

**Love Meets Joy Podcast**  
**Episode 8: Cleft Representation in Media**  
**Transcript**

Iva Ballou: Hello, everyone. Welcome to the Love Meets Joy podcast on the Smile Train podcast network. I'm Iva Ballou. And I was born with a bilateral cleft lip and palate, the CEO of RealSophisticatedJoy, and a cleft confidence coach.

Ashley Barbour: And I'm Ashley Barbour. I was also born with a bilateral cleft lip and palate. I'm the creator of Cleft Love and by day I work as a teacher consultant with students who have hearing loss. And today we're very excited because we have a super, special guest, Alex Eisenberg. He's a very successful entertainer. He's an actor, singer, dancer, and model and he's cleft affected. So today we're going to be getting into cleft representation in the entertainment industry in the past, in the present, and what we hope it will be in the future. But before we dive into all of that, let's get to know a little bit more about Alex.

Iva: Wow. That was such an amazing introduction that Ashley gave, but we have to know, let the people know, Alex, who is Alex Eisenberg and how did you get here today?

Alex Eisenberg: Well, first things first, uh, Alex is very appreciative for both of you ladies for having me on and all of the work and time and effort you put into the cleft community and giving back to the cleft community. It's just greatly appreciated by myself, especially as well as by so many other people that I know. So thank you very much for that. I grew up in a small town outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania called Freeport. I was the third of three children. So the baby rock and that, and as we know in the statistics, that is also one of the more rare ones in keeping it in the cleft land. Right, right. But yeah, I,

Ashley: I didn't know that.

Alex: Yes, yes. That is, uh, the baby is the least likely in whenever you're having kids too. Wow.

Ashley: I had no idea. That's super interesting,

Alex: But yeah, uh, pretty much the normalcy of having a cleft was, uh, introduced, but then had a very interesting conundrum almost if you will, or a dichotomy rather of, yeah. Of like being talked about, but then also not treated in a way that was a handicap or a, a place to fall off or an excuse.

Ashley: Let me back it up. So, what kind of cleft were you born with?

Alex: I was born with a single unilateral cleft lip and both the hard and soft palate as well as the lip. Mm-hmm <affirmative> and it is on my left side.

Ashley: Okay. And then how many surgeries have you had altogether?

Alex: Whew. Um, together, I think just strictly related to the cleft directly. Yeah. I think I'm at eight,

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Iva: Eight. Do you know how old you were when you had your first one?

Alex: Mm-hmm <affirmative> I was, uh, approximately right before a year. Wow. So I was, I think 11 months was the first, well, the first major one, I had the, the lip when I was at three months. Three months. Yeah. That's usually that sounds about, but it wasn't, that was not one that I remember it being obviously three months. You're not going to remember, but even the photos and the things of that nature, as far as invasive surgeries, I feel like I started defining them by that rather than just procedures, because the ones that hurt and the ones that really I have ingrained in my mind that you're like,

Ashley: Oh yeah. Which one do you think was the most difficult for you? Cause I always think this is an interesting question, because I feel like it's usually like one of two. Yeah. Yeah. Well it is, but I think it's common to have it be a select couple given the age, but

Alex: Yeah, I think mine just the one that stands out most for me is definitely the bone graft.

Ashley: Me too. Yeah. That's what I know. That's a big one.

Alex: I was, I believe eight.

Ashley: Yep. That's how old I was too. I

Iva: Know that. Oh yeah. I was older. Yeah. I was 10.

Alex: I also could be incorrect in this. I know that there was one that was eight. So between eight and 12, I had about six surgeries.

Ashley: So something that Iva and I talk a lot about so far that we have on this podcast is what it's like to be a woman with a cleft versus well, really our experience is just living as women who are born with cleft. So we're kind of interested in your perspective. Something that we talk a lot about is the beauty standard that's imposed on women. And yeah, I'm just curious if you ever felt that as well as a man or as like a teen boy growing up, what that was like for you?

Alex: Definitely. I think, well, first things, I think that the idea of a beauty standard is, uh, if this was not a family friendly one, you'd have to censor me a lot because it is just kind of ridiculous in, in a large thing where these people, that aren't putting something in front of us demonstrating conditioning, you, this is what you should feel. This is what you should be attracted to. This is what you find you should find attractive symmetry is proven. Right. But, um, absolutely. I think that growing up, I felt that because, and for any parents listening out there as well as people that are cleft affected, you know, when you look in the mirror or you see a photo of yourself or video back of yourself because of the, the mirrors in there. Yeah. That is in the reflections. It constantly flattens out our image. If you see yourself like that or are told something enough times, you start to believe it. Right. Right.

