

LiveWell Interview, Louie Schwartzberg

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SPEAKERS

Louie Schwartzberg, Dr. Wendy Slusser



Louie Schwartzberg 00:03

And for me wonder and awe is the intersection between art and science. It enables you to be present in enables you to be observant enables you to look at things with our preconceived ideas.



Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:20

Hello to our live wealth listeners. This is your host Dr. Wendy Slusser. And today we have the immense pleasure of talking to the ever wise grounded trailblazing cinematographer, director and producer and of course, a UCLA alum, Louie Schwartzberg. Louie's work features nature scapes that alter our perception of time and space, sweeping views of mountains, intricate close ups of mushrooms growing in the soil, time lapse flowers and pollination. You're probably familiar with his work he has hosted three viral TED talks, has been a guest on Oprah's Super Soul Sunday, as his moving artwork and Netflix, fantastic fungi and Disney's Wings of life and is continuing to grow his work and healthcare spaces, like at the University of California, San Diego Jacobs Medical Center, and even here at UCLA. Louie has mastered this combination of art and entertainment and specifically for the sake of uplifting his audience. As we will discuss, he manipulates nature's beauty to inspire awe and odd just might be the key to a healthful life of living well. Please enjoy this wonderful conversation. Thank you so much for being part of this. You were with us recently receiving the Eudaimonia award. It's an incredible honor that you're not only part of what we're doing now at UCLA, but many of the other UCs but also you graduated from UCLA and cinematography. You're an award winning director, producer. You focus on the beauty of nature, but you also live a life of giving other people a sense of awe. Louis is the responsible for the fantastic fungi Netflix special. You're also part of the ride and Disney called Disney soaring ride. We've also done three TED talks, they'll stay with you for the rest of your life. You've been on Oprah.



Louie Schwartzberg 02:31

Are you saying I've been around the block?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 02:33

I guess so. And just to say, you know, you were good company receiving the seminal healthy chemists industry centers Eudaimonia award, you're in good company with legendary Quincy Jones. So let's start with your sort of philosophy of living a life of meaning and purpose, because that's really, as an artist, that's what you've been doing your whole life. And I think everyone wants that kind of life. So tell us a little bit about that.

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Louie Schwartzberg 03:02

I guess it's a gift and a blessing that you are able to figure out what your purpose is, you know, so that you can put all your energy into it. I think for me, it happened at UCLA, when I was a poli sci history major. And the anti war protests were happening on campus. And so I went out and I documented the protests and the police brutality, and creating these photo essays, which was a lot easier for me to do than writing a paper. And I fell in love with photography. And of course, that led me into wanting to do fine art photography, which were classes I took at UCLA, which were great because they were experimental. And the Theatre Arts Department was just sort of getting started on the film side. And to be honest, they were very rigid and academic. I mean, it was more like film history, and you know, screenwriting, and in the fine art, photography world, I was able to really, I think, find my means of self expression and found my voice. And of course, that led me into wanting to fill nature. And in nature. I found my greatest teacher. I mean, Mother Nature taught me everything about lighting and composition and color, and movement. And so when all that fell together, I'm fortunate, I suppose, or lucky that I didn't think about it, but that's what I wanted to do. And we all have that inside of us. When you kind of figure out what what makes you happy and what gives you purpose, what gives you joy, which fulfills your heart. It's never ever going to be work. It's never ever going to be, you know, something that you don't want to do. As a matter of fact, it becomes so encompassing that you can't stop thinking about it when you go to bed at night. So, that that's the genesis of of the journey.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 05:00

So unpacking it. You talk about Mother Nature here is a real Guiding Light, right? You said once that beauty is nature's tool for survival, where you protect what we love nature's beauty can open hearts and the shift in consciousness we need to sustain celebrate life. How do you express it or give that gift to others, like you just said,.

