

Sawbones 195: Mütter Museum

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Clint: Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[audience cheers]

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello everybody, and welcome to Sawbones: a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your cohost, Justin Tyler McElroy.

[audience cheers]

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee Smirl McElroy.

[audience cheers for longer]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: It's not even— a lot of people on social media talk about that's not even funny anymore.

Sydnee: [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Justin: I've seen a lot of hashtags about how that's not really nice anymore and everybody gets it.

Sydnee: Uh...

Justin: From different sourc— from different people. But I'm more concerned about the inevitable backlash, and I don't want my wife to get caught up in that, like—

Sydnee: Uh huh.

[audience laughs]

Justin: So anyway, hello Philadelphia. How are you?

[audience cheers]

Justin: We've never done a live show in Philadelphia before.

Sydnee: No, that's true.

[audience cheers]

Justin: I went to Philadelphia once, with my family— why is that funny?

[audience laughs]

Justin: It's not that funny, there's a lot of history there, it's a lovely area. But as we were walking back to the car, a man ran up to us and he seemed to be someone who was going to want some money from us. And then when he ran up to us, he said, "I do something the whole family can enjoy! Backflips."

[audience laughs]

Justin: So, you imagine— okay, two things: Yeah. And also—

Sydnee: I'd enjoy that.

Justin: We did, yeah. My entire family enjoyed the backflips.

[audience laughs]

Justin: And he was compensated duly for his backflipping prowess.

Sydnee: Are you just asking like, do you know that guy? Is that the next question?

Justin: So, if anybody here is the backflip guy... um, anyway.

Sydnee: We almost didn't make it.

Justin: Yeah. It was tight. We, uh, our flight got—

Sydnee: Our flight got cancelled.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And we live somewhere very small, and it's not easy to get—it's not like there are lots of other flights.

Justin: But we just put everybody in our car and decided that we would drive to Philadelphia.

[audience cheers]

Justin: It was a bad idea at the time, but now we are here enjoying your fair city—

[audience member shouts out]

Justin: Well, it was the least we could do.

Sydnee: It was worth it. We've had a wonderful time here. We're very happy.

Justin: It's been lovely. We went to, uh, the Reading Terminal Market, over there?

[audience cheers]

Sydnee: We didn't wait in line for the doughnuts. We thought about it.

Justin: Yeah...

Sydnee: It was just a really long line.

Justin: Almost waited in the doughnut line.

Sydnee: We have a toddler and— no. But everything was good.

Justin: But we did go to— ah, what was the name of it, Syd? I forget.

Sydnee: Oh, I know why you're asking me.

Justin: Yeah, cause—

Sydnee: Cause you're not sure how to pronounce it.

Justin: Well.

[audience laughs]

Justin: You do yours.

Sydnee: So, we also went to the Mütter Museum.

[audience cheers]

Sydnee: Or Mutter Museum. [laughs]

Justin: If you prefer.

Sydnee: That was actually the first question that I asked. They were nice enough, at the museum, to send us some emails ahead of time inviting us to come.

They even were gonna let us come in a little early, but because we ended up driving here and getting in so late, we didn't get to swing that. But we got set up with Gillian Ladley, who I have to give a shoutout to, because she is the media and marketing manager and she met us there and gave me, like, a little personal tour and showed us some stuff.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And my first question was, "Gillian, how do I pronounce the name of your museum? Because I'm gonna do a show about it and I don't know." And she said, "Well either way's fine." Which isn't— [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: Which is not helpful, now. But she— I didn't know this. So, the guy that it's named for, I'm gonna tell you a little bit more about him, Dr, originally, Mutter. When he was born and raised he grew up Dr Mutter, and then he went to Europe to study surgery and medicine for a year and he thought, "You know what would be fancier than Mutter?"

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] "Mütter." So, he came back Dr Mütter. So, he just added the umlaut. He just— I mean really, he just thought, "That looks good. I like that there." So there you go, either way.

Justin: I'm gonna put an umlaut somewhere in my name and just see what happens.

Sydnee: [laughs] Justin?

[audience laughs]

Justin: Justin. Just so everybody's always wrong. I just want that, "Uh, actually."

Sydnee: [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Justin: "Thank you so much for having me here, Mr. President, to the Whitehouse. But it's—" that probably wouldn't happen.