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Iva: And that's all you hear and that's all you started to see mm-hmm <affirmative> and it plays over and over and in your head.

Ashley: What's crazy is prior to when I had my rhinoplasty as you know, an older adult, like I had when I was 30, instead of as a late teen. Um, but before I had that done, I always thought my nose looked symmetrical in pictures. And then after my rhinoplasty, even though I see a major positive difference, uh, I now see it as lopsided in photographs. Isn't that strange.

Alex: Yeah. And it starts to mess with you. Like

Iva: How can you not see

Alex: It? How can you not look at that and be, be like, wait, time out, time out, hold, hold, hold the phone. I thought this was supposed to

Iva: Happen. Like I'm the exact opposite. One thing that I love about Ashley's page, she's always posting up her baby pictures. I don't have any because I tore them up because I did not like the fact that how I saw myself internally never matched up with the mirror, younger me never. And so when you said that about the mirror, it was like, that was it. You never wanted to go look at the mirror because they never matched up.

Alex: That. Yeah. And not on top of it. Right. You can explain it to a kid. Right. But picture yourself at that age, even if I'm telling you that's not mm-hmm <affirmative> what does it really based on perception, perception is reality. Right? How, how am I seen, how do I, how am I able to see that?

Ashley: Yes. It's super interesting. We talked, um, a few episodes ago about a study where like they put on fake scars on people, but took them off before they actually went out into the world. Mm-hmm <affirmative> uh, but they didn't know that they were gone and the people all reported that they were being looked at and they were treated more negatively when in fact they were encountering the world in the same exact way that they've always encountered it. And so it's like so wild how, what our perception is and what we think.

Alex: Well also as, as far as like the beauty standards, things like putting on makeup on and like, you know what I mean, learning to do that. I had a very, very small doing that with entertainment, with performing and stuff and having to do that or having somebody else try to put makeup on you that if that has never worked with somebody that is right, not symmetrical. And they try to almost, uh, make it symmetrical <laugh> I'll never forget one of the times that I had to wear, I had to wear lipstick in a show and you know, when you're on stage, it's what you're doing. Yeah. And I don't know if it was subconscious by the makeup artist or not. Uh, they, they tried to almost draw out over. I went to the bathroom and rub that off. I said, uh, no, <laugh> absolutely. I love

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Iva: That. We're good for you. Good for you. So do you think that the reason that the part of that was because you had gotten to a point of, no, this is who I am like a certain sense of healing. How did you get to that point?

Alex: I think that definitely, that was for sure, a place of lots of self-work, um, going through the roller coaster that is having a, a cleft of any kind, you know, uh, uh, of facial difference any nature of anything that people can see day in and day out where you have your good days, you have your bad days and all days are, are valid and, and worth mm-hmm <affirmative> you know what I mean? You have worth in those days, but the, the good has to come with the bad. We can't stay down here. It's too high. You never can be up here too high because it's never going to stay there. Right? Yeah. You get up in the morning, you feel good, you feel good. So then you like, look good, feel good, play good. Like, that's definitely a, it's a very real thing. Whereas you have the other days where you're like, I just, I don't feel attractive and, um, is something of, and it's not necessarily all directly to the cleft, but days where you're having a good hair day or you're having, you know what I mean? You have an outfit.

Iva: I call it, I don't have it day. It's like, that's my, I don't have it day. And it's just what it is. I don't have it. I don't have it. So do not ask if those days are real. So I'm very happy that you mentioned that mm-hmm, <affirmative> like some days you just don't have it and it's okay. Maybe

Ashley: Tomorrow. And to remember that those days are temporary, right? Like those feelings, although they're valid and you're really feeling them, like, hopefully I'll go to bed and I'll wake up feeling better tomorrow. So that's something I always try to keep in mind because then you don't get lost in that sort of sad feeling.

Alex: Yeah. And it's way easier. Like you see that in people all the time. It's way easier to be sad and it is to be happy. Hmm. Like it's as easier to go that way. And, and to feel that way,

Ashley: Actually, I feel like it just depends on where you send your attention or your focus. Um, I will never forget. I was having a drink with a friend a few years ago and she told me a little nugget of wisdom that if you are ever having a bad day, that you should look for like physical hearts, like heart shapes in your environment. And once you start looking for hearts, you see them everywhere. They're all over. And so the same is true for negative experiences. The same is true for positive experiences. So if you're focusing on looking for those positive experiences, then you see more and more of them.