L

Louie Schwartzberg 05:23

Because I want to share it with others. You know, as a filmmaker, I'm schlepping equipment and doing hard work in order to capture and share it, you know, in order to be, let's say, a Jedi warrior for the environmental movement, we have discovered that messaging, the facts and the science and putting that on the table doesn't work. You can't appeal to the mind, I really feel in that statement about you know, beauty is nature's tool for survival is because you have to appeal to the heart. And if you appeal to the heart, you're always going to make the right

choices. And because it shapes your values, by desire, my mission is to get people to have that emotional connection. And I I just know, as a environmentalist, that's been involved in a lot of public service announcements and making films for the UN and lending my imagery to many nonprofits have to be honest and candid, that the messaging of the environmental movement has failed, in large part, I mean, I was there in 1970, at UCLA, at the celebration of Earth Day, the largest gathering of people on the planet, period. And everything we talked about, you know, from, you know, renewable energy and organic farming and you know, getting off of fossil fuels, et cetera, et cetera. It's like we were right. And like, but why haven't we moved the needle on that stuff? And I would have to say that we were naive to think that if you put the scientific facts on the table, that it would change your behavior. And for a lot of people, it doesn't work. You know, and of course, there's a lot of disinformation, from people in the on the opposite side of the fossil fuel industries, who put out a lot of disinformation and confusion, say, Oh, you don't know that, you know, man is really creating climate change. And we need to have more research, the more scientific experts need to say this and say that, and we're still doing that today. You know, you got people in the US Senate bringing a snowball into the US Senate and saying, There's no such thing as climate change. So as someone involved in the entertainment industry, I get the idea that you got to tell a really good story, to move people. And you can just put the facts on the table. And that's what I tried to do.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 07:48

So cool, because what you described is what why you went into photography in the first place was to express a social justice kind of issue, like police brutality, and certainly environmental movement, is a social justice challenge of our time, in so many respects. Yeah.

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Louie Schwartzberg 08:08

And then, of course, also inspired by the fact that my parents being Holocaust survivors is why I want to be a lawyer. And studying poli sci in history at UCLA, I probably would have ended up, you know, becoming an environmental justice lawyer. You know, if I hadn't picked up the camera.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 08:28

Goes to show you, if you have a passion for change, you can use your, your talents and your skill sets to do that, no matter what skill set you might have. Yeah, very cool. You know, you've mentioned a lot about the environment and how important it is to your work. And you've really captured so many parts of our environment that are just breathtaking natural escapes, right, like the Big Sur, and the Galapagos islands and underwater forests, and just deserts and oceans. I mean, just the breadth and depth of what you've been able to give all of us who might not have ever visited those places. Which one would you say in your lifetime has created the most odd to you?

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Louie Schwartzberg 09:18

That's really hard to say which why the best thing which when your children is your favorite, you know, but I would say maybe your as a couple of highlights. I mean, in terms of like a

you know, but I would say maybe you as a couple of highlights. I mean, in terms of like a place, I think New Zealand is pretty spectacular for its diversity. There's no doubt about that. And actually Maui, because you can go from Holly Alcala, which is like a crater, where you know, you're at 11,000 feet in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, like breathing, the cleanest air there can be in the air stream going from Asia to North America. And then you can also drop down to two hours at sea level, and you actually go through every ecosystem from top At the bottom, but one of the definitely highlights I was here when I was in, in Mexico and I was filming the monarch migration. I mean, we're outside of Mexico City about two hours, up in the Highlands at about 12 or 13,000 feet, and to be surrounded by hundreds of 1000s of Monarch butterflies, and they're all around you. And when they run into, you know, the second raindrop it barely feel anything. But the sound of the wings flapping, you can hear him. It's like when going through aspen trees. And it was phenomenal to be in the middle of that. And, again, the cautionary note is that they are on a serious decline because of the pesticides. America puts out throughout the Midwest with Roundup, and Glyphosate, and are killing the milkweed. And they kill their food supply. And you're poisoning. Not only the monarchs are poisoning the bees, which is critical for our food supply. And so I love telling the stories of monarchs because it's such a heroic story. You know, when they leave, in February, after wintering, they're arriving in, say November, and and they're living off the fat that's in this little tiny body. And when they begin to go back, they migrate to Canada. They reproduce along the way. And their great grandchildren, they make it to Canada, fly back to the same several acres in the highlands of Mexico. How in the world? Do they know how to do that? How do they know how to navigate the journey? Imagine? So volunteers put little stickers on the wings, well, they've actually taken monarchs that they maybe they found in Kansas, they drove him to Georgia. And then those monarchs found your way back to Mexico to the same mountaintop. So things like wind, things like their, you know, variables. It's amazing. It is like they are on the magnet where they're going, you know, do south? Because you might think, well, that's probably how they do it. You know, I don't think I could find my way out of LA, if I had to search through, right?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 12:21