Sydnee: No.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: I can't see that happening.

Justin: Not right now. [laughs] We've talked some yay.

Sydnee: I doubt he listens to our show. [laughs]

Justin: So, I was a little worried when we decided to do the museum, because normally I have to feign ignorance of medicine to make our show work, and I was worried that that would not be the case. But we brought our daughter Charlie with us, and—

[audience cheers]

Justin: She enabled me to have sort of a parallel experience to the actual visiting of the museum. So, throughout Sydnee's presentation, she got, like, five skulls in before she, "Eh, actually, I'm two. So, I'm gonna go? If anybody wants to come with me, that would probably be legally advisable."

[audience laughs]

Justin: So, I'm just gonna be able to throw in some cool insights about the gift shop, and there's a garden outside. [laughs] So either one of those, if I have any sort of like fun observations that connect with what Sydnee's talking about. About the gift shop or the gardens.

Sydnee: [laughs] I don't know why, I really thought she'd be into it.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: I don't have a good sense for those things.

Justin: There's a little thing that you stand in which is the last thing we did, which is like a virtual 'get your arm shot off in the Civil War', which, okay, you're laughing now.

[audience laughs]

Justin: Shame on me. Right, okay. [laughs] But I thought, in my dad brain, I'm like, "Hmm, interactive."

[audience laughs]

Justin: [laughs] "She should enjoy this!"

Sydnee: Charlie came and told me about it and she said, "Daddy got his arm shot off and I yelled for you and you weren't there." [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: It was terrible.

Justin: After we left about 20 seconds in, "Daddy, never, ever, ever, ever, ever get your arm shot off in the Civil War again."

Fine.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: So, first of all, as I already mentioned, let me tell you a little bit about Dr Mütter, for whom the museum was named and was the originator of the collection.

So, he was born in 1811, he was orphaned and raised by some distant relatives, and like I said, he got his MD at Penn and then went abroad because at the time medical education in the States was... not a thing, really. I mean, it was sort of a thing, but you didn't have to have any sort of education to be a doctor. You could just decide one day "I feel like a doctor today. I'm gonna say I am, I'm gonna put up a sign, and people can figure it out the hard way."

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: So, he didn't like that. He wanted to learn in Europe, where at the time there were actually, like, standards, and you had to go through certain, you know, classes to be a doctor. So, he went and he studied and he came back, and so he had a lot of knowledge that not necessarily every physician would have had at the time. And he came to work in Philadelphia.

And you've gotta understand, at this point in the US, like, the state of medicine and disease, I mean, it was a bad scene. People didn't understand germ theory of disease, so, like, sanitation was not really a concept for most people. Like, "Why would we care if things were clean? We don't need to wash our hands, why would it matter?"

And diseases, specifically in Philadelphia, that were running rampant were things like cholera, smallpox, dysentery, yellow fever, scarlet fever, malaria, typhus, TB, just ravaging the city. Daily.

Justin: Hey, listen. Y'all nasty.

[audience laughs]

Justin: For real. You guys are kinda nasty, it seems like. [laughs] What are y'all doing?

Sydnee: It was a rough time. [laughs] But he was very talented from the jump. He learned a lot, he studied really hard, he had good hands. He was a surgeon. He was actually ambidextrous. So, he was really good at surgery.

And he was known mostly, though, for how personable he was. He was supposedly very charming, his colleagues loved him, his students loved him, his patients loved him. All of his colleagues' wives loved him because his suits matched his carriages. [laughs] He was very fancy.

He was a very well-to-do guy, he was very proud, but his patients would attest that he had a great bedside manner and he really took a lot of time to connect with his patients and treat them as people and not as diseases, long before Patch Adams came up with that. [laughs]

Justin: "You know, you—" shoot, you beat me to it!

[audience laughs]

Justin: Dammit! I was so close! Ugh!

Sydnee: I knew it, I knew you were going there.

Justin: You know what, I'm gonna get this one in post. You know Syd, you treat the patient—

[audience laughs]

Justin: Never mind, the moment's passed. It's fine.

Sydnee: Part of what he was specifically interested in were plastic surgeries, especially procedures that other surgeons at the time just said, "I don't even know why you would do that."

