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### Javier Fox

Javier Fox

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## Coming to the Plains

Javier Fox, Interviewee  
Michell Warren, Interviewer  
Jacob Rosdail, Videography

Sesquilé, Colombia

Interview Date: 09/20/2019

**WARREN:** The first thing I'll ask you is if you can state your name and the place of origin.

**FOX:** My name is Javier Fox. I was born and raised in Colombia, until I was age ten, almost eleven.

**WARREN:** And what part of Colombia were you from?

**FOX:** I grew up close to the capital of Bogota, in the center of the country. In the small town of Sesquilé which is about, I suppose, three hours from Bogota. It was up in the mountains, much more lush, wilderness; I considered it jungle more so, compared to here. It was a remote area with about forty other kids, ranging ages between four and seventeen. It just depends on the perspective, I got there when I was very young, to the orphanage.

**WARREN:** So, right. Tell me about where you lived there and what was that like?

**FOX:** The way I can describe the place I grew up is, it was run by priests, and it was Catholic. Basically, there were rules. Everything was a rule, everything had to be specific, everything you did was for a purpose. It was black and white, everything was either good or bad, so, by the time you're age four, pretty much all the kids knew that we were going to go to hell because we all stole, we all fought; we all did all the opposite thing that the priest... It was run in two kinds of environments, the environment that the way we behaved in front of the priests and then the environment we behaved when the priests were not around. The older kids were the ones that ran the orphanage, the ones that were teenagers. They were thirteen, fourteen, and since it was an open orphanage, basically, what that meant is that kids from all over could come until they were the age of seventeen. When they turned eighteen, they were turned over to the State, and the State decided what they would become, so a lot of them went into the military, or something like that.

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I came from, basically, a broken home. My understanding is that my mom died giving birth to my sister. I was about one or two years old when I went to live with my godmother. My

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godmother, what I remember of her, had three other kids, an older daughter, and a couple of younger kids, and one of them was close to my age. I remember him the most. He suffered a dramatic accident; he was burnt almost from head to toe, and I remember that it caused a lot of difficulties because he had a lot of surgeries, and there was no money. So, I noticed her crying many times. I was just a kid, but that is the thing I remember the most about her. And I think the situation happened that she could no longer take care of me, and she is the one who took me to the orphanage.

From my actual family the only people that I met, I think, was my aunt for a very short time, maybe my grandmother, because I remember seeing some older people. I remember playing with trucks and stuff and definitely my godmother because I spent a lot of time with her. She took me to the orphanage; I believe I was around four or five. I am not quite sure because my age is a strange situation, I don't really know exactly the date and the year I was born. Obviously for documentation purposes for America I was given an age and given a birthday, but it was not necessarily the one I celebrated. The one I continue to celebrate these days is the one in the orphanage... My grandmother came and visited me once and she told me, "Today you were born." I remember it was November twenty-sixth. Sometimes the kids get visitors, and they tell them that, so I don't know, I don't know if that was is the real birthday, but there was no documentation. That is why I went for and that was the first time I remember celebrating my birthday that was on November twenty-sixth. That is why I still celebrate that one. The government gave me May 19 to fill in the documentation and so that's the birthday on my legal documentation for adoption purposes.

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Growing up in the orphanage was definitely a different struggle; obviously, I'm older now, so I understand things, but looking back, the biggest difference and difficulty was with family. When it comes to family, for most kids it is just a word, and you have to build that structure to understand what family really is. When you don't have it, it's an understanding of what you have, your world becomes different. I feel like my world was mainly to survive. I learned very quickly to survive because we are constantly malnourished, you know. We had two meals a day; there was a huge bell they rang, and you threw down whatever you were doing, and you ran to get food and you had to be quick about it, otherwise the other kids would take your food. It was chaotic, but it didn't seem like that at the time because that's all I knew. It's interesting how your world is different in perspective; when you grow up with something, you don't realize there is something better. It's not until you get out and see, "Holy...! Wow! I don't know how I survived that. I don't understand how that happened."