You know, just that story alone, that you just told this. Bringing, like, the sense of you're hearing and you're feeling and you're seeing Louis and I, you also are expressing such awe of what you observe. What can you tell us about? I know you you surround yourself with researchers and scientists as well, I mean, you've been quite transdisciplinary. In your work. What do you think is going on? or what have you been told? Or what are you trying to prove in your work about all that relates to the scientific phenomenon that occurs in all of us when we experience all?

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Louie Schwartzberg 13:02

Well, I do work with scientific advisors, and experts, all the films I do in order to figure out like, what is a good story, you know, and then just saying the science. And then after I do that, then it's up to me to come up with what I think would be not only entertaining but fill you with wonder and awe. And for me wonder and awe is the intersection between art and science. It enables you to be present in enables you to be observant enables you to look at things with our preconceived ideas. And I believe that could be perhaps the most spiritual place you want to be. And so yeah, I do work. In the areas of on Monday, I've read you know, Decker Keltner his book, you know, who's an expert at that the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, all the different forms of law, you know, with, with, with movement, with dance, with music, with

architecture, with, you know, nature's beauty, there's a negative side to all which can be manipulated by people. Unfortunately, if you look at a military parade, you know, you look at like 10,000 people, you know, doing seek Heil, I mean, it makes your, your jaw drop, maybe a maga rally, who knows? It's like, you kind of sit there and you go, Oh, my God, you know. And so anything that is vast, and makes you feel small, you know, triggers that kind of, you know, sense of wonder, but flipping back to the positive, where wonder is really sacred. I mean, that's where you feel the divine. And so when I said it's your section of art and science, I think you have given go in two directions. You can take the scientific path, which is the scientific method and could go Like, I'm looking at something I want to understand, I want to explain what what is that? What is pollination, you know, and so the scientist, you know, would give you a really great explanation of the phenomena that is occurring with pollination, and the pollen, how it's going from flower to flower, etc, etc. On the other hand, are another direction. There's the artist, who looks at that, and is just enamored with the color and the beauty and the scent, and the aroma of, of the flower. And the fact that the bee and the flower are having his beautiful love dance together. You know, it's, it's a love story that feeds the Earth, it gives us our fruits, or nuts or vegetables, all the healthy food we need to eat. But it all comes back to that same focal point of feeling of awe, and wonder, and being blown away amazed, all those great words, where you really are experiencing the most sacred divine moment that one can have on this planet.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 16:07

You've been able to share that image and give us that detail through your work. And I'd love our listeners to understand how you do that like, or and how did you start doing that? What's what's behind this ability that you have to really share the details of mother nature in a way that we can appreciate and feel awe?

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Louie Schwartzberg 16:31

At UCLA, because I started with fine art photography, I certainly had people like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston as my quote unquote, you know, spiritual guides, which meant I also want to shoot high resolution film. And back then, we only had video which was like, you know, 525 lines was primitive video, compared to HD and 16 millimeter film 35 millimeter film was only used to shoot commercials, and movies. And even back then film processing costs about \$100 a minute for purchase, develop and getting a print. That sounds like a lot of money today. Imagine what it was like in 1970. In order to shoot 35 millimeter, there were a bunch of old 193040 cameras that UCLA back into a storage room. And I modified these old non reflex cameras and waited, you know, like, God 50 pounds, I modified them to shoot time lapse, because when you do time lapse, I'm shooting one frame, and then the camera waits 20 seconds, maybe even minutes for a flower to open. And what it did, it triggered my sense of wonder. Because I had no idea that the clouds been more emphasized. And that the flowers open and close and do it as if they're like ballet dancers, it opens your heart that opens your mind, it opens your perspective. Because then you realize that the way you look at life is really limited. That's a metaphor, by the way, right for anything. That's why people travel, you get to see other cultures, you get to learn about different lifestyles, you know, we need to do that, right? Because the way we live wherever you live isn't the only way to live. Well, the same thing is true, I think in in nature, you know, I want to know what it looks like from a hummingbird point of view. I want to know what it looks like from a flowers point of view, radically different, you

