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(ADVERTISEMENT)

Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

Music: “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. In 1987, Marlee Matlin got her first movie role. She was barely 20 years old. She'd been doing mostly community theatre before that. And the role that she got wasn't just any role. It was the lead part in a big Hollywood drama, *Children of a Lesser God*, in which she starred opposite William Hurt. And *Children of a Lesser God* wasn't just any big Hollywood drama either. The movie was nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and for Matlin's part, Best Lead Actress. And when the 1987 Oscars rolled around, Marlee Matlin won. It made her the youngest winner in the history of the Best Actress category and the first deaf person to win an Academy Award. Here she is giving her acceptance speech with help from her ASL interpreter, Jack Jason.

Clip:

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jack Jason (*speaking as Marlee*): I just want to thank a lot of people. (*Unclear.*) To tell you the truth, I didn't prepare for this speech. But I definitely want to thank the Academy and its members. And I wanna thank my mother and father, Eric, Mark, Gloria, Zachary, and Liz. They're here tonight with me. And I just want to thank all of you. I love you.

(*Applause.*)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: When a story like that happens in show business—an overnight success story—it's not uncommon for that success to just sort of fizzle out. Plenty of young promising stars recede from the limelight. Marlee Matlin, though, was in it for life. She's appeared in dozens of television shows: *Seinfeld*, *Law & Order SVU*, *The West Wing*. In 2021, she was nominated again for an Oscar, this time for her supporting part in the Best Picture winning film *CODA*.

Earlier this year, Matlin was the subject of the documentary *Marlee Matlin: Not Alone Anymore*. The film chronicles her life and career, her brilliant work as a performer, her efforts to make movies and TV more inclusive for the deaf, and her own struggles with substance abuse and addiction. So thrilled to welcome Marlee on the show, along with her interpreter, Jack, who's been working with her for literal decades. Let's get right into it.

Transition: Bright, chiming synth.

Jesse Thorn: Marlee Matlin, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

Jack (as Marlee): I am thrilled to play.

(Jesse laughs.)

Jesse Thorn: I know that you wrote an autobiography. Why did you wanna tell your story on camera, as well?

Jack (as Marlee): I wrote the book because I was ready to tell my story, talk about things that I experienced, and just for several reasons. But then American Masters approached me and said, "We'd like to do a story about you on film." And I thought, okay, well that's admirable. Because I wrote a book, but that was in print. In film, it would be more visual. And so, I took the opportunity. And then actually I said at the time, "On one condition. It has to be directed by a deaf woman." And the rest, of course, is history.

Jesse Thorn: Why did you want that condition?

Jack (as Marlee): I requested a deaf woman, because this really was—I mean, for me, to be able to share my story was more impactful, to the point where everyone would be looking at and analyzing and scrutinizing everything and every detail as I told my story. And a deaf woman who would be directing would have a great—would have a better understanding of what I'm talking about. Because actually, it's about a deaf experience and a woman's experience. A deaf woman's experience! And Shoshannah is a good friend of mine, and that helped a great deal.

And this was—I mean, I felt that she would do this film justice, my story, by using a deaf woman. Simple as that.

Jesse Thorn: I would imagine also that part of the appeal is that you live your life carrying the burden of explaining yourself to people. And to have somebody on the other side of the camera to whom you didn't have to explain certain things would just make the process of being open-hearted a lot easier.

[00:05:00]

Jack (as Marlee): Exactly. And I agree with what you just said. In all honesty, I didn't know what her vision was gonna be for the film. I didn't even ask her. All I asked for was for her to

direct and for her to take the reins to make the film as authentic as it could be. I walked in not knowing what the setup was gonna be, not knowing what or how things would go. No prior questions, no heads up. Nothing to really prepare me for the interview.

But naturally, having done all these interviews for years and years with people like yourself, I'm always mentally prepared—obviously—to answer questions, ready for whatever you throw my way through an interpreter who is speaking for me. But in this case—

I mean, I don't wanna say risk. That's the wrong word. But just to kind of go with the flow, not knowing exactly what the interpreter would say, what words they would use as they were translating for me? I trust them, naturally. But when I walked in here, I saw all the lighting set up. I saw the cameras. But there was no frame like I've been used to—you know, like one single frame. And I thought, okay, well I'm not gonna say anything about that.

And so, then Shoshannah said, “Look, let's just sit down on the couch.”

And so, I sat on the couch. And the DP said, “Are you ready?”

And I thought, (*uncertainly*) oookay.

He had a monitor to see me, to see what I look like. And I always ask that I not see the monitor. And again, I still didn't know what the setup was going—I didn't know what was going on. And Shoshannah had her folder. And I thought, okay, fine; she has her questions there.

But when we— You know, typically as deaf people, we tend to have a conversation. It's not necessarily, you know, a step-by-step question and answer. Or I mean, we typically follow each other. And we went—questions everywhere. We just sort of free associated. And I realized, oh, okay, this is not your typical interview that I've been accustomed to, that people are accustomed to doing with me. It was a conversation.

And that was probably the best thing she could have done in how to proceed with this documentary. As for the lighting and all that, that was part of this sort of—“Oh, okay. I get it.” And I'm so glad that I wore cute socks.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

Because I had no idea that my socks were gonna be on camera. I had no idea!

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughing.*) I was about to ask about that.