Iva: That's a cheat code. Those are cheat codes. Those are great to have like having little cheat codes that you can do. We've talked about that before actually like, like I'm a dancer, I'm going to dance. I have no rhythm, but I will dance it out. I'll sing it out. Don't ask me to do an eight count Alex, cuz I'm not doing it, but <laugh> well, I will do it, but it won't be good.

Alex: Oh, it'll be fantastic. It'll be fantastic.

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Iva: You have to have those little cheat codes. I, I love that.

Ashley: That's something that I try to focus on anytime I'm having a bad day. So try it all out there. Um, Alex, did you have any moments in your, I don't know, cleft journey and any of your surgeries that felt particularly pivotal to you that sort of changed the direction of your life or anything like that in how you felt about yourself?

Iva: Or maybe even the surgery that you knew? This is it, I'm good.

Ashley: Oh,

Alex: Sure. Well, woo that's a, that's a, uh, dissertation there. I'm going to have to whip out the scroll for that one. But no, I think a, a major one for me was at that time period that we had mentioned earlier, like the eight to 12 range, because I had so much surgery. Um, I had a ton of oral surgery because I had a small underbite that we had to do it, but they didn't do, they didn't end up doing the, uh, breaking my jaw, moving it. I wore the Walrus is what the device was called. Like it went on my chin and on my forehead it had a bar that came out. I

Iva: Had to, oh, there you go. And it kind, you put the rubber bands and the pools drip forward. Yes. Ooh. Don't let that rubber band snap.

Alex: Ooh. And I, I swear, I ate soft food in the morning for probably two years because you couldn't chew in the morning because it hurt so bad. Cause it was slowly just moving your jaw, right? Yes. I don't count that I'm an able-bodied person. Yeah. I am able to do these things that other people, you know, I, whenever I teach dance classes, I usually reiterate this with kids. Um, you find kids that don't work hard or don't have that, that drive mm-hmm <affirmative> just remind them, you don't know how many people wish that they had the facility that you have. Yeah. And you're in here not giving an effort, you know? Right. And that, that was something that both emotionally very much mentally in terms of where you position yourself with exactly what we were talking about before, of how you look at things a good day, a bad day. When is it time to sit down and, you know, to, to cry, sit down and cry, right? Or, or fight, you know what I mean? Like right. Well, we

Iva: Always, I do think that we, that have clefts, we grow up faster than the average child because of certain things that we have to go through. We are talking to a lot more doctors than the average child is because we all know about the cleft teams and all the doctors that come on. I always say that those of us in the community, we have an innate sense of grit, determination. And it's just up to us to use that as a superpower.

Ashley: So true. So now I feel like I'm very interested to get to know more about, you know, your experience in entertainment. I don't know if people out there are aware of the historical representation that facial scars have, you know, how they've existed in entertainment previously. So, you know, they started out in silent films and they needed a way to denote the bad guy.

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Right. And so sure. Facial scars, were an easy way to do that, you know, a villain has to have a, an origin story, how he became the villain. So physical scars are a way to show.

Iva: I'm just going to slap that on. Right. <laugh>

Ashley: I, I'm not saying it's right, Iva. I'm just saying I'm giving the people a little background.

Iva: No, it's I know you're not, I know it's not, I know they're not, but they just want to slap that on. Okay.

Ashley: <laugh> and so right. And so they need an origin story, so they give them physical differences to make them look evil. However, I think people don't realize the impact that that has on the facial difference community, because then everyone who sees someone who has an actual facial difference, they're viewed as scary or mm-hmm, <affirmative> dangerous. ~~I will never~~ I will never forget. I was observing when I was in college, I was doing sort of my, like pre-student teaching because I went to school to be a teacher and I was working in a kindergarten class and the first day I was in there, uh, a kid came up to me and he was like, what's wrong with your face? I don't like it. It scares me, you know, it's that implicit bias that, you know, older people don't talk about that and having those feelings as they get older, but we all have a little bit of that inside of us, you know? So see,

Iva: I don't know,

Ashley: I'm not saying an adult would say something, but I think it causes an implicit bias. So like when I see someone who looks different, then I'm like, oh, you know, you kind of have a reaction. And I think it's in part because of programming.