know, ultra slow motion Ultra timelapse, you know, but they're both valid. And then you realize because of the human specie construct of who we are, but we do, we look at things in a really narrow point of view, called 24 frames per second. And so I was able to use my camera like a time machine that I can bend time, if I can slow it down. I can speed it up. I can I can zoom in, I can zoom out, but in terms of scale, which is another thing, you know, equals MC squared. Yeah, you can learn about the scientific theories in a much better way, when you can actually experience it.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 19:14

Well, one of the areas that you've really telegraphed, and I think brought to people's eyes and probably even their careers is this thing about mushrooms and the fantastic fungi being even my niece has decided she wants to study mushrooms in different capacities and what what brought you to that subject in the first place?

L

Louie Schwartzberg 19:38

So I'm like, I'm fascinated by you know, telling what is what is life and what is the foundation of life. So, you know, after I started your time lapsing flowers, which was, you know, obviously an awakening. Then I heard about colony collapse disorder, which is the fact that the bees are disappearing. And for a long time I wanted to do a film about this Flowers. But then when I heard about Colony Collapse Disorder, I figured, well, wow, you cannot tell the story about the bees with a tiny story about flowers and how they co evolved together over 50 million years ago. And so that, you know, enabled me to do Wings of life, which is, you know, on Disney plus, we got Meryl Streep being the voice of the flower. And you know, she's producing bees, bats, hummingbirds, butterflies to come get her with her awesome beauty with her aroma, her tastes her scent or color, or pattern. It's all about sensual beauty, which I think we can all like lean into and be proud of. I think there's a lot of because our culture manipulates beauty to be make you a consumer and make you feel inadequate, right social media, but beauty is nature's way of manipulating your behavior, not just in terms of reproduction, but also in terms of making you fall in love with things you want to you know, protect, like a flower. So I told that story. And I go, wow, pollination, the foundation of life. And then you have to ask even the bigger question, okay, well, if that's the foundation of life, what do plants need, they need water, they need sun. But really what they need more than anything is soil and where to soil come from. And everybody assumes it's here. It's not soil is decomposed, you know, organic material that, you know, fungi helps break down into its molecular components, which is food and nutrients, in order for plants to thrive, to feed its babies to grow again. So that's why I made fantastic fungi. And then of course of making it movie, I discovered, it could also be the greatest natural solution for climate change. Because in that symbiotic relationship with trees, and plants, et Cie Questers to carbon under the ground. So when the Trina plant, suck in the co2, release the oxygen which we need to breathe, your breath, every time you breathe, you're in relationship with what's behind you. You are in relationship big time, right, every breath you take. So that's happening all the time. And then the co2 goes down the trunk of the tree into the roots, and is traded with the mycelial network, which is the organism and the fruits are the mushrooms, the fruit Mycelium is the organism and into mycelium gives, you know nutrients to the tree in exchange, and then stores the carbon. Nothing, there's nothing evil about carbon. Carbon is a building block of life. What we've done is we've taken we burned a lot of fossil fuel a lot of you know organic materials, quote unquote, and we put it into the atmosphere. So carbon is not a

bad thing. It's what we've done to it by putting it into our atmosphere as if it's a big garbage dump. You know, that's what inspired me actually to do fantastic fungi. And then you discover that it can be the greatest natural solution for climate change. It can heal the planet, it can heal your body, you know, in Lion's Mane for your brain for tricky tails to build your immunity Chaga for giving you energy which is good for your heart. You learn about all these positive, symbiotic relationships, we have a symbiotic relationship. So microbiome, you know, in your gut, if you'd learn about medicine, I just hung out with Dr. Zack Bush, he's incredible endocrinologist as well as having multiple degrees in medicine. You know, the microbiome, the gut, according a you know, his vision is clearly the pathway to solving all our chronic disease that you know, that we're suffering from and without that floral garden, you wouldn't be able to absorb food. What an incredible story.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 24:13