Like, you know, this person, yes, maybe they have been— especially fire and burn injuries were a big problem at this time, a lot for women because they would work in kitchens that were not in any way kept safe, and so burn injuries in kitchens were a big problem. So, people would come to him and say I've been, you know, "I'm alive, I'm functioning, but I've been disfigured by this accident, and I would like you to help me." And a lot of surgeons would just say, "No, what's the point? We don't need to do that."

And at the time, that could be the rest of our life. Especially for women, who didn't have a lot of opportunities, if you weren't considered "marriable" then that was it.

And so, doing these surgeries was actually a big deal from a social perspective, from a medical perspective, even though it wasn't recognized at the time. And he was willing to do them.

And he was a pioneer of a lot of techniques that we would, you know, learn and obviously get better over time, like flap surgeries where we could connect a piece of skin that was still connected somewhere and kind of pull it over and connect it somewhere else and grow new skin there, and all kinds of things. And he would operate on people that at the time, medically, would have been called "monsters". That was a medical term. If you can believe that, that would have been, like, your diagnosis.

Justin: "You're a monster."

Sydnee: "You have monster"

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: And he gave them hope and did these procedures. So, he was very well-liked and he was very popular and he was very successful. And as part of his learning about different disfiguring conditions and accidents and traumas, he started collecting a lot of unusual specimens.

He had a very, he had his own personal interest in it, but he also thought this was really helpful for teaching. If I can show you what this looked like before, or if I can find something that I've never operated on before and get a specimen, then I can learn techniques, kind of figure out how to handle it if I ever see it. So, he began amassing this giant collection of what people tended to think of as kind of medical oddities.

Justin: I have to imagine, like, if you get one of those, you pretty much only have the option to make a museum, right?

[audience laughs]

Justin: Like, you look at the shelf, like, "Well that's weird. It's just a brain in a jar. They're certainly gonna arrest me for that. But if I have 50 brains in a jar, suddenly I've got a museum cookin'."

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] So, he put together this huge collection and he decided, you know, "This needs to be housed somewhere. I don't wanna run this by myself, but I want it to be accessible to students and doctors of the future."

So, he went to the college of physicians, the Philadelphia College of Physicians, which was and is a very prestigious organization, again, of physicians who said you actually have to know something, something standardized, to be a doctor. Let's all agree on that. It was founded by Benjamin Rush, among others, who I know in the past I have thrown a little shade at Benjamin Rush, to be fair.

Justin: The first thing we looked at on our tour was a portrait of Benjamin Rush and Gillian, our guide, was sort of talking to us about him and Sydnee and I were both looking a little uncomfortable, like you see

somebody at a party you've been talking trash about. Like, "Oh Ben, this is awkward. Um... eugh."

Sydnee: [laughs] It's hard. It's that time in history where there's a lot of... like, especially like, rich white doctor guys who you can say some really great stuff about, but then there's always a "but also". And Benjamin Rush is a good example of that, and man, I've learned that you gotta be careful. Do not insult him in front of a psychiatrist. I've learned that the hard way. [laughs] So I don't do that.

But anyway, he was responsible for this college of physicians, which is a very prestigious organization, and they were chosen by Dr Mütter to house this collection as long as, there was a stipulation, he said I'll give you, at the time he had 1700 objects. He gave them \$30,000.

And he said, "All you gotta do is you gotta have a fireproof building to put it in," that's reasonable, "get a curator, and I'd like you to hold regular lectures and seminars and things to continue to teach people about it, and keep adding to the collection over time." And so it happened, and there you go. We have the Mütter Museum, thank goodness.

Justin: And how relaxing his garage must have been after that.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Because it was just getting a little silly in there.

Sydnee: It's really—

Justin: "I'm gonna do some painting. You know what? Jill! I decided—I'm gonna do the pottery, I know I've been saying I'm gonna take up pottery. We finally have this room in here. I'm gonna do this! All the brains are out, let's do it!"

[ad break]

Sydnee: It's really interesting to think. You know, he actually, he died fairly young. And part of the reason that it was always—

Justin: You always have to— we always have to go to where somebody died.

Sydnee: I'm just, I'm just finishing—

Justin: No story on Sawbones can be like, "And... he worked for a long time after that and seemed to be pretty good."

[audience laughs]

Justin: Like, you never, it's always like, "And the princess and the prince rode off into the sunset. And later, they died. Anyway..."