Oh, one of the things— So, there's a moment in the film where it is archival footage of you on *Nightline*. And it's when Gallaudet University students were asking for a deaf president of the university.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Clip:

Speaker: I believe very strongly that a deaf individual one day will not only be the president of Gallaudet—

Jack (as Marlee): (Interrupting) Why not now? Why not now?! Look at me! Look at me!

Speaker: I'm having a very hard—

Interpreter (as Greg): No, that's old news. I'm tired of that statement. “One day,” again and again, “Someday, a deaf person—” We've gotta break this cycle.

Jack (as Marlee): It is. Again and again. It's old news. And come on!

Interpreter (as Greg): The past presidents have always said that. “Someday.”

Ted Koppel: (Interrupting.) Folks, I'll tell you what. We have something approaching anarchy here. Because even while the two of you are talking at the same time—which makes it very difficult—we are also hearing the voice of a man speaking for a woman and the voice of a woman speaking for a man. Have a little bit of compassion for the viewer who's trying to keep up with who's speaking.

Jack (as Marlee): Okay, okay.

Ted Koppel: And I'm going to have to insist that you do it one at a time. Now, Greg, you had a point you wanted to make. Go ahead.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Jack (as Marlee): Ted Koppel says, “Sorry, sorry, sorry, I have to cut this off. This is chaos.” Because there's two students, and one of them is you—or two young people—and you're talking over each other. And the interpreters are speaking for each of you, and they're talking over each other. But as you say, that when deaf people have a conversation, it's not rigid in that way.

Jack (as Marlee): It's not question, answer, question— It's very free form. But in this particular case, it was the heat of the moment where we really got into it. We were talking about—we were wanting our voices to be heard. Because we knew we were on national television. We're talking to Ted Koppel. How many people were watching *Nightline* at that time?

And I understood the importance of that. I understood the opportunity to be able to express our voices, to take advantage of the moment to be heard. And so, I was quite surprised when they asked me to hop on board, because I wasn't quite sure who asked for my presence. It's probably the folks at ABC, at *Nightline*.

So, just because I had just recently won the Oscar, because I had the benefit—or I had the benefit and the spotlight in the media, and the fact that I was deaf person who was supportive of the cause to have a deaf president.

[00:10:00]

I wasn't a student at Gallaudet. I never went to Gallaudet. I wasn't at the protests; I wasn't at the march. But I was one of so many, many people who supported the idea that it was time for Gallaudet to appoint a deaf president. Because for 125 years, they had hearing presidents. There was no representation in that office. So, when *Nightline* asked me to hop on board, and I said, "Of course, on behalf of Gallaudet students," it was about the principle of having a deaf president. It was a no-brainer for me to do it.

(*Chuckling.*) And as we were having this interview and having this conversation, I was getting really annoyed and angry because of the situation itself, how the deaf students were being manipulated. And I wasn't even thinking about the interpreters, because I knew that we were in good hands with our interpreters, that they would interpret whatever I was signing.

And yeah, it was almost like a comedy. You know? For those who didn't know sign language, for those who didn't know the situation. Ted Koppel couldn't handle it. (*Laughs.*)

And yet, that's authentic. That's how we communicate. With passion. And we know that the result was. We got what we wanted.

Jesse Thorn: It also occurred to me watching it as a hearing person that—and someone who doesn't speak ASL—that communication in ASL is different in fundamental structural ways. And I thought, "Yeah, I guess crosstalk is different in ASL than it is in spoken language."

Jack (as Marlee): Yeah, I mean, you can see the emotion. You can see our facial expressions. You can really experience how we speak up. It's almost like you can understand us with the benefit of the interpreters, because you can understand what's going on. You can understand the subject of the interview by watching us. I was really young too at the time.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

I might have handled it a little differently today, but yeah. I don't regret what I said, what we did at that time on that show.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, being young was part of the point, right?

Jack (as Marlee): Exactly. And just like, who cares? Let's just go for it. I knew I couldn't swear on ABC, but that's as far as I went.

(Jesse laughs.)

I'm glad I didn't.

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughing.)* Have you ever sworn in ASL on television?

Jack (as Marlee): Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I just did on—I posted on my social media last week about when I taught Stephen Colbert. I did the F word, and I taught him how to say it in sign language. And they bleeped my hands. It's the first time I ever said that on television, on a talk show, and I was so excited. I might have sworn on *Arsenio Hall* perhaps, but again, they blurred my hands. But this was so clear for the entire audience. They knew exactly what I was saying in sign language, and yet they still blurred my hands. That felt good.

Jesse Thorn: I like the idea that they have to have somebody in standards and practices who has enough ASL to know which hand movements to blur. *(Laughs.)*

Jack (as Marlee): I mean, it's so obvious to sign.

(Jesse laughs.)

It's so obvious. And when people tell me they don't know American Sign Language or anything, or any sign language—because you know, there's over 300 signed languages in the world. 300. Sign language isn't international. But yet, people wanna know. People say, “I'm so sorry, I don't know sign language or ASL.”

And I say, “That's okay. Do you wanna learn something?”

And they said, “Sure.”

And usually, I always teach them the cuss words, because it's more exciting and more fun for that. And I realize cuss words is not for everyone. *(Chuckles.)* Not everyone wants to—I mean, I have to analyze the person who I'm talking to to make sure that they won't get offended.