Sure is. When I first learned maybe a decade ago about the microbiome. I was like, we're the vehicle for the microbiome, the DNA is older than our own DNA, I find that that's mind blowing.

L Louie Schwartzberg 24:26

And we share a more similar DNA with with fungi than we do with plants. So according to scientists, we actually branch off of fungi and created animals, you know, and that's why the viruses that they fight like with penicillin, et cetera, they're fighting the same viruses that they defend themselves against are the same viruses as we are also, you know, are helpful in defending our ecosystem called a body Hello, you

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 24:59

You just keep bringing in so many different disciplines into what you're describing as your work, which I think is quite remarkable. And really something that I find so helpful and pursuing and advancing knowledge is by integrating different disciplines towards common goal. And one of the things that you've done in the recent past that you've shared with us was about your work in the hospitals or with people with certain illnesses that they're suffering from. And I'd love to have you give us a little information about, for instance, some of the work that you've done here in Los Angeles, and some of your hopes for future work.

L Louie Schwartzberg 25:43

Well, obviously, nature's medicine.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 25:46

That's right.

L Louie Schwartzberg 25:47

L Louie Schwartzberg 23:47

If I say, love is good for you talking about that for a long time. What's interesting is that we have scientific tools that can kind of prove it. We've been talking about love for a long time. And certainly, indigenous cultures, and man has been very aware that nature is a healing modality. So I'm bringing the power of nature from the outside inside, especially in health care, where people don't have that opportunity to be outdoors. And my big goal is hoping that someday we can be prescriptive. And I can say, when you would you need to do you need to look at some slow motion ocean wave crashes. And like an Ayurvedic medicine, you can look at balancing the body, you know that if your fire you need water, you know, these are like ancient medicinal practices that go back 1000s and 1000s of years, which is all about creating harmony and balance. So what we recently did in LA, which I'm proud to say, is that at a Pacific Neuroscience Institute, you know, at St. John's Hospital, we did a clinical trial, combining my imagery with psilocybin to treat alcohol addiction. And they watch a video of nature's rhythms and patterns for about 40 minutes, as they're coming on to the psilocybin, which is, quote, unquote, magic mushrooms. And the preliminary results, which is going to be published in the next several weeks, in frontiers of psychiatry, is indicates that the combination of my imagery with psilocybin was in many ways more effective than the psilocybin by itself. Heart rate went down, blood pressure went down. I mean, those are measurable scientific, you know, tools, but I'm sure there are things that they couldn't measure, which is, how does it make you feel? Are is good for you, you know. And so coming up, we're gonna do another trial at UCSF with way more sophisticated technology, EEG, galvanic meter response, fMRI, these are all tools that measure your brainwaves, right, and your skin. And we're gonna do a deeper dive, like 80% of the data you receive goes into your eyes. We have a healing modality for for touch, call it massage, music, guided meditation, smell, aromatherapy, food, healthy taste, what is your vision, and when you think of vision, it is light energy which hits your retina, which and the retina I think a lot of scientists will even say it's an extension of the brain because it immediately turns it into an electrical impulse that goes to the brain. It is a neural network that is occurring in this moment as we're looking at each other. Right.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 28:38

You jsut dissected another image for me that I never thought of how it happened.