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: Because all people do. And that's important for us to recognize.

Justin: Trademark— okay. [loudly] How's your festival going? Pretty good, it seems like!

[audience laughs and cheers]

Justin: Festive, isn't it?

Sydnee: I just mentioned that, because—

Justin: That's the Latin root, I believe.

Sydnee: I think— I'm trying to create a context here.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] What I'm trying to say—

Justin: Sorry dear.

Sydnee: —is that part of why, it's really easy to look at the museum and, like, what I had heard about it before I actually went and experienced it, is that, "Oh, it's a bunch of weird medical stuff." Which, yes, of course, that stuff is there.

But it's more than that, and part of why he was so connected to his patients and he was thought to care so much, truly care, about his patients, is that he suffered his entire life from gout and probably, maybe, tuberculosis as well. It's not entirely clear.

But he was a patient, too. He was sick and in pain most of his life, he died young from it, and so he understood what it was like to constantly face the challenge of chronic disease, which connected him more to his patients and also was part of what motivated him to say, "Let's learn from this, let's respect this and let's create this collection so that we can learn more and pass it along," which is really what the museum is all about. Not just, "Come look at some weird stuff".

I mean, he rescued a lot of artifacts from, like, sideshows and freak shows and things like that, so. That was my point. That's my context.

Justin: Okay. And they have lip balm in there that looks like skulls.

Sydnee: [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Justin: So... if you wanna go that route, that's available to you. And also, okay, they have a brain that is filled with liquid and I got one for Charlie because she really wanted it. And then we went back to our Airbnb, and if you have a two-year-old, you probably already see where this story is going. She, I guess, gnawed a hole in it?

[audience laughs]

Justin: Because we came into the bedroom that we have there, and there's just... brain goop everywhere. On the floor and the walls.

Sydnee: It was all the way up the wall... it looked like a murder.

Justin: Just like... and then like Dexter there, in the middle, just chewing on a brain.

[audience laughs and applauds]

Justin: It's like... [laughs] In my head, I'm going through this like, mental inventory of like, what *is* in that? Because my day's about to go one of many different directions depending on the substance within the brain.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: I don't know what it was.

Justin: No. We got it all cleaned up, it was fine.

Sydnee: We got it off everything. She's fine, no one was injured. [laughs] They're not gonna sue us at the Airbnb, it's fine, but don't buy the brain if you have a toddler.

Justin: Yeah, or watch them better than we do, I guess.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: So, some of the exhibits that Justin didn't get to see, [laughs] I wanted to talk about. Actually, the first one you did get to see.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: The soap lady.

Justin: Yeah, the soap lady. She here?

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: That's rough. [laughs]

Justin: She'll make it. [laughs]

Sydnee: So, she is called "the soap lady", it is a woman whose body was exhumed in Philadelphia in 1875, and because of the conditions in which this body was buried, specifically it was a warm, airless, alkaline environment, that's what you need for this process to happen, something called adipocere can form out of, like, the fatty tissues in the subcutaneous tissues in our body.

And it preserves the body in a very unique way. It's sort of like soap. I mean, it's basically soap. Is what happens. The body is kind of made of different kinds of soap. And so, you don't see, like, the decomposition over time that you would assume we would see. I mean, by now we'd expect this body to be a skeleton, and it's not. And right now, when you—

Justin: Did you say a skellington?

Sydnee: No? [laughs]

Justin: It sounded like you said skellington, I got pretty excited. And I'm not just trying to derail you because I'm getting yucked to the max.
[laughs]

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: But she's still preserved exactly like that, and she's like at room temperature now. You don't have to do anything. She's in the glass box, you can look at her and she's at room temperature and she's just like that, and she's largely made out of soap, sort of. I mean, not like your soap, not like the soap you use. Don't worry. [laughs] Don't use this as soap.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: Although they do sell little soap lady soaps. [laughs]

[audience laughs and applauds]

Justin: Oh, and *I'm* the bad guy!

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: There's a couple things that are really interesting about the soap lady.

Justin: [laughs] I can guess one. Made of soap.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: One, from a very practical standpoint, she's been used— and that's the neat thing about a lot of the stuff in the museum, is that they can continue to use, because they're such old artifacts and they're well preserved, they can use them for some current medical research.

