me that like they didn't care anything where they were all working together just to who knew the prime minister best, who could work this best, who needed to be like the front runner. And just like that, that was so encouraging that they could actually put those things aside and say family is so much more important than all this other stuff.

Linda [00:21:22] You know, when we find a common goal, that's where we have to start from. And and it's it's wonderful to hear stories like this where it just re-emphasize is that it can happen, that, you know, politicians can come together, they can put their differences aside when there is a common goal. If we start from there, then we can move forward.

Laura [00:21:45] I think a lot of times we just have to bring it back to basics. Right. We get so involved in these minutia. You know, these little things that are, you know, do they really matter if we pull back? We have a common connection with everybody. We're all people. Right. We're all imperfect people. Like we all have that in common. So let's go from there.

Linda [00:22:02] I couldn't agree with you more when people hear your full story because, you know, I so I follow you on Instagram. So. So that's why I know a lot about you. Well, we go way back and we go way back. You know, I just remember the first time I met you and I'm sure it when I when I was on the air Channel Two and doing interviews and whatnot. But it's been great to see you. In more recent years and and see your family grow and develop.

Linda [00:22:29] But I just I want to know what when people hear your story about your family, that they probably did not know those of you, those who just follow you as a diver. What do you think is the biggest takeaway from your story that you want people to know and understand that maybe they didn't before?

Laura [00:22:49] Oh, that's a great question. I guess just really that we're we're all people and we all deserve love and we can all give love even if you're not getting it. If you start giving it, you're gonna get it back. You know, and we can find reasons to fight it. We can find reasons that we're different. We can. That's easy. You know what's hard is eating that slice of humble pie and just loving the person who may not be very lovable. But that can change a person when you're willing to do that. You know, and I guess I guess that's kind of the gist. Yeah.

Linda [00:23:20] What would you say are the lessons that you've learned in your athletic career, the techniques and things that you use to be Olympic level? How do those lessons play in your overall life?

Laura [00:23:38] That's another great question. You know, one of my favorite things I love to talk about when I speak to a group is I compare the very first time I jumped off a platform to life because that first time you jump off a platform, it is scary. I mean, you're three stories high in the air and you don't know how you're going to land. It's a terrifying jump. And my coach likes to say you can't dip your toe in the 10 meter to see if the water feels nice. You have to jump in with both feet. And that's what life is. A lot of times we try and do my best. I want to try this. But really, you have to commit to doing it. You can't just dip your toe in. You have to jump in with both feet. You have to commit to giving it your all. And I think that's really the thing that I've carried over into my life outside of the pool the most is like, I can't just try and do this. I mean, they're all in doing this or I'm I'm walking down the platform. You know, I have to summon that courage and I have to try. Even though it's scary, even though it may not go the way I want it to. Like I'm going to learn from this, whether it's successful or it's a failure to learn from it. I pick myself up and I going to keep going forward.

Linda [00:24:38] When your kids come to you and say, Mommy, daddy, I want to do blank, whatever it is. How do you how do you think you're going to react?

Laura [00:24:47] Well, I have one diver already. So my oldest started diving about a year and a half ago. And it's the greatest thing because she.

Laura [00:24:55] She loves it. And she's kind of serious about it. But when she's on the pool deck, she's just jumping and dancing and bouncing and she just enjoys it. You know, and who knows if she'll be any good. But she absolutely loves it. And that just makes me so happy, you know? And my my next one wants nothing to do with sports. She wants to be an artist. So, you know, they're all gonna have their different roads. And I love it. I mean, that's what makes everybody special, is that we're all different. We all have different gifts and talents and loves. And it's a good thing. It's good to be different.

Linda [00:25:22] So what are you looking forward to most over these next couple of years as well? Not couple of years with his twenty nineteen. So the Olympics is not that far away. About a year and half a year and a half. Yeah, well, OK. So are you feeling good?

Laura [00:25:36] Well I mean I'm just just got back in the water after the surgery, so I'm still kind of getting the rust kicked out there and kind of oil and myself back up. But I'm I'm excited to see to see where it goes, you know, and if nothing else. And just doing the act of diving. I love it. It's my passion. It makes me feel so complete. But, you know, hopefully we'll have a good run because I'd love to just put one more awesome list together in front of the world and just. Yeah, that's just the best feeling.

Linda [00:26:01] I cannot wait. I cannot wait. So just know that we're all going to be cheering you on. Thank you. Sure. Best of luck to you, Laura.

Linda [00:26:08] Appreciate you so much for taking the time to to share your beautiful story with our audience. And thank you for taking the time to watch this. We'll see you next.

[00:26:18] Thanks so much for giving our guests permission to speak. And for having the courage to listen with an open mind. If the mission of our voices matter resonates with you. Please like subscribe, download and share and then join the conversation because it really is going to take all of us to make a difference.