L Louie Schwartzberg 28:43

I know. Forget time lapse and slow mode, normal vision, it's a mind blower, knowing that it can be healing. I think one of the cool things is that I actually don't show you what you would see if you were taking a walk in the forest. I'm showing you something is different, you know, but Slomo, time lapse aerials, things like that, I mean, you're never going to be underwater with a whale. You know, let's be honest about that. And a lot of people cannot afford or have the health or the time to go to Machu Picchu, or Angkor Wat, or Galapagos or Africa. So why not be able to share that energy with you. And in a way I got to tell you, it's almost better than the real thing. And I had music, and I add sound effects. And you get to see Machu Picchu as if you were there alone.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 29:35

Wow. So much of what you do is an expression of gratitude towards Mother Nature towards

others. And you you expressed it in your most recent film gratitude revealed and what is it that you'd like to share right now as we end this conversation?

L

Louie Schwartzberg 29:58

A lot of people ask me why do Did you make this movie? And in terms of how does it relate to fantastic fungi? Okay. And I think gratitude is really imbuing us with those values of connection, of love, of courage, purpose, creativity, wonder. And these are all values that add up to gratitude. And these are all values that I have not only, I think experienced, you know, in nature, but in the, in the remarkable, extraordinary people that I've met, inspired by my parents who had gone through a tremendous amount of adversity, but had a ton of joy and love and hope in their lives. And I think that it's kind of put me on a path of always wanting to tell stories of people who overcome adversity, but have joy and love.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 30:51

Wow, that movie was the first movie we were able to show in person at UCLA through the Semel Institute and friends, Semel, and I, it brought out a lot of gratitude for everyone, because we were also all together in person. So thank you for that.

L

Louie Schwartzberg 31:08

I'm really proud to say that now what I've able to do is have created my own platform called the Louis channel, which is like a platform like Netflix, like Disney plus, you name it. You can find it on the app story on Roku, Apple devices, but it's a place where it's all positive films to celebrate life. And that's what we need. We need like a new story. And the beautiful story of nature is a feminine side of nature. It's about symbiosis. It's about regeneration. It's about rebirth. It's about nurturing. This is what makes the world go round. This is what makes life go forward. It doesn't just end in one generation, whether it's us or a flower. How does that happen? That's what I'm always fascinated with. How do we keep that ball rolling, you know? And it is these incredible billions of interactions, whether it's with the fun guy, whether it's with the bees and the flowers. That's what makes the world go round. And it's a great story. It's an amazing story.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 32:16

Well, that actually is a great segue to what we ask all our guests is, what does it mean for you to live well?

L

Louie Schwartzberg 32:25

You know that every day I'm living my purpose, and moving forward? And on my mission? It makes me feel good. I mean, I know everything else, like eat well, and exercise. That's okay. Yeah, it's like, what am I doing to really, you know, make the world a better place. And that's, I think, the legacy I inherited from my parents.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 32:48

That's a lovely way to end it. And I have to say that you certainly do that to millions of people that watch your movies and listen to you talk. So thank you so much, Louis, for what you do, and also for living, so well.

L

Louie Schwartzberg 33:02

Appreciate it. Thank you.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 33:05

Louie talks a lot about awe and wonder in the natural world. But I have to say I am in awe of him and his work. I look at a bee hovering over flower, where they're changing images of clouds differently, thanks to him. And I also imagine what this is doing to my health and well being on so many levels that he is brought up so much in his conversation today. It is this interdisciplinary compassion based care for humanity and Mother Earth that motivates me every day. I'm so grateful to be able to share these stories on this podcast. I hope you enjoyed this conversation as much as I did. Talk to you soon. We are so glad you joined us today in this conversation. To learn more about today's guest, and to explore the entire podcast archive, visit our website at healthy.ucla.edu and find the podcast page under the media tab. If you enjoy this episode, the best way to support the show is to subscribe on Spotify and Apple podcasts. And if you can leave a review or share on social media even better. If you have any guests suggestions, visit our website for the submission form or email us at livewell@ucla.edu or direct message us on Instagram at [healthyucla](https://www.instagram.com/healthyucla). Visit the show notes on our website or on whatever platform you're currently listening to and check out organizations ideas or people mentioned in this episode. Thanks for being on this journey with us. This episode has been brought to you by the Semel Healthy Campus Initiative Center at UCLA.