For instance, a lot of new— every time a new imaging modality, you know, we're talking about x-rays and CAT scans and MRIs, every time something new comes along, they try it out on the soap lady. To see, you know, what does this do? What can we see and how does it work? And they've learned a lot about her.

Like, they had her year of death completely wrong. They used to think, like, she died in the yellow fever epidemic in the 1790s, but then they

found these buttons on her clothes using imaging techniques that showed she would have lived much later than that. And it also helps us learn how to use this new technology and what we can do with it and that kinda stuff. So, she has a very practical application, a gift she continues to give, to medical knowledge.

The other interesting part is probably not as useful, is that Gillian sent me a list ahead of time of the three most popular fainting spots in the museum. [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: And she is number one on the list. She's also, like, the first thing you encounter. So, I guess that's good, because if you're gonna pass out, let's just get it out of the way.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And maybe then you know, like, "Maybe I should go ask for a refund and just leave. Maybe I can't handle this." But they used to— she told me this, she said, "You know, we used to have her housed at the top of this staircase over here..."

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: They've moved her to a different spot, because as you can imagine... [laughs]

Justin: That's how they used to get new exhibits.

[audience laughs and applauds]

Sydnee: So there you go, be prepared—

Justin: You can have that one for free, Eli Roth.

Sydnee: [laughs] Be prepared, because that really— and maybe that was why it was a little overwhelming for Charlie, that's really the first thing you encounter. You walk through the first gallery and there's the soap lady. And it's a lot. It's a lot if you're not prepared. But now you are, so you're gonna be fine and you're not gonna pass out.

Justin: I didn't pass out because I didn't realize what I was looking at.

[audience laughs]

Justin: There's no punchline there, I'm just not a very smart person.
[laughs]

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] Moving on from there, I think what was probably the next thing that made have done it in for Justin and Charlie is the wall of skulls.

Justin: So metal.

Sydnee: [laughs] It does, it is very metal. The skull collection was donated later, this was not part of the original Mütter collection, but it was donated by Dr Joseph Hyrtl, who was a Viennese physician who donated the whole thing in 1874, and the reason he amassed this giant collection of 139 human skulls, not just cause he's like a weirdo with a fetish or something, no, I'm not— [laughs] No. He didn't want to just keep them in his house and look at them. He had a good reason, a medical reason.

He collected them all because he wanted to disprove phrenology.

[scattered cheering]

Phrenology of course being the pseudoscience that you can feel the bumps on somebody's head and then predict, like, are you gonna be a criminal, what kind of job will you have, how smart will you be, all the different things about you. And he said this is nonsense, this doesn't make, you know, I'm gonna show you you're wrong by collecting all these skulls, and along with them he collected their name and their occupation and their age and how they died. And so, you can see all that along with the skulls. Which is really interesting, because you don't usually, I mean, usually when you encounter a skull you don't get that kind of information.

[audience laughs]

Justin: That's true.

Sydnee: You know? [laughs]

Justin: I'm always left hanging. Whose skull was it? What were they into? Were they made of soap?

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: And it really is fascinating, because you see, like, there's skulls on the wall that— a lot of these were collected from poor people, because — he didn't steal them. I'm not saying— he didn't steal— I mean, I don't know that every single one...

Justin: That's the first line of his biography. "Joseph here... did not steal people's skulls."

Sydnee: Hyrtl. "I did not steal these skulls." He didn't steal them, although we are looking at a time when grave robbing and things did happen. But I can imagine there were a lot of questionably ethical deals made with families, like, "You know, I could really use that skull. I could make it worth your while." [laughs]

Justin: "Do you remember when they were alive, did they ever talk about being on a wall? Well, their dream's about to be realized."

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: And so, like, you can look and they have, like, tightrope walkers, one who died of a broken neck. I think we can piece that together. [laughs] You can find there's like, a famous prostitute listed under one.

And then, like I said, you can learn all about them, which I think is really interesting just from like, a personal standpoint, to remind you that these are not just like, "Oh, weird, there's some skulls," but to remind you that these are medical, this is medical history, these are things we're learning, these helped advance scientific knowledge, and these were people. And they made this contribution to history and knowledge. I think that's great.

Justin: Me too.

Sydnee: I don't think a lot of people pass out there.

Justin: No.