Jesse Thorn: When you were a teenager—and I'm talking about a younger teenager—I know that you wanted to be an actor. Did you think about what that meant, functionally?

Jack (as Marlee): No. No, not whatsoever. I always wanted to be an actress since I was seven, and performing songs and sign language and performing plays at the Center on Deafness in Illinois, in Chicago, I remember feeling so connected with acting and signing songs. I remember feeling how that made me feel.

It was freeing for me. It was something about the experience that I truly realized, “This is something I wanna do when I become an adult.”

And then I met Henry Winkler. And that's when I realized, “Oh. It's a real job.” And that Hollywood is the place to experience that job.

[00:15:00]

But I didn't realize the hardship, all the things that go with putting up with whatever you have to do to become an actor, how much you have to fight to get a job or to be seen. And that's why my mom, bless her heart, took Henry aside and said, “Look, please tell Marlee that even though she's wonderful actress, is it possible Henry— You know, she couldn't get into Hollywood. Could you please tell her to push those dreams aside and go to college instead? Figure out something else to do?”

And Henry said, as he said in the documentary, “You're talking to the wrong guy.”

Because Henry knew what it was like to not be believed in and always criticized and always put down. This is Henry's experience growing up. So, he said no to my mother. “I'm not gonna tell her that.” Instead, he told me I could be whatever I wanted to be, as long as I believed in my heart.

Jesse Thorn: We've got even more with Marlee Matlin still to come. After a quick break, what if every time you wanted to say something at work, someone else had to speak for you? It's a vulnerable position. Marlee Matlin has been working with her interpreter, Jack, for nearly 40 years. They'll talk about the kind of trust that requires when we come back. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

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Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is actor and activist, Marlee Matlin. She's the subject of the new documentary *Marlee Matlin: Not Alone Anymore*.

When you auditioned for your first movie role, which was also the film for which you won an Oscar, one of the things that you say in the film is that you didn't know how casting worked.

Jack (as Marlee): No. I had no idea what the whole process entailed. I was doing the play *Children of Lesser God* in Chicago in a small, independent theatre. And I heard about the movie in little bits and pieces here, because I was just out of high school. And I wasn't in the know when it came to the deaf community outside of my community in Chicago. There was no social media back then.

So, then I heard about the movie, and I was like, “Oh, okay, whatever.” Because I wanted to be a cop. At that time, I wanted to be a cop.

Jesse Thorn: For reals?

Jack (as Marlee): Yeah. Then I did audition—you know—of course, when I was a kid at the Center on Deafness for different plays, but casting for a film was a different deal. So—I mean, it's a different ball game. I was doing auditions for real, to be a movie star.

So, they flew me to New York to meet with Randa Haines and William Hurt. And I recognized him immediately from the movie *Altered States*. And I was a fan. But I remember saying to myself, “Just do what they're asking you to do.” Because I've always had a good rapport or a good relationship with directors growing up, so I knew how to work with them. Pretty much.

But the process was just—I mean, it was heavy. Because they had to fly me here to LA after New York. And there in LA I was doing a screen test with full makeup, wardrobe, and sets in an actual studio in Culver City. Me and this other woman, the two of us were auditioning for the same part. She was here first for a week, then I came in for a week to rehearse with an acting coach. Then it was my turn to film. We filmed three scenes from the film. And then the next thing I knew, I went back home.

Well, actually. The day I found out I got the role, I was talking with my agent through what's called a TDD—a teletype writer we used to use back in the day for deaf people to communicate. Nobody uses them anymore.

The agent said, “Okay, Marlee, would you do a nude scene?”

And I said, “I'm an actor.” Just like that.

She said, “I'll call you back.” Two minutes later, she called me back. She says, “You got the role, congratulations.”

I was like— And then I looked over to the doorway, and there was my mother standing there with—standing in the doorway with her phonebook in her hand, ready to call everybody.

Transition:

Clip:

James (*Children of a Lesser God*): This sign. To connect. Simple. But it means so much more when I do this.

[00:20:00]

Now it means to be joined in a relationship. Separate but one. That's what I want. But you think for me, think for Sarah, as though there were no I. She will be with me. Quit

her job, learn how to play poker, leave Orin's party, learn how to speak. That's all you, not me. Until you let me be the way you are, you can never come inside my silence and know me.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jack (as Marlee): I think if I would do this all over again, in terms of auditions, I probably wouldn't have been able to sleep. Because back then I didn't know what it entailed. So, this whole being unaware really helped. It was really one hell of an experience for sure.
(Chuckles.)

Jesse Thorn: Did you feel as confident as you just presented to me about being nude on camera?

Marlee Matlin: Think.

Jack (as Marlee): I think I had a better body then. I wanna say I had a better body then.

(They laugh.)

Marlee Matlin: Before kids.

Jack (as Marlee): Before I bore four kids.

Marlee Matlin: They ruined it!

(Jesse laughs.)

Jack (as Marlee): They ruined it.