Iva: That's what I'm saying. Like the adult won't say anything, but will treat me differently or treat us differently. Ah, compared to, to the kid, he was just honest. He was like, you know what? Your face scares me. Yeah. And that's an honest, that's honest because what, what he's saying is I I'm scared, but I'm telling you because I'm pretty sure with time that opinion can change. Because he is not saying I'm not open to changing how I see you. Sorry. <laugh> get a little passionate for

Ashley: Sure. And it's not like I was, you know, I, it did throw me because I don't know if you all know this sensation where you just kind of are going about your regular life and then mm-hmm, <affirmative> all of a sudden it shows up, like someone says something out of nowhere and then it's sort of like a, I don't know. I always get sort of a reaction because I I'm not expecting it. Because as an adult, you don't hear about it as much. So it is true. But it was a teachable moment

Alex: As someone who works with, who works with kids, like I teach dance to kids a lot and you definitely get, you get the, you get both ends of the spectrum. Mm-hmm <affirmative>, it's always, for me, at least always a lot more uncomfortable when it's like an adult side-stepping around it and like trying to find the appropriate way to bring it up. Mm-hmm <affirmative> like,

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or, um, I love the people that, that may maybe know somebody who is a cleft affected and then they're like, they're huffing and puffing, like really working up the way. And again, I would probably not do that either, but I, somebody who has cleft, like, can I ask you? Like, I, I really don't mean to be offensive. I preface it with that. Like they're trying to find a way. I'm like, yes, I have a cleft. Yes. A hundred percent. Let's chat about it. Mm-hmm <affirmative> like the openness with that. And then with the kids thing, I always love to educate them with them.

Ashley: Of course.

Alex: Why, why does your, why does your nose look like that? Or why does your lip like, oh, what happened? Yes. Well, let me tell you, like, let me give you a little thing. So the next time they encounter somebody, yes. They have a little more information or they can bring it up and like hopefully have a better interaction the next way down. So then when they are adults, then it's not like

Iva: A big thing.

Alex: Like looking through, looking through this through the Cape, like exactly,

Ashley: Exactly.

Iva: Something that I do is I've even had like asking them like first one letting them know it doesn't hurt me. I let one little girl like touch my face because she was like, well, can I touch? Sure. Yeah, sure. Yeah. Right. Because it was just, as you said of like just trying to educate because hopefully down the line. Yeah. She might educate someone else and Ashley said, and then one of her previous, when she was younger, she would tell, talk about her cleft presentation and another kid defended her, but you have to educate them in order for that to happen.

Alex: Yes, totally.

Ashley: And right. That education is just so key and that's the way we make a change. Right. I mean just one little person at a time, you know? Well,

Alex: I do have actually I want to share one story quick. I'll be making it super quick. So okay. In that eight, eight to 12, I was playing baseball. So we traveled around a lot. Then I had my surgery, my, bone graft and when I was finally allowed back and I had, I couldn't get hit in the face. Yeah. So I wore a, um, a hockey helmet while I was playing baseball. Well, so I couldn't get hit in the face. Right. But it had the cage. So I couldn't get hit in the event. Yeah. There's line drive or something. Then I'm coming up to bat and of course I still have it on case I get hit. And the coach opposite coach says, Hey buddy, I think you're the wrong sport.

Ashley: Oh no.

Iva: Oh

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Alex: Doesn't he come to find? After, after I tell him what happened, that person had to feel this big. And again, probably thought it was already hard, hard, but then you find out like, ah, you're kind of just being, not that cool right now. How

Ashley: To be a jerk, Chris

Iva: <laugh> yeah. You got to think about what you're saying as more so for adults as an adult. Yeah. If you, you have to be mindful, you don't know what someone else is going through and it's like, yes. I feel like a little ding should have gone off that. There's something going on here. No other adult seems concerned that he has this on it's probably for a reason.

Alex: Right, right. But it was just such a funny thing too. Like it's so funny. I hope that took him the next time that there was something like that. That mm-hmm <affirmative> maybe he thought a second further before letting just the word vomit come out.

Ashley: So yes, for sure. So we have kind of moved from how cleft was portrayed historically in entertainment. It's kind of interesting because you notice trends in all sorts of marginalized populations as they get introduced into mainstream entertainment. Right. And so where we're currently at with cleft representation is getting better. I think it's moving in the right direction, but we're not all the way there yet because it's definitely not perfect now. Right? I mean there are still continually villains being put out that have scars. I even remember, not that long ago, maybe five years ago, uh, Disney came out with the Lone Ranger and the villain in the, the Lone Ranger. They added specifically a cleft scar on him to make him look more evil.