Sydnee: One interesting point that Gillian told me that I didn't know, and she said this is, like, background info. When the museum picked up in popularity, because when it was first built, they didn't expect it to have the kind of traffic that it does, and I can attest to that. We went yesterday and it was very busy.

But they weren't prepared for that, so initially all of the vibrations from the foot traffic of all the people walking past the big glass-encased wall of skulls was actually kinda shaking them and causing, like, them to break and, like, teeth to fall out and all kinds of things to happen. They were moving around in there and they weren't prepared for that.

So, the solution is that they had to make, like, personally crafted stands to fit every single skull in the collection. And there's not, like, a person who does this. [laughs] Like, you can't look that up. Like, google "personalized skull stand for my skull collection". Who does this?

So, they had one person who works there building them. Each one, by hand, in the basement, to fit each one of those skulls. And like, the wooden frames, if you look at them, she was telling me those wooden frames are from Michaels.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: Like they're just stuff that— [laughs] Stuff that they figured out how to put this together and build all these skull frames.

Justin: Bet that was a popular cat. He didn't get weird at all, though. He stayed very normal through the entire hundred skull-stand making process. He's beloved.

[laughs]

Sydnee: My personal favorite exhibit that I had heard of ahead of time and I got to see, um, and also a very popular fainting spot on our list of three fainting spots, was the giant megacolon.

[audience cheers]

Justin: Woohoo!

Sydnee: [laughs] Y'know, I'm a scientist, I had to bring along a very scientific example, as you can see. This is exactly what the giant megacolon looks like.

Justin: Sydnee, for our podcast audience, can you describe what you are holding aloft there?

Sydnee: I'm holding a stuffed colon with a smile.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: A little smile. This is one of my favorite things that I now own.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: So, the story behind the giant megacolon, and I'm particularly fascinated with this because one of the first surgeries I personally encountered as a medical student was the removal of a giant megacolon.

Justin: I'm not sure how the story of the giant megacolon ends. But I'm betting it starts at Applebee's.

[audience cheers]

Sydnee: [laughs] I don't think there was an Applebee's back then.

Justin: Ye Olde, you know, whatever.

[audience laughs]

Justin: Theodore Geraldo Ignatius Fridays or whatever. That SNL...

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: So, [laughs]

Justin: Applebee's started somewhere, Sydnee. They did have them in olden times somewhere. There may not have been as many of them, I'll grant you.

Sydnee: [laughs] So, the original owner—

Justin: Did they have Golden Corral back then?

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: I hope not.

Justin: Man, I'm just eliminating potential sponsors left and right here, huh?

Sydnee: [laughs] So, the original owner of the giant megacolon before it, uh, you know, came to live in the Mütter Museum, had a condition called Hirschsprung's Disease, which is when you don't have proper nerves to part of your colon and so things don't get moved along, kinda like pushed along like they're supposed to. And stool can just sit in your colon and you don't have a bowel movement, so it just keeps collecting there, and the colon continues to distend and get larger and larger. And with that, your belly gets larger and larger and it's painful and you can't go to the bathroom. You okay?

Justin: I'm fine.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: And you can see, the colon itself is impressive. If you look for pictures of this patient, which I did—

Justin: How's your day going? Pretty good, huh?

[laughs]

Sydnee: It's incredible.

Justin: Free time to kill.

Sydnee: So, he had— he was born with this condition. From pretty early on he had problems with constipation. It got really bad as he got older. As a teenager, he was having, like, a bowel movement every month, about on average.

[audience groans]

Sydnee: So, as you can imagine, pretty miserable.

Justin: You'd get a lot done.

[audience laughs]

Justin: I'm into that biohacking lifestyle Sydnee, I love that.

[audience laughs]

Justin: Maximize your time. Tim Ferriss's The One-hour Monthly Doody.

Sydnee: He used to show himself at like, um, like dime stores and things as The Balloon Man, because his stomach was so enlarged. But eventually he succumbed to the disease at 29 and his colon, after he died—

Justin: Just having some fun here, Syd. Just trying to have a few laughs at the expense of this poor gentlemen, you gotta make him beef it before his 30s, thank you. I feel bad, I'm the bad guy, sorry. I didn't get to my Mr. Creosote jokes that I wanted to, but I...