Marlee Matlin: No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

Jack (as Marlee): At the time, I was okay with it, because I knew that it was part of the story. I didn't know— If you asked me now, it would be hell no. But back then— There's a particular scene in the pool. Well, I must say that Randa Haines, who directed the film, was so mindful, so protective of me during my nude scenes—as well as William Hurt, as well. There were only three people in the pool scene when we shot that, maybe. And I will say, I'm talking about the crew members. Plus the director, so four people. The director, the DP—the director of photography, the cameraman, and the boom—the sound guy. And the water was 90 degrees. And the wardrobe folks were so helpful, ready to give me the bathrobe when I needed it, and then they left.

But there's one story that I always laugh about. I was directed to jump over the camera that was already underneath the water. So, it was me diving into the pool, and the camera was

facing away from me, the opposite of where I was jumping over. So, I was a very good swimmer. I'm a very good swimmer. So, I jumped over and went down under, and the camera was shooting behind me. But then, in order to swim away, obviously you have to use your legs. So, I used my legs. Like a frog kick. And the camera was right there.

And so, I did two takes. And the DP came up to me—just between the two of us; there was no interpreter there—and said, “Uh, Marlee, you're such a beautiful swimmer. You made a perfect dive. You hit your marks every time. Let's do one more, but if you don't mind, try to keep your legs together.”

(Jesse cackles.)

Marlee Matlin: I was mortified! I went *(gasps)*, but he was very, um... professional.

Jack (as Marlee): I really then kept my lace together for the rest of the takes.

Marlee Matlin: Talk about bare *(unclear)*.

Jesse Thorn: Your interpreter, Jack, who's sitting next to me now, who's worked—*(laughs)* worked with you for decades and decades now—

Marlee Matlin: Four decades.

Jesse Thorn: Four decades. And I wonder—even with someone who is fluent in spoken English and ASL, even with someone who is your business partner in addition to being your translator, even with someone that you've known for 40 years, if there are things that can be expressed in ASL that you don't know whether they can be effectively expressed in spoken English?

Jack (as Marlee): Well, I'm accustomed to Jack. His sign style. But I can tell you that when I first met him for the first time—

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—I was pretty much shocked at how he signed. Because I signed what's called—it's called Signed Exact English, what we abbreviate as SEE. Because I signed English in sign language, in English word order. Whereas when I met Jack he—whose parents were deaf; he's a coda—he signed his first language before he spoke. So, he learned how to speak through *I Love Lucy*, by the way, just to give you an idea of what Jack had learned.

So, Jack signed in ASL, American Sign Language, that I had never really seen before like that. The style, the speed, the fluency, the clarity that made much more sense to me as a signed language than English. And that's when I learned American Sign Language. And it really captivated me, because it was so beautiful. And meeting his parents as well, who were also deaf. I had two or three friends—maybe three friends who had deaf parents that I grew up with, but I really didn't pay attention much. I remember thinking, “Oh, okay. They're

lucky they can talk to their parents so easily in sign language. There's no barriers there. They're not hearing, like my parents.”

So, working together, we hit it off. And to this day, sometimes I criticize his signs, because I learned so much, but then that's okay. We have a good working relationship, and we get each other. Should I keep on going? I mean, Jack is very handsome. Jack is very good-looking. He's so wonderful. He loves hearing himself say that, so.

(They laugh.)

But yeah. It's unusual to have that kind of professional working relationship between a deaf person and a coda, actually. And he also runs my production company as well. A lot of people at first are like, “Wait a minute. Oh, okay. Jack is his own personal— You have your own personal interpreter. You have Jack running your production company, your business. He gets you jobs. Oh, okay. Jack is your gatekeeper,” all that stuff that comes with being somebody's designated interpreter. And it may be the case, understandably so.

But 40 years is a long time, and I really cherish our friendship and our working relationship as well.

Jack's gonna get a drink of water.

Marlee Matlin: Oh, god!

(They laugh.)

No water for you!

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: I mean, it's an unusually intimate relationship. It's a really distinctive relationship.

Marlee Matlin: Intimate.

Jack (as Marlee): Intimate?

Jesse Thorn: Intimate.

Jack Jason: In a—in a language—

Jesse Thorn: Not in a romantic sense.

Jack Jason: Not romantic sense. In a language—not in a romantic sense, no, no, no, no. But—this is Jack speaking now. I mean, we're like family. I mean, 40 years? There are some

relationships in Hollywood that have lasted that long. Barbra Streisand and her manager have been together for 50 or 60 years, something like that. There are examples of it. It's just not in this case, with an interpreter and a deaf person. That's all. But they happen sometimes in Hollywood. They're out there.

Jesse Thorn: But it's also true just in life. I mean, I mentioned to the two of you before we went on that my dad's best friend had a disability and needed aid. And the relationship that I saw as a kid between him and his aides depended on who it was, obviously.

(Marlee agrees.)

Jack (as Marlee): Yeah, and it's about trust. It's about trust. And I guess I trusted— I have trust issues myself, but... I still do. But yet, I depend on Jack to make my communication fluent, smooth. And he gets me, most times.

Jesse Thorn: What's an example of a time that he flubbed it?

Jack Jason: It's in the documentary. It's one of the documentary— I misspoke when she won her Oscar, afterwards in an interview. Shoshannah actually corrects me. Which is great.

Jesse Thorn: In the caption.