Iva : Or maybe you try giving him a backstory that makes him a villain. You don't have to slap on a scar or, and actually highlight a group of people or community who are born this way. And then you have non-affected people who look at us like, oh, well, you know, you have that thing too. So you are a villain too. No,

Alex: I definitely have issue with again, the villain thing is, is so played out too. It's the early twenties black man. That is a gangster. That is a drug dealer. Like, come on. If you're going to keep reiterating that stereotype, that is so outdated. We want to believe we've gone past that as a people of, I look at somebody, I instantly, that's what I associate. And then when you do it over and over and over and over, like we were just talking about that's social conditioning. That's now I look at that person. That's how I think. Yes,

Ashley: Exactly.

Alex: Conscious, subconscious, whatever you want to call it. Then that part of that is the slapping, the cleft on them. If, as an actor myself, I would love to play a villain role one day. Oh, I would love, I would love to. I would, I would love to just as an actor. Yeah. Again, the cleft aside, like thinking the, the idea, the mentality of that. Yeah. I'm not playing it because I'm, mm-hmm, <affirmative> cleft affected. Yeah. I'm playing it because I'm a, a good enough actor that I can play that role.

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Ashley: And it doesn't mean that cleft affected people can't portray the villain, but there has to be an equal number mm-hmm <affirmative> of roles where they're the love interest or they're the dad, you know, like there has to balance it out, you know?

Iva: And like, if we can take baby steps into it, maybe he starts off at, as a villain. And then can he end up the hero? You're starting to realize that some of these villains, they have a backstory, they have a reason as to why they are like this. Let's talk about that and make them more human.

Alex: Yeah. Allow cleft affected actors to play these roles. Do not get somebody that is not somebody that's not cleft affected and then give them a cleft scar and expect them to understand how that works.

Iva: And then you wouldn't have to worry about prosthetics.

Ashley: You wouldn't know how cleft would affect that character as well. Right?

Alex: Exactly.

Iva: Oh my gosh.

Alex: <laugh> if Hollywood, if you're listening, if you're listening out there, there are three people from different walks of life, from different eras, ethnicities, everything right here that you could consult or just a picture, how to make it look accurate. Yes. How did this affect you in your life?

Ashley: Yeah, yeah.

Alex: Right. To make the actor's choice. Not just cross my arms and I'm mad at the world because this happened to me and I'm a pity case. Yeah. Like no three of us here are that,

Ashley: Right. We're not, we've really, there's so much resilience in having a cleft. Right. Mm-hmm <affirmative>, mm-hmm, <affirmative>, we're not to that total ideal yet. I, I really hope that we're moving in that way. And I think facial differences are entering into the collective consciousness, which is also really important. So even though they're kind of getting it wrong, like I think there are some reality surgery shows where they're going to work on people with facial differences to, you know, potentially maybe it will help someone who isn't able to afford the treatment that they want or whatever, but it's not exactly, you know, where we want it to be. But the fact that they're looking for people with facial differences to put on TV is, is new. So we're kind of in the growing pains stage. I think I'm hopeful, Iva. I think we're headed in the right direction.

Iva: I do too. I do. I think that with time and that the more that Love Meets Joy of the cleft community and they get to see the beauty that is there. Because we have it collectively. We have it. And we are such a special group of people. That type of energy can never be hidden for long.

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Yeah. And it's the work that we are all doing that will slowly let that be shown. Yeah. But before we can get into that, we've got to go to break. I know that the listeners, you are loving it so far, so make sure you come back. We have more to talk about with Alex and it's going to get even better. Can you believe that?!

Speaker 4: We are happy to tell you more about our sponsor: Smile Train. Smile Train pioneered a sustainable model of partnering with local medical professionals in more than 70 countries. In 22 years, it has supported more than 1.5 million safe cleft surgeries, more than all other cleft charities combined. And as many people in our audience know, children born with clefts often need more essential cleft treatments than just surgery. Because their partners provide local, year-round care, Smile Train is also able to fund nutritional support, dental care, orthodontic treatment, speech therapy, and psychosocial support for those who need it. Smile Train invests in their partners, providing them with the state-of-the-art equipment and training they need to make safe and quality care possible for those who need it most. Visit [smiletrain.org/donate/lovemeetsjoy](http://smiletrain.org/donate/lovemeetsjoy) today and donate \$21 a month to make sure that every child with a cleft can receive the care they need whenever they need it.