[audience laughs]

Justin: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Sydnee: His colon is in a museum. I don't think this is surprising. I think we knew where this was headed. But it was full of—

Justin: That's true, I did not think that fool was still wandering around like, "I feel great! Why didn't I think of this years ago? I should have just put it in a museum!"

[audience laughs]

Justin: "I don't want it, they can have it! Perfect!"

Sydnee: So, it was full of 40 pounds of feces.

[audience groans]

Sydnee: And the largest part of it is 30 inches in diameter. That's a very large colon. It is not currently filled with feces, I had to look at that. I was like, "What is... what's in there now?" It's just stuffed to keep its shape. But you can see the toxic megacolon— or the giant megacolon, if you want to. Or if you don't want to.

Justin: Yeah, it's kind of way out in the middle, so you kinda have to.
[laughs]

Sydnee: Yeah, you kinda have to. Well, I made like a special, we almost went past it quickly and I was like, "Wait, hold on. I gotta get a closer look. I've heard about this."

Justin: "Give me a moment."

Sydnee: One thing we didn't get to see but I had heard about were the anthropodermic books. Now, that means books that were bound with human skin.

[audience groans]

Sydnee: Which do exist in the library at the museum, but you don't get to see them. I heard about— Gillian was telling us about the library. They have this amazing library with just tons of old, very old medical texts that, *oh*, I wanna see.

And she said, like, the floors are made of glass because light is good for books. I gotta see this library. I just want a peek at it! But among their collection are five books that are bound in human skin. Three of them all came from the same person.

[audience member cheers]

Sydnee: Who's excited about this? [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Justin: "Heck yeah! Bound 'em in human skin, do it!"

Sydnee: And it's this weird story about the— there's this weird story about the woman and the doctor who collected this skin. So, her name was Mary Lynch, she was a poor Irish woman who came to Philadelphia General Hospital, which was known as Old Blockley at the time. And this was in July of 1868, and she had tuberculosis, that's why she was there. She was ill and it was a very hot summer and she was there for a while.

And her family, meaning well, started bringing her extra food to help with her recovery while she was there, in addition to what she was getting at the hospital. And specifically, they brought her a lot of, like, pork and bologna, and like I said, it was a very hot summer. And from this food she was eating while she was in the hospital for tuberculosis, she ended up getting trichinella, which is a parasitic infection that you can get from

pigs, and the larva, after they get into your bloodstream, they can get cysts all through your muscles. And so, what eventually happened, the sad story is that she eventually died of the trichinella—

Justin: And time! Wow, Syd.

[audience laughs]

Justin: Three minutes. It's a record.

Sydnee: Again, I already said her skin is used to make books.

[audience laughs]

Justin: I get haircuts, I'm fine.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: So, this is what's weird. There was a doctor, Dr John Hough, who was working on the ward, he wasn't actually her doctor, but he had a special interest in trichinella, so when she got it he wanted to study her and, like, be involved in her case.

After she died, he was the one who performed her autopsy and published the results because she had a lot of larval cysts throughout her muscles. But he also took a piece of skin from her thigh and tanned it. In the basement of the hospital, in a toilet.

[audience laughs and groans]

Sydnee: And, I mean, at the time this would have taken two to four weeks of tanning to do this, assuming that he was using similar procedures that you would do with animal skin, I guess. He could have been using urine, you can use that for tanning. And here's the thing: I don't know why! I have no answer for you as to why he did this!

Justin: I was watching Sydnee research this last night and she just kept looking more and more horrified and I said, "What's wrong, sweetie?" and she's like scrolling, and she said, "I'm just trying to get to the part with *why*."

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: Cause he kept this for almost 20 years. This piece of tanned skin. And then he bound three books in it. And then, after he published them, after he released these books—

Justin: 50 Shades of Grey, obviously.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: He wrote in it that it was bound in her skin. So it wasn't a secret. He didn't hide it! He was like, "And thank you so much, Mary Lynch, for your skin, which is of course used to bind these books."

So, they're there. You can't see them, but oh my— and if anybody ever figures out why, I'd love to know why. I don't know why.

Justin: Just, yeah. Get at us.

Sydnee: Um, [laughs] just a couple things to mention, because I know we're running low on time, aren't we?

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Okay. A couple things that are very popular at the museum, you shouldn't miss. There are slides of Einstein's brain there that you can see. Little microscope slides, sections of his brain. Which is interesting because the pathologist, of course, who did his autopsy, Dr Thomas Harvey, had actually stolen the brain.