I feel like my time in the orphanage was an interesting situation that propelled me. One of the greatest gifts that I have is the ability to forget the bad things in life. My nickname in the orphanage... all the kids have nicknames, we never called each other by our names. A lot of the

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time they didn't know their names. Everybody called me "Pato," which translates to "happy go lucky". I was one of the kids who did things for attention, you know. I climbed trees, I climbed buildings, I jumped, you know. I challenged whoever or if someone gave me a challenge, I did it; and that's how you got respect.

If you won fights, everybody was amazed, then you got to get in line first for lunch or they carried you on their back and the older kids protected you. So, it was important that you demonstrated quickly who you were because there were a lot of kids who were... I considered them zombified. Zombies, because their emotions and the conflicts left an empty shell that just walked around. They didn't smile a lot, they didn't talk a lot, they seemed to be abused by the whole system and I didn't understand why they were like that, you know. Obviously, I was a kid, so I had no understanding why, but I remember that clearly. I remember I didn't want to be like them because everybody took advantage of them, and they abused them and stuff.

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The unfortunate thing is that... when you're young and the people who are supposed to protect you and give you an understanding about the world and give you hope for the future are the ones who are mostly abusing you and corrupting you, you lose something of yourself, or you lose trust in not just adults but in humanity. The priests represented both good and evil at the same time. Some of them were great. I remember especially one priest, he passed away, unfortunately. But he was the one who gave me the most hope; he showed us the outside world, he sang with us. He had a guitar. He would drink his wine and start singing and start telling us about the outside world. Because our world was so small, it was caged, not necessarily because it had fences, but because we were separate from society. Even though, I grew up as a Colombian, I feel like I was not a Colombian because I was removed from the cultural of Colombia.

A country like Colombia is a family-oriented culture, which means that all your status and everything that you are, and you will be roots from your family. And if you don't have a good structure, a good foundation, then it's really hard to establish yourself as an individual. Especially when you are young because your resources are very limited, so we knew we were outcasts, we were different. The only time that we felt that we had similarities is when we played soccer, because we went to the streets in the town, and we followed the kid with the ball, you know. And so, there would be a kid walking, and there'd be a line of kids following them to the field. Once we got to the field, we started playing sports.

Other people and all the kids started to join our game. And then hours later, more people joined the game, and people started watching and stuff like that. That was the only time that I felt like I was like everyone else. There were no differences, there were no walls, there was no longer just an orphan and a nobody. We were just a bunch of people playing a game. And I suppose that's why soccer is so special. It's still my favorite sport, because it's a poor people's sport; you just

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need a ball and a patch of grass, or not even grass. So, you don't need a whole lot to play it, and lose yourself for a moment.

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In the World Cup, when you see these little-tiny-small countries that are considered third world or minorities that no one really cares about, most of the time they're beating this juggernaut. To me, it's just the greatest thing because it shows that sometimes it doesn't matter how much you have, and it is just the hunger you have, the passion you have within. And I suppose that that drove me... Like I said, singing songs and listening to these other stories... I think my favorite and the first book I remember reading as a kid was Aladdin, which is interesting because it's about this kid who lives in the street, an orphan who has pretty much nothing, but even when he didn't have anything, even when he had to steal to survive, he still gave to others. If he had a piece of bread, he broke it and, and gave it to the other ones around.

He went out of his way to help others when he had nothing. To me it was just amazing to think about castles and princesses and all these different things that we can't ever imagine in our world. That's why I think literature and especially stories that are, in some way, related to you are important when you are young because they give glimpses about something else. What's funny about that is that the very first movie that I saw when I came to America was Aladdin. I have never seen such an amazing world. We literally went from that place to Miami, and Miami to Omaha and then the next day, we decided to go to a movie, and it was Aladdin. I didn't understand it because it was in English, obviously. But I knew the story, the imagery. I was just like "Wow." I had never seen movies in a movie theatre in Colombia.