Ashley: Welcome back from break. We have more fun, interesting conversations to be had with Alex. So I'm ready to just jump right in. Are you ready? So as a kid, did you always know that you wanted to be in entertainment or was that something that, you know, did something happen that made you decide that that was a path you wanted to take?

Alex: Um, I don't know if you've, uh, picked up on this, but I do like to talk and be

Iva: An entertainer. Okay. Okay.

Alex: I feel like that's, that's always been there, but um, I actually went to school. I went to college to do pre-med in biology and then I was playing football at the time. That's

Iva: A big contrast.

Alex: <laugh> yeah. Yeah. I wanted to, uh, I wanted to actually be a cleft surgeon and work with cleft affected children. Ah, awesome. Like myself. Yeah. But then I, um, was, was shadowing my, my surgeon, Dr. Dennis Herwitz in Pittsburgh whenever I decided to I missed dance, I missed performing. So I did a program at Broadway dance center in New York City and ended up getting a little bit of work from, from that program. I asked him, I said, what did you, what do you think I should do? You know, should I, you at school that was going to be another eight years realistically. And right. But he, he told me that he, you know, go chase a dream. The school's going to be there in the event that you wanted to do it. Wow.

Iva: That's so true. That's a major mentor to have someone say to you, don't do this. This is a very dependable right. And go chase your dreams. That's beautiful.

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Alex: Yeah. And I mean, uh, to be very honest, my parents were as supportive as, uh, they kind of gave me a, the look and were like, you sure you want to do this? And mm-hmm <affirmative> the fire was burning. I was determined. And uh, yeah, moved to New York City the following year and I was there for four years. Wow. And then I was in LA for almost seven and a half. And now I balance between all three and Toronto. So, wow. Wow. I guess it was a good decision. It worked out in the long run, but, um,

Iva: It was, yeah. So what role kind of like solidified, what role were you like? Yep. Mm-hmm <affirmative> mm-hmm <affirmative> this is it. I never, ever am going back to anything else. There has to be like that one role.

Alex: I have, I have two, I have two. Oh, I got to do an epic special with Madonna, which was pretty cool. Okay.

Iva: So

Alex: Cool. Yeah. That was like, oh, like I'm in this room with all these people I'm like, and her I'm like, oh, okay. All right. I think I got a little bit of little bit of confidence from that one. And then I actually was a lead in a burlesque show with, uh, Coco Austin, Ice T's wife. Ah, so cool. And that was again, talk about a full circle moment of our conversation of the idea of feeling sexy. Right. Of feeling that kind of way while you're dancing. Cause

Iva: That doesn't always happen for us.

Alex: Totally. And it was like very much in the public forum. Right. I'm just on stage. Yeah. Right. Like that this person I got hired and I was speaking and dancing and doing the whole thing that was very much a uh, in a sold out ballroom in New York city. So that was,

Iva: So you heard it here first listeners. Cleft can be sexy too. Okay. <laugh> I just wanted to say that.

Alex: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. And don't you ever forget it?

Ashley: Do you find that in all of the roles that you've gotten, because you've done a whole lot of different things, do you find that those stereotypes of, you know, oh, you have a facial scar, so then you should automatically be the villain. Do you feel like that has ever come up or do you feel like you've been cast in roles that are, you know, a wide variety?

Alex: I think it's definitely played a part in like the pre casting or what I've been, uh, available to audition for. Okay. Because a lot of the times your agency manager, whoever you have kind of as a middle person, submitting you for roles, you, you might fit the specs. They need a white guy that uh, mm-hmm <affirmative> has, um, light eyes and is a certain height or what have you. So you have all these things, then they send in your photo and your resume or a reel, if you have one. Yeah. So then from that they look at, you look at your headshot and then they say, okay, I

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think he would fit this. I want him to audition for this role. It's not like I'm out here picking, uh, what I get to shoot. Right. I choose. Right. So I mean, I would love to count. There's so many things I want to be the first cleft action hero.

Iva: Say it. Yes. Say it. We dream big here. We dream big here. So put it out there. I

Ashley: Love it.

Alex: It becomes true. It was happened right on this podcast. Yeah.

Iva: There you go. We've heard it here.

Ashley: We believe in putting dreams out into the universe and watching 'em happen. We believe in manifesting. So, we're doing it.

Iva: This whole podcast was that. So you got it Alex, you got, you got it. You got it.