Jack Jason: You can't help when you're—when she's—Marlee—this is Jack speaking again. Marlee speaks so fast in sign language, and I have to keep up. And I'm thinking, “What am I gonna say? How am I gonna say it?” How to make it sound natural and fluent. I don't wanna sound like a UN interpreter where I (*staccato and flat*) talk. Like. This. I wanna make her sound natural. And sometimes you trip over your thoughts, and I get the wrong—

Marlee Matlin: Sometimes?

Jack Jason: Not all the time!

(They chuckle.)

But sometimes you trip over your thoughts, and you have to— You know. And she catches me, because she's a good lip reader, and she can hear me too. So, sometimes we're on stage, and she goes, “I didn't mean that word.”

[00:30:00]

And then that becomes— Then we turn it into a standup routine. It's almost funny. So, that's all. We're experts at that, of how to make a bad situation a good and funny situation. So, yeah. Enough with me. Go on and talk to her. Don't talk to me anymore.

Jesse Thorn: When you two are around people who don't use ASL, do you talk mess?

Marlee Matlin: Well...

Jack (as Marlee): We used to be able to do that before social media came around.

(Jesse laughs.)

Because now every—I mean, we'll talk. I mean, we talk crap about people, or we'll even, you know, say positive things about people, and we can get away with it. But yet, these days everybody knows sign language, so I can't do it anymore! *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: I think there's a fascination with people who have typical hearing with ASL, with lip reading. I mean, speaking of social media, lip read videos are one of the most popular forms of social media.

(Marlee agrees.)

And it's basically because it's like looking in on a secret.

Marlee Matlin: Right.

Jack (as Marlee): Right. before social media, I would get phone calls from news organizations or studios asking me if I could read the lips of this person that they're filming, or something of that sort. But now there are so many people. There are professional lip readers. There are lip reader experts that are out there. It's funny to watch. I am getting Jack's water. I need water now myself.

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: When you were a young adult—19/20/21 years old—there were so many things going on in your life at the same time.

Marlee Matlin: Right.

Jack (as Marlee): You weren't just a 20-year-old winning an Oscar. You were also learning to be a representative of the deaf community in a way that is really hard for a 20-year-old to figure out, I'm sure. You were in a romantic relationship with your much older costar in the film, who became abusive. You were using. It was about 75% more things at the same time than most people have to deal with at any point in their life.

Jack (as Marlee): In all honesty, I wasn't even aware of the—all that happening simultaneously. I wasn't stressed out about it, because I—that's how immature I was. I was so naive at the time. I had things come my way that I had never experienced before, and I dealt with it. I made the decision to get sober. I made the decision to go to rehab. No one wanted me to go. None of my family members—not even Jack—only because I had a movie coming out. And people thought, “Well, okay, this—” These other people in my life thought, “Wait a minute, wait. Time out here. You just did a movie. Don't jeopardize your career.”

“Don't jeopardize what?” I said. “You don't mind that I'm jeopardizing my own life over my career that I just started?” I wanted to live. And I didn't listen to them, obviously. So, I just went. I put myself. Walked into rehab with two counselors standing outside, waiting for me, to hold my hands. And that was the best freaking decision I ever did for myself. The best gift I ever gave myself. Because now what do I have? I have 38 years of sobriety and clarity. And the fact that I'm able to manage things in my life the best way that I can.

If I knew myself, if I hadn't gotten sober, I wouldn't be sitting here with you today. It's a gift. And I was fortunate to be able to give it to myself and to maintain it on a daily basis. And that's why I have a tattoo here that says, “one day at a time” on my right arm, and I still look at it every day. I need to look at it every day to be able to keep me going, to keep me sober.

But yeah. *(Laughing.)* So much crap was going on in those two and a half years! And I'm thinking, “Wow. Is that what it's like to be an adult? Making decisions for yourself, looking for support from everybody, taking some of the support, not accepting the other support?” But that's part of what you call growing up. And in terms of being the quote/unquote “representative for the deaf community,” I had no idea whether there was such a thing. I didn't understand what that entailed really. I was a kid! Leave me alone! I just made one movie! *(Chuckles.)*

[00:35:00]

Let me be the person to enjoy the film, to enjoy the experience. All the love that was given to me by people in Hollywood and people outside of Hollywood. It was a lot of learning. I didn't have any plan in mind. What I was gonna do next, what I was gonna— I mean, is this good for me? Will this make me happy? Will this do me good, bad? I didn't think about that often. I was a risk taker. Call me crazy, but at the time I didn't think it was crazy. I didn't think it was crazy. Looking back now, I don't think it was crazy.

Jesse Thorn: Hearing you describe bringing yourself to rehab—both here in front of me and in the film—I'm reminded of this moment in the film where you revealed to the director that you got there, and they weren't just unprepared to offer you translation; they were unwilling to. And to think when you need the most support of any time in your life, to go in there and trust them to take care of you as you fight with addiction?

Jack (as Marlee): But you have to understand, I didn't let them win. I wouldn't leave. Because I knew what I needed, and that was the best place for me to be, to get rehabbed. Because I didn't know of anything else. I mean, I'd never heard the word rehabilitation before until William Hurt mentioned it to me.

“I'm going to rehab,” he said. The day after Christmas, he told me. “I'm going to Palm Springs.”

I said, “For what?”

“To go into rehab.”

I said, “What's rehab?”

“To get better with my drinking.”

And I said, “Oh, alright.”