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A lot of them were black and white and stuff like that, and stories that we had on the color TV they had once in a while, we had the American movies and stuff like that, but when you see it in the theater, it's just completely different. It still had a huge impact, and I think that's probably why my spirit trusts in art and other things.

**WARREN:** Before you came to live with Jerry and Janet, was the orphanage the only place you lived before you came that you remember?

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**FOX:** There were a few places I lived before I moved to America. The first one was with my godmother, then when she took me to the orphanage that is mainly where I spent most of my time. I went to school there, I completed first grade to fifth grade, almost all the way to fifth grade; before I was finished, we moved to a different orphanage in Bogotá, because something

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happened that they had to close down our orphanage and so they split us up. A small group went with one priest and another group with another priest, another group with another priest. The girls went with a different priest, so we split up. About ten of us... Thankfully, I was fortunate that I went with Hermano Marco León, the priest that really was influential my life. I was very fortunate for that, because definitely other priests made our lives pretty miserable. They drank too much, and they became violent, and they, you know.

That's when they turned and they started turning their anger towards us; we got hit with sticks and everything. We had a lot of problems with that because we understood that if we did something wrong, we deserved a punishment, but when we didn't do anything wrong, we still got punished. And that raised a lot of alarms and a lot of kids tried to escape. I ended up escaping from the orphanage with another older kid who was one of my good friends. We escaped from the orphanage, and we escaped to Bogota. So, I lived on the streets for about six months; I remember living and sleeping on the sidewalks. Since he came from the streets... The orphanage is an open orphanage, so what happens is that they pick up kids from the streets, from broken homes or young kids who don't have a home. They bring them in.

So, you have a mixture. Imagine a fourteen-year-old who has lived on the street for eight years of his life, and you combine that fourteen-year-old with kids who are six, five years old, that came from a broken home, so it's different, completely different structure. That kid was fourteen years old. To us, he was ancient. He had so much more experience with life; obviously, he knew how to take care of himself, because he lived so much adversity and chaos for a long time in his life. He was the one teaching us how to do stuff, how to steal, how to make weapons, how to move around, how to escape, and to go outside at night, so we could steal stuff for him, but we were the ones getting caught, the young ones. And so, it was a messed-up structure of who did you follow, because if you follow the priest, it was just black and white. We prayed before breakfast, after breakfast, before night, praying didn't do doing any good because you're still cold, you're still hungry, you still feel alone, you have no warmth at all.

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And so, it didn't matter how much you prayed, it didn't matter how many images of demons and angels are around you, and how many times they tell you that you have to be good. What was the purpose? You know? If you were good, it didn't do anything for you. It was not feeding you. It became apparent that the structure that you lived in, you had to be aware of what things you did. Like I said, fortunately, I was one of those kids who was able to forget all the terrible things, when I got beat up, when I got abused physically, emotionally by the priests or by the older boys... I had a tomorrow is going to be better attitude. Even though I didn't think about tomorrow, because today I need to find food. I used to hide food; you know. I used to do all these different things because we were just thinking about survival, so we didn't have time, or a

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reason to think about tomorrow and if you didn't think about tomorrow, you didn't really care about the people next to you.

Probably my strongest and my hardest memory that I have from the orphanage that really changed me as an individual was when I saw my best friend die, and that was tough. He was probably four, five years older than me. He had a good heart. He meant well. He knew how to fight, but he meant well. He was not one of those who was going to take advantage of you. If things were not balanced, it had to be a balance in this world. I was attracted to him because he motivated me. He was a good kid, a happy kid. So, I spent a lot of time with him; he taught me a lot of things. He was the reason I escaped from the orphanage; it was because he knew the streets and stuff like that, and he told me he would take care of me.