Ashley: Yes. <laugh>

Alex: Sometimes the, the way that I would attack roles or even audition for roles, I had to take into consideration that I do have a cleft. So, um, uh, a great piece of information I got told when auditioning, pretend like the people behind the camera know nothing and they really don't like, yeah. How would a person with a, a cleft behave? How would they react to this? Because as a cleft affected person, I have yet to audition for a role that it is defined that that person has a cleft. Has

Iva: That been intentional or just never happened?

Alex: Nope. Just never got offered the chance because I feel like, again, I feel like I have a one up on anybody else that's auditioning for

Ashley: The world.

Iva: Right. Obviously

Alex: <laugh> yeah. I would, I would love that, that opportunity to, to portray that my character study has been ongoing for quite some time now. So, uh, in the event that it ever pops up

Iva: <laugh> yeah. <laugh>

Alex: But no, I mean, as, as far as that goes, I think each thing there definitely affects it. I hope that in the future that I can fulfill that role or play that role. Yeah. Um, we see them again, like you said, coming up a little bit more and more now. So if that's a thing anyone's listening out there that's casting hook your boy up. I'm ready to rock and roll.

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Iva: Yes. Yes. And speaking of casting, Alex, what areas of entertainment would you say have been more accepting for you or just cleft in general?

Alex: I feel like in a larger sense and especially happening at a faster rate, dance, even whenever I started dancing in New York. Right. Yeah. Bigger people, people that weren't super fit, that weren't super, um, skinny, like that idea of a dancer's body. And now it's very much shattered that glass. Yeah. That there are people that, of all shapes sizes, colors. What have you, yeah. That are, are dancing. Mm-hmm <affirmative> um, facial differences. Um, what there's, her name is escaping me right now, but there's a girl that has a big birthmark around her eye. Yeah. Mm-hmm <affirmative> um, that is she's. I mean, first of all, she's fantastic. Yeah. But I also think like, for so long, if they didn't, you didn't look a certain way. It's

Iva: That visual. Yeah.

Alex: Right. Exactly. Totally. And I think that the mold, that mold has, has broken much faster and also because it isn't a vocal too. Yeah. Which we, um, we, we haven't touched on this yet, but um, singing lessons have been very difficult for myself, especially because, uh, whenever I'm using my chest voice, uh, because of your cleft, even though it's closed, right? Yeah. However, air quotes there, but because there's all still a tiny amount of air passing through there, and that doesn't just happen with, you know, super cleft affected people that other people that aren't diagnosed with. It will have air leak through their nose, they are a little more nasally. It's harder to hit those notes. Oh. And hear it. So that is something that I think is going to be very difficult because there is a direct technique to it. Yes. Rather than a, a visual, right. That one is going to be harder. Right. But, to answer your question, dance, I feel like has been the most accepting as far as that goes.

Ashley: Yeah. Oh, so great. Are you working on any cool projects right now?

Alex: Oh yes. So, my, let

Iva: Us know, let us know. Come on.

Alex: Yes. My fiancé and I, her stage name is Ramona Vogue and we are the Savage Patch Kids, is our, is our stage group name. I love last two DS. K I D D S because there is a group with one D and they're like a really, really aggressive rap group. And if you've heard it, you'd be like, I don't Alex, I don't, this is,

Iva: This is I don't, that don't match up. That doesn't match up. It doesn't match up there. This

Alex: Is not. Yeah. It's just, there's a little something missing there. We are actually producing, we're working on our live show. We are producing a show in the metaverse as well. Oh, cool. So going to be pretty interesting. I can't disclose too much. That's fine. But we're working to have a full experience where you get it's all based around a concept and we have a handful of new songs

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going into the new year. Yeah. So, and it's basically a look into our minds, literally, lyrically and with video. So you have

Iva: To let us know about that. So Ashley and I can, can attend in the metaverse. Yeah. I don't, I haven't been, I haven't been in the metaverse yet, so I'll go.

Ashley: Do we have to create an avatar

Alex: On your computer? Yeah. Whatever you want and or you can do it from the Oculus too, if you're doing it. Oh, that's so cool. Um, we've been so focused on the music and our, our dance stuff that we really haven't had a chance to get back to auditioning as much. Yeah. Recently, but fingers cross. Hopefully you'll see me on the phone. TV screen, big screen. It's

Ashley: The

Alex: Big screen near future.

Iva: What's happening. It's happening. It's happening. It's happening.

Ashley: Okay. So now is one of our favorite segments and we love to call it Smile and Slay, where we talk about questions that we've gotten from our friends and family. So Alex, we have a special question for you today. So if someone with a facial difference is interested in getting into the entertainment industry, what are some tips that you might have for how they might be able to get their foot in the door?