And then that's when I thought, “Okay, two things. Things will be much better between the two of us, because it'll make him stop drinking. And two, is this something that I need help with?” But I thought, “Nah, no, it's okay,” until I got there—what they call family week. And then I realized, “Oh, okay, I need help too.” And if he didn't go to rehab, I wouldn't have been sober, and I would not be sober today. So, I thank him for that.

Jesse Thorn: How did you find peace and stability in your life after that? How did you get to a place where you weren't just rushing forward headlong? Even rushing forward headlong through rehab and getting sober?

Jack (as Marlee): I worked my program right after I left. I had to do publicity for the movie I mean, I turned down world premieres—Japan with King Charles and Princess Diana. All these things, because I needed to go to rehab. And Paramount had no idea where I was—why I was doing what I was doing, why I was pulling out. You couldn't have gotten away with that today. And I was lucky enough that back then there was no TMZ or anyone with a cell phone. But right after I worked my AA and NA programs—Narcotics Anonymous—for five years straight. And then after that I felt somewhat settled. I felt I had grown up a bit, and then I met my husband. And he was the one who really grounded me.

I know it's because maybe he was a police officer, who knows? (*Chuckles.*) But it was my husband, his personality—where he was very even-keeled and fair and respectful—that I saw that in him, and I learned from that. And that's when I calmed down. Before that, I was all over the map. I was everywhere. Searching, trying to find my place, figuring out who I was.

But that's okay. That's alright. I mean, you're a young adult. You're learning, you're experiencing. You're figuring things out one way or another. And now I'm a mom of four, and my kids are 21 to 29 years old. And they're going through what I went through. Their experience, they're figuring it out. The support from Henry Winkler was incredible. He played a huge role in my life to the point where he and his wife invited me into their home right after I had ended my experience in rehab and William Hurt and provided me a place where I could chill for two years.

Jesse Thorn: You lived at their house for two years?

[00:40:00]

Jack (as Marlee): Yeah.

Marlee Matlin: So cool.

(They laugh.)

So cool. But.

Jack (as Marlee): But yeah, I was very grateful for that.

Jesse Thorn: Did you live over the garage?

Marlee Matlin: I lived—*(chuckles)* no, at the pool house.

Jack (as Marlee): I lived in the pool house. I had dinner almost every night with them. I had tea every night with Henry. We had conversations. So, I found ways to figure out myself, my place, where to go, what to do from Henry Winkler, from my sponsors, and a few other people in my life.

Jesse Thorn: We've gotta take a quick break. When we return, we will finish up with the legend Marlee Matlin. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

Promo:

Music: A playful, upbeat track.

Tom Lum: Hi, is this Archer?

Archer: Yes. Hello. Who is this?

Tom: Hi, this is Tom Lum from *Let's Learn Everything*. I'm calling about your Maximum Fun membership's extended warranty. Do you have a few seconds to talk about that?

Archer: Uh, I think I have to go.

Tom: No! Oh, no, no, no. Oh no, they're gonna be so mad at me.

Archer: Okay, fine.

Tom: Did you know that as a part of your MaxFun membership's extended warranty, you've even picked as the member of the month. Which is wild! And we're so excited to have you.

Archer: That's so exciting. Thank you!

Tom: So, as our member of the month, you will also be getting a \$25 gift card to the Maximum Fun store, a special member of the month bumper sticker, a special priority parking spot at MaxFun HQ in Los Angeles, California just for you. Also, I have to read... hold on. I have to read this.

It says, “We at Maximum Fun apologize; you ended up with the worst host of the three. And as consolation, you'll be getting those—” Wh-what? Why was—why is that included? I don't remember that being there for the other—

Archer: It's okay. I can settle. It's fine.

Tom: (*Cackles.*) Maximum members are the best.

Speaker: Become a MaxFun member now at MaximumFun.org/join.

(*Music ends.*)

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Marlee Matlin. Matlin is an actor and a deaf activist. She was the first deaf person to receive an Academy Award, an honor that she received for her lead role in *Children of a Lesser God*. She's also performed on the *West Wing* and in *CODA*, among many, many other movies and TV shows. Matlin is also the subject of the documentary *Marlee Matlin: Not Alone Anymore*. You can check it out in select theatres or buy or rent it digitally now. And if you'd like to check out this interview on video, you can. We'll have the whole conversation on our YouTube page with closed captioning. If somebody you know might enjoy it, please share it with them.

Anyway, let's get back into my conversation with her and her interpreter of over 30 years, Jack Jason.

I asked my friend, Moshe Kasher, who is a standup comedian and grew up with deaf parents—he has typical hearing—what I should ask you about. And the thing he said to me was, “Ask her—”

Marlee Matlin: (*Nervously.*) Oh, gosh.

(*They laugh.*)

Oh god.

Jesse Thorn: (*Chuckling.*) Nothing bad! No.

Marlee Matlin: I love that guy. I love him. I love him.

Jesse Thorn: Moshe would gladly ask you something transgressive.

Marlee Matlin: Oh my god.

Jesse Thorn: But it's not something transgressive.

(Marlee asks.)

He said, “Ask her how what is funny is different in spoken language and ASL—or to people with typical hearing and people who are hard of hearing.”

Jack (as Marlee): Deaf humor is what you see. Not what you hear. Not a play on words like you guys do. You learn about what you hear. You play with words you hear. You pick up lines. You overhear—

Marlee Matlin: Idioms.