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Things got bad at the orphanage. A lot of kids who got abused running around and there was a lot of chaos from the priest abusing the kids and stuff like that. It just became a very dangerous place, so we decided to run; that's the only thing you can do. The most important commodity that we had and that we needed was shoes. We fought for everything, but the most important thing we fought for was shoes, because shoes gave us freedom. We were able to run, we were able to move. Sometimes we even slept with our shoes on because we didn't want to lose them; at night kids came and took your stuff or beat you up. So, we had to escape our room. We were like ninjas. You gave me ten seconds, and I was gone. I was able to climb anything, I was able to get into anything.

Our windows... Since it was full of trees and basically jungle, we made our sheets into ropes, we threw them to the trees, so we could climb out in case people came for us. That's how we escaped, to go and goof around at night. It was imperative that we had shoes, the priests knew that. So, one of their favorite games was... Anything we had was, obviously, donations, for example, new clothes or especially shoes, they tied them together and they had someone go and climb the highest tree, put it on top of the tree and then made us go race for it. They didn't just say, "Hey, here, have good shoes." Literally, they made us go in line and then race up the tree.

Whoever got the shoes was who got to keep the shoes. So, we were kicking each other, punching each other, we were falling off the tree, we beat ourselves up, and they're down there clapping and enjoying it and we were just so excited to get those shoes, you know. Just looking at how chaotic that was, what kind of person would do that to kids? Because you don't know the effects it is going to have on your life until later on, until you realize "wow." Obviously, in some kids have bigger influences than others.

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For me, until I was age eight or so, I was reckless and had no stop at all in me; I could climb anything; I could go anywhere. I was just made of steel, I felt invincible, but then my friend passed away. He was killed in front of me. It changed my whole world because for the first time in my life I felt a shivering. I felt vulnerable. You can die at any moment. I saw him laughing just yesterday, and now he's gone. So, when you realize that, it completely changes you. I don't know if you've heard the expression, "childhood is over the moment you know you are going to die," but it's totally true, I totally believe it. I knew I was a different person. The next day I was no longer the same kid that I was yesterday, I was no longer a kid. I was a survivor. It took over much more, I became harsh, I became a stone wall with my emotions. I showed no emotion, I didn't cry, I didn't laugh. Everything was weakness, everything was going to be used against me. I became a completely different kid. That obviously followed me for many years.

Once I moved to Bogotá, I remember that there was a knock on the door and the priest told me to go with this guy. I'd seen the guy one other time in my life. Once in a while you get to visit the city; there was a truck that came to the orphanage to bring supplies there from the city; we got our clothes, and we got our food and all that stuff. There was a truck that came once a week, so, if you're good, you're able to go in the truck, and as a reward, you get to go to the city and see it, and they brought you back. It was a big deal; everybody wanted to do it, so you had to behave. When I said behave, you had to do everything they told you to do because... We didn't have a lot of adults, so they had to give an example. When someone did not follow the rules, in front of everybody they got punished severely, and we knew certain things. We did not cross certain lines, it was very important that the kids understood that, and they made a point.

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We had to be good, and, fortunately, I was good, and they took me to the city, I was able to meet this guy. We went to this room, and he gave me what I now know is a physical. He looked in my eyes, he checked my breathing, and he looked into my mouth. He was a doctor. I had no idea who he was, I didn't care. I just went back to the orphanage with the priest. Later on, when I moved to the city, there was a knock and it was the same guy, and the priest told me to go with him; his name is Carlos. And Carlos took me to his house. It happened that Carlos knew my father; his daughter was going to school here to learn English. She was a dentist; she wanted to learn English, and so she came. Carlos sent her over and my dad, at the time, was the Director of International Studies, and helped students from all over the world to come and learn English and stuff like that. And he did the processes, and helped with paperwork and all that stuff, so a lot of kids from all overtook advantage of that and he opened his house and his heart to people.

He was able to have Carlos's daughter María live with them, though I did not know it at the time. Carlos took me in. He was a busy man. He had his wife, and he had other kids; his younger kid Andrés, was still living at home and going to school. It was the first time that I was in a functional, warm home. But I did not understand that; I had no idea, "Why was I here? You

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know. These are my new parents.” He said, "No, I'm not your dad." Why would he make that point? I didn't understand, so I was, "Hey, he is giving me free food, and a warm bed. It's great." Carlos did other things; he was trying to civilize me.