Justin: Creep.

Sydnee: Did not have the family's permission to do that. And kept it in a cedar box under a beer cooler next to his bed for years, until finally he got permission? Somehow? Hmm. Again, mm.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: And after he "got permission," he created a bunch of slides, and some of those slides you can now see in the museum. So that's a really, not a popular fainting spot, just a popular spot.

You can see, we've done a whole episode before on the conjoined twins Chang and Eng. You know, famously joined at the side and despite that they still went on to, like, live full lives, get married, have a ton of kids.

You can see their liver there. Their preserved liver. And the teeny little band of tissue that was all that connected them, that now we could do surgery to correct but back then we couldn't. But you can see the teeny little band of tissue that connected them, and that was really neat to see. And then you can also see recent donations like jars of skin, skin pickings that have been donated very recently.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] In 2009.

Justin: I'm fine.

Sydnee: A 23-year-old woman sent them to the museum. Which is— and the interesting thing about this is she has a condition called dermatillomania where she compulsively picks her skin. And she collected it all and sent it to the museum.

And I think it's— I know, I know, but bear with me. I think this is very cool. Gillian was saying they were debating, "Should we include this? Is this something that fits here? Does this fit what the museum is?" And it's really neat, because their rationale is that this is a physical manifestation of a psychiatric illness, and that's important for us to see to remind us that even though we can't always see psychiatric illness, it is a medical condition and that it should not be stigmatized and treated different than we treat all other medical conditions.

[audience cheers and applauds]

Sydnee: And so, that's the rationale. Which I think, actually, I mean, it brought it home. I know for me, looking at it, and you see this jar of skin and you think, "Ah, that would hurt so much," I think that visceral reaction is important. So, I thought that was a really interesting newer addition.

And if you wanna go, which if you haven't, I mean, if you live here you've probably already been. But if you haven't been, please go. It's open 10 to 5 every day. They have over 20,000 pieces. They're not all on display at once, but they rotate in and out. A lot of these things I've talked about are permanent exhibits, so you can see these any time you go. Right now, there's the Civil War medicine exhibit that Justin traumatized our daughter with. [laughs]

Justin: Mm hmm. Very cool. Saw a little bit of, got a little sneak peek of that.

Sydnee: And they have cool, like, art exhibits, too. There's one right now called connective tissue which is done by an artist, Lisa Nilsson, who has done this paper quilling and turned it into these anatomical sections. It's incredible. Like, the detail in these, it's amazing. I don't know— it's amazing.

And then they do all kinds of, like I said, lectures and research and outreach programs, things like the History of Vaccines program and they do, like, STEM initiatives for LGBTQ youth, and they're involved in a lot of wonderful, like, public health and outreach programs beyond just, "Come to our museum and look at, you know, some interesting things" Oh, last fainting spot, I didn't mention.

Justin: Yep.

Sydnee: There's the wax eye wall. It's a wall of— they're wax, they're not real, but I mean, you can, they're still— they're pretty good. They're real, [laughs] they're pretty good. But they're a bunch of eye disorders. So, there's your three fainting spots, if you go.

Justin: Don't miss them. Do you guys like podcasts?

[audience cheers]

Justin: There's a lot more— first off, let me say thank you to the Philadelphia Podcast Festival for having us here, it's beautiful and fun, and this is a beautiful theatre.

[audience cheers]

Justin: You got such a wonderful city here and we've had such a nice time. If you wanna see more shows, at 3:30 you can see By the Book in the balcony bar, here. Just go watch them. 5pm, Call Your Girlfriend is gonna be here. 6:30 we got TV Guidance Counsellor at the balcony bar again, and then at 8pm our dear friends The Flophouse are gonna be right here for you to enjoy.

[audience cheers]

Justin: And then Friday, July 21st, another Max Fun favorite, We Got This with Mark and Hal. You can get more information at the PhillyPodFest.com. So, come see all those great shows and support them.

Thank you to the podcast festival for having us here, thank you to The Taxpayers for the use of our song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. And thanks to the Maximum Fun network, home to a lot of great podcasts, which you can go and enjoy at MaximumFun.org. But for now, and until next time, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[audience cheers]

[theme music plays]

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