Jack (as Marlee): Idioms. All that stuff that you can hear very quickly. We have to focus with our eyes. What we read, what we see. But we make fun of hearing people in good ways, if you wanna put it that way.

Jesse Thorn: What's funny about hearing people? I can take it.

Jack (as Marlee): How sometimes they're ignorant about who we are. But that's okay. We all make fun of each other anyway.

Jesse Thorn: You don't have to take care of me. *(Laughs.)*

Marlee Matlin: *(Doubtfully.)* Okay.

Jack (as Marlee): But yeah. I mean, I just love the experience of meeting people of all kinds. And sometimes I have friends who are hearing that forget I'm deaf, and they start talking to me. They like whisper in my ear. And I just look at them and I'm like, “Hellooo?”

(Jesse snorts a laugh.)

And then they try to—they feel bad about it and, “Oh gosh, I didn't think about it.”

Jack Jason: And this is Jack speaking. I watch Marlee and her friends, and they are very good mimics. And it's about—they'll copy the way people, their faces look. It's more unspoken humor, and it's not about words. You know, sometimes it's about signs, but it's about face and voices that they can imagine.

[00:45:00]

Whereas hearing people, it's all about words. You know, it's George Carlin talking about words and emotion.

Marlee Matlin: What they hear.

Jack Jason: What they hear, how they put words together. You know. And I think a lot of hearing people take their hearing for granted. But in deaf humor it's about how they portray themselves. It's all physical. And so, humor—yeah.

Jack (as Marlee): So, Marlee says a lot of hearing people get uncomfortable, because they think we look funny. Like, for example, when they see interpreters standing in emergencies, and the interpreters are expressing themselves—you know, breaking news items or whatever it may be—and they see interpreters who are so animated. And they make fun of them, because they think that's wrong or something like that. But that pisses me off, because that's part of what our language is. That's what our culture is. Who are they to think that they understand what we're signing in sign language and that we look funny? And to me, I find that very insulting, by the way.

Jesse Thorn: You, I'm sure, have talked about acting with a lot of other actors who are deaf.

Marlee Matlin: Mm-mm.

Jesse Thorn: No? Really?

Jack (as Marlee): Not enough. I haven't worked with deaf actors enough, to the point where I'm— You know, on every job that I've done it, there's not enough out there for me to have experienced— That's what I'm trying to do right now is to try to break this cycle of just hiring one deaf actor, maybe two deaf actors on a project—on a movie or a TV show—as if somehow we live in isolation. It's not typical. That's not how we live.

Like, *CODA*. I mean, that was a big change for me. Three deaf actors leading—carrying a film. Plus having interpreters on the set, plus having deaf background. Everyone was signing, everyone was working together, collaborating. So, I'm looking forward to more of that or having a film that has an entire deaf cast. They do that in the UK. They have a television series right now in the UK. I wanna be able to do that here in the United States. It's just the studios don't get it yet, that it's okay to make a film or a television show with a deaf cast.

There are so many deaf stories. There are so many stories that we can do, whether they're real stories or they're fictional stories, the same way that other underrepresented people are represented on screen.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that a deaf actor gains skills through using ASL that are helpful when you're acting in a situation where most of the audience can hear?

Jack (as Marlee): Well, look. Actors are actors, right? You have to be good at what you're doing. You have to be able to deliver whatever it is that's written on the page on the screen or on the stage, whether you're deaf or not. I mean, being deaf is an added advantage, because

you're expressing a look or whatever it is that the character lives. But we sign "happy", and we look happy. We sign "angry", and we look angry. So, it comes across in a different way. So, yeah. It's a bonus. It's a bonus to see a deaf actor.

And I want studios to see that. I want writers to see that. I want directors to see that and the people who make and have the power to make things happen see that.

Jesse Thorn: Being an actor necessitates immense amounts of rejection. The biggest part of the job is being able to try out for another job after you didn't get a job. (*Chuckles.*) You know? And give your heart to the second one the same as you gave it to the first one. And every time that you don't get a job, you have to—to some extent—answer to yourself the question, "Is it because I wasn't the right kind of good, or is it because I wasn't the right kind of person?"

Marlee Matlin: No.

Jesse Thorn: No?

Jack (as Marlee): In all honesty, when I'm working, I am delighted. But I'm very worried about what's next, as you just said. And I feel like deaf actors have much longer wait times until the next job than hearing ones do. So, it's the truth. I hear, "No, no, no, it's not true. Everyone is not working. Everyone is having a hard time."

And I'm saying, "No. Okay, fine. I respect that opinion, but it's more for us." Period. It's more for us. I do have a full plate of projects, but there's no green light on any of them. And I hear that's very typical of what Hollywood is all about.

[00:50:00]

I get it. But I think it's the fear in whoever it is that wants to make a movie or do a television show, whoever makes things happen—investors, for example, or studios thinking about box office. They're just afraid that we have to use a deaf actor. And we need to tell them, "Put that aside."

First of all, I'm never retiring, by the way. I'll never leave. Don't think I am. No matter what someone tell says to me. "Oh, you know, you're done, Marlee." Or, you know, "Let some other people take over your job, or let them lead their way, or let them take on—the new generation. Give them jobs. Let them have what you have had."