He tried simple things, like using silverware which sounds like, "Hey, anybody can do that." No, not everyone can do that. Not if you don't know how to use silverware or if there was no point because you're shoveling the food into your mouth, because you want to eat as much and as fast as you can. You're not using silverware; you are not sitting at the table for more than five seconds. You're just hoping that no one around is going to grab your food. It was tough because he was telling me things that completely went against my nature, my world, my structure that I had built; and it made no sense to me. It was a hidden mess. I was listening because he was giving me stuff, but I was not really adapting, you know. He was trying to teach me some English. Obviously, I had way bigger problems than that. Why would I care about English?

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He taught me things like food, family, basic words. Believe it or not, my Spanish was very, very bad. Growing up in the orphanage... imagine you have a really good Spanish, no, no, no. The school system is not the same. You learn street language, so, obviously, my language was very tough, very crude, very physical, very pointed – to get information, and that was it. It was not about getting to know you, no. It was not a personal language. It was more in your face, because that's all I needed, you know. I used the things I needed, the tools. One of my side effects that I have as a kid or that my mom gave me or something like that, is that I'm a very curious kid. I could not leave anything alone. I could not, if someone told me, "Don't touch it." I just had to figure it out.

My world was so different than here. There were no fences in the orphanage. Even though it's a small world, there were no fences; there were no sidewalks. There was no street. It was nature and me. There was a connection that I built, that I learned, that I trusted, that I understood. It was so important to me because, there, you see a spider, you put your hand there. The spider walks in your hand, you look at it, you put it back down. You see every kind of animal; every day we checked our shoes to make sure nothing crawled on it. There were venomous snakes, there were animals everywhere. When you walk into the deep jungle, you listen to the birds because those are your sirens. They tell you what's around you. You don't make noise; you are the quiet one. You listen, you hear, you tap things. You know what the clean water is. I was six, seven, eight years old learning all this amazing stuff that people here have no clue.

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I was completely in tune with the natural world, my hearing was perfect, my way of seeing in the dark was great, the way I touched things was great. I was silent, I never made any noise, and I

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had that with me. Obviously, that didn't make any difference in a different culture. Going with Carlos, my favorite thing and most weird, bizarre situation...I had people coming and visiting and from different places. Carlos had friends and family friends or different family members that were curious about visiting me. They were asking me questions and I got used to dealing with adults.

Adults are easy to deal with as a kid because with adults, they tell you stories, they give you candy and they are always thinking, "Oh, it's going to be better, and you are going to have a happy future." After you hear the same story and nothing changes, you don't believe it, so you just smile and think, "Yes, sure." You take their candy and then they go away. So, it was great. You learn not to trust adults; by the time you are five years old, you do not trust. You don't trust a lot of your own companions. You definitely don't trust adults because they are full of lies. All they do is lie, in our world. All they do is tell you stories that are not true. All they tell you are things that never happened, we've never seen it.

We cannot understand it. They tell you about all this other stuff, but it's not real to you, all that is real is that candy they have, and so, I knew how to deal with adults very young. I learned my limitations, and I knew how to survive. I learned very quickly when you're telling me something true, when you're... People came and went, I'm like, "Whatever, whatever." I clearly remember we were driving to the airport, the big international airport in Bogotá, and Carlos turns around and throws me for the first time, "Today you're going to meet your father." I'm like, "Whatever." I am thinking of a short brown guy. We are driving, we got to the airport, and I see the biggest, scariest man I have ever seen in my life. I mean, this was the most nightmarish possible scenario you can put someone in. You see a kid and you tell me that's my father?