Iva:

Audience, get your pen and paper ready? Okay. Get it ready. <laugh>

Ashley: All you entertainers out there.

Iva: Cause they, we have a lot.

Alex: <laugh> the biggest one would just be to, to work on your craft and lean into your difference. Because I, like you said, the world is changing and, and people try to cover it up or, or do these things very

Iva: Nice way of putting that <laugh>

Ashley: That is very true

Alex: Work. Work your butt off, work your butt off at your craft because no matter what talent can't be denied. Hard work can't be denied. Absolutely. You'll get that one opportunity. You'll get that chance. And as soon as you prove that you deserve it, not because you were given it or not, because it was because you had a cleft or not, because you looked certain way down the line.

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If you show up, you put the work in and you really show that you can do it. Yeah. Then that's going to be, get more opportunities and open more doors and then allow you to get to a place where then hopefully one day you can, you can pick and choose. You can pick and choose what you want to do. So yeah. Put, put into work. That's just number one, show up with a smile on your face. Bring a little smile to somebody else. And that's, I feel like you could truly do anything. Yeah.

Iva: Alex, thank you so much. We knew having you on was going to be like great, but it has been a million times that, and I'm so we are so thankful for you coming on and speaking to the audience. I know they loved it too. And so that is our show for us today. Guys, you can find me on Instagram and TikTok at RealSophisticatedJoy.

Ashley: And you can find me on Instagram at CleftLoveIG and on TikTok at CleftLlove.

Alex: And you can find me at AlexEisenberg on Instagram and AlexEisenberg on Facebook because I'm old and still use Facebook.

Ashley: And don't forget to go to smiletrain.org, to learn more about all the wonderful and amazing things that Smile Train's doing for the cleft community around the world. You can find us on your favorite podcast streaming site. And while you're there, please don't forget to leave us a five-star review. Thank you so much for listening and, Iva, we're at the end of this journey. Can you believe it?

Iva: I know I can't believe it. I cannot believe it from, to start from November of 2021 at Cleft Con and someone just saying, we should do a podcast, to being here

Ashley: And here we are. And I have truly enjoyed every minute of, you know, our meetings leading up to recordings and actually recording with you because I knew that we had a chemistry together. Mm-hmm <affirmative> like the first time we met in 2020, and I feel like it's just blossomed and we just keep finding more and more similarities. And I am so grateful to get to call you my friend.

Iva: Aw, thank you. I feel the same. This is definitely the name says it all like love meets joy of our friendship, of our experiences, our shared experiences. Like there are just so many times where I'm just like, I'm almost like I wish that we could have connected sooner because we've had so many shared moments and it's like, she had something that I, I needed and I had something that she needed and we could have helped each other. And I feel like we're helping each other now and we're helping the audience. So it's, we came together when we come together and I'm just very thankful and grateful. And thank you so much to Smile Train for giving us this amazing opportunity. Um, and yeah. And thank you Ariel to, yes. Thank you to our producer, our

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Ashley: Producer too, but we're also just so grateful to have this platform to be able to educate with love because that's something that we value so much and bring awareness to this amazing, beautiful, talented community.

Iva: All right, guys. Thank you so much for listening

Ashley: As always. Thank you.

Speaker 4: If you like this show, be sure to subscribe, leave a review, follow us on social and tell all of your friends to listen. Please reach out with any questions or episode ideas by emailing us at [lovemeetsjoy@smiletrain.org](mailto:lovemeetsjoy@smiletrain.org). We can't wait to hear from you. Love Meets Joy is a product of Smile Train. Our hosts are Iva Ballou and Ashley. Our Senior Producer and Editor is Ariel Nachman. Our Smile Train Producer is Adina Lescher. Love Meets Joy is presented by Smile Train the world's largest cleft-focused organization. One in 700 babies is born with a cleft, a potentially life-threatening birth difference that can cause difficulties eating, breathing, hearing, and speaking. The good news is that Smile Train developed a sustainable model that empowers local healthcare workers around the world to provide lifesaving cleft treatment, to all who need it everywhere on earth 100% free. Learn more at [smiletrain.org](http://smiletrain.org). The information provided in these recordings is meant to be helpful to you and is provided as is for informational purposes. Smile Train cannot guarantee it is accurate up to date or error-free. We are not responsible for the content and disclaim all liability concerning actions taken or not taken based on these recordings.