And I say, "(*Censor beep*) off." Because I work hard. And yes, it was like, "Whoa! I definitely got an Oscar. Wow! Yeah. That's amazing!" But I work hard for it. And I still am. And people think I have it easy, and I don't. I don't.

I may have a household and a name and recognition. "She's the deaf actress." And that's fine, but it doesn't mean that I have to sort of hang up my Marlee Matlin hat and let other people take over. I want everyone to work, and I wanna be part of that everyone, and I wanna continue to have the experiences that I have. But just like every—just like I did, everyone has

to work for it. And I want to work with deaf actors and hearing actors. I want more, just like we did in *CODA*. More.

Jesse Thorn: For a couple of reasons, subtitles and captions are more popular than they ever were. There is worldwide streaming of all kinds of entertainment that is leading people to consume a lot more media in languages that they don't speak. There's also things that aren't mixed for the stereos that people have at home that leads people to use captions even when they have typical hearing.

What's it like for you, as a person who had to dedicate a not insignificant portion of your life energy at one point to trying to get any captions on anything?

Jack (as Marlee): I know—I knew what the hell I was doing back then when I was making noise about having captions on all television and streaming and movie theaters and internet, whatever. I knew that it would benefit us as deaf people, but I also knew—but maybe I didn't realize the phenomenon that it would eventually become—that hearing people now rely on captions just like we do. And I wanna say: you're welcome.

I didn't invent captions, but I certainly was one of those people who fought to make sure that it was law and to have captions in all television. I just stood in front of a camera. I stood in front of the Senate and said, “Hey, look, this is a no-brainer.” And they approved it right on the spot. And you know, when I go on a plane, and I see people with their laptops watching movies—you know, no headphones, but they're watching with captions. Or maybe they might have them, but they're always captioned. I see people watching captions. I wanna say, “Are you enjoying captions, by the way?”

(Jesse cackles delightedly.)

“You're welcome, you're welcome. You're welcome, on behalf of the deaf community.”

I didn't realize how huge a phenomenon it would become. Captions— There's a company called Caption with Attention—a great company—that they use color, tone. For example, how a person speaks. They'll increase the size of the caption depending on the word. Like I said in my documentary, Shoshannah chose to put different colors for every person to identify who's speaking or who's signing. And I would like to see all movie theaters provide captions, all of them. Not just at 7AM or 1PM in the afternoon.

Jesse Thorn: One of my oldest buds is blind, and he went back to graduate school in his—I guess—late 30s to become a therapist to work with blind families. That is, families of blind children. And when I asked him about it, my assumption was that he was passionate about working with the kids. But in fact, he was passionate about working with their parents, because he had the experience of growing up with parents who were sighted who wanted to help him but didn't know how, and for that reason did a moderately bad job.

[00:55:00]

Are there things that you would say to the parents of deaf kids who have typical hearing that they wouldn't know unless someone who had grown up without hearing told them?

Jack (as Marlee): First of all, treat your children with love and respect. I'm a big advocate for sign language, because it's a language that fits the kid. It's visible, it's part of who they are, the same way that hearing is part of who you are, to be able to communicate in a language rather than force something else on them. How many babies are learning how to—? I mean, you can see many people are teaching their babies how to sign before they learn how to speak, even if they're not deaf! They can learn language through signs. Kids are sponges.

People are big on cochlear implants. I'm not one to say, “Don't get a cochlear implant.” If you get a cochlear implant, and you take off your cochlear implant, you're still deaf. So, signing is a great means to elevate a child to the level to communicate like their peers, the same as their hearing peers do. I was lucky to have had to— I went to amazing schools in Chicago. And they were called mainstream schools, so they were deaf programs within hearing schools. And we had to have classes. And there were programs where— I mean, I was in my comfort zone, because they were speaking my language, you see?

So, the bottom line is: parents, do your homework. Listen to what's out there. And if your child is signing, please learn to sign back. Because they are working as extra hard to understand you as you are trying to understand them. So, you need to meet halfway.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Marlee Matlin. I'm so grateful that you took all this time to talk with me. It was really nice to get to know you. And you too, Jack.

Marlee Matlin: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Jack (as Marlee): Thank you. Thank you so much.

Jesse Thorn: Marlee Matlin. What a blast. The new documentary, *Marlee Matlin: Not Alone Anymore*, is available to rent or buy digitally just about everywhere, and it is really fascinating. If you haven't seen it or the movies in which Marlee starred, you should. *CODA* is particularly beautiful and poignant and funny.

Transition: Buzzy, upbeat synth.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created in the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun—as well as at Maximum Fun HQ, overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. If I'm a little hoarse, it's because last night I went to the grand opening of the Blue Note LA, the new Blue Note Jazz Club in Los Angeles. I got to see Robert Glasper with special guests; including another past *Bullseye* guest, Terrace Martin; two of the greatest singers in the world, Lalah Hathaway and Ledisi. And I have to tell you, all those legends on the stage, and I think the star of the show was a drummer named Justin Tyson. So, if you get a chance to see that dude, he's incredible.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum

Fun is Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. We get booking help on *Bullseye* from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com. Our theme music was written and recorded by the great band The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you will find video from just about all our interviews, including the ones you heard this week. So, please go do follow *Bullseye* on Instagram and TikTok and YouTube. Just search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)