Yes, I'm a kid, you think I'm stupid? There's something there that doesn't add up, something is not making sense. I had seen that guy because he visited before, but I'm like, "That's not my dad. I know for sure, that's not my dad." So, later on, I was like, "Why did he wait this long to tell me that?" In the orphanage, after a certain age they don't tell you about adoption. Why? Because there's more lies. The problem is that the older kids tell you, "Man, we're never going to see you again. They're going to torture you. They are going to take you away." So, your mind is filled with the worst possible situation, because at least you have a place here, but there, they are going to take you away, and never going to see you again.

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So, they are going to torture you, murder you, something like that, all that chaos that's not good. So, why would I want that? If the older kids hear that they are going to get adopted, they run away from the orphanage. After a while the priests don't tell them until someone is right there and tell you, "Go with them." That's it. That's the only time you hear something about adoption, or if they are going somewhere else so we don't have those stories anymore, so I think that's

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why Carlos waited until we were driving to the airport to tell me. It made sense. Anyways, that was the very first glimpse of my new future.

**ROSDAIL:** When did you discover ceramics?

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**FOX:** Art, in general, came to me in middle school. I had this phenomenal, this very wise and amazing teacher who noticed that I wasn't a terrible student. Not necessarily because I was not smart, or something like that; I could not sit still for very long. I got not necessarily tired, but I just got very bored very quickly. Most of the structure in America, schooling is, you come in, you sit down, you wait for instructor, you do something, you just keep sitting and waiting and waiting. I wasn't used to that. I was one of those students that I got done with something very quickly, and then if you're not paying attention to me, or if I didn't have anything to do, I run away.

It was very important that I had something to do, so this art teacher in middle school noticed that I had a lot of energy and she tried everything. I was one of those kinds of kids that ten minutes later, "I'm done." And even if you tell me to do it again or do something over, I would be, "Done". One day she came with a piece of wood, just a big chunk of wood, I think it was pine, two feet by two feet. She brought this poster of Albrecht Dürer, who is a German artist, one of my favorites of all time. He did the "praying hands" or "the four horsemen of the apocalypse." Very tough stuff, very technical, a lot of detail; he did a lot of wood carving. She gave me some tools and gave me a little demo of how to use them; then she's like, "I want you to do that," and so, "Okay." I started, and I just got consumed. There was something about it... It felt really good and from then on, I loved that class. I just kept working on that piece of wood. She gave me materials like clay and other things; I was able to use my hands for the first time. All the other classes to me were boring; it was so structured, English class was a pain because my English was terrible; all the other kids spoke good English.

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It didn't help that the school systems here were.... I came to a very conservative place; Kearney is very conservative. Especially at the time I came here, it was very white. Oh my gosh! My first couple months of school were very difficult. I came in the summer, so it was good because it was warm, and I like the heat; I grew up in the jungle. Anything below 60°, I thought I was going to die because it was too cold. At least in the summer it wasn't too bad, but the kids here were in a different world. In the orphanage, the rules were if you fought and if you did the things that the other kids told you, you got to go in front of the line, people elevated you, put you on their shoulders, people gave you candy and stuff like that; it was like you were a celebrity. In America, it had the complete opposite effect, if you fought, if you cause chaos or did anything

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like that, then people stayed away from you because then you were labeled, "Oh, that kid is a troublemaker. You shouldn't be doing that. You are breaking the rules." Everything had structure; there was just so much structure and I couldn't handle it.

And, honestly, my best friend in fifth grade, when I came here, was the principal because I saw him so, so much. He was the only one who knew me. The teachers did not know what to do with me. It was just a different dynamic; my world was not at all attuned to this world. And I saw these big people. In my life I'd never seen such big people, so I was terrified because I thought, "Man, they are just going to kick my ass and take me to town and they're going to make me their slave. Man, I got to do something." That's part of the reason I started martial arts in sixth grade; probably my parents tried to find ways to use my energy. I don't know if you understand, my parents are the most structured people I know, but they're the most amazing people; they are hardworking individuals. My father Jerald Fox, before he retired, was the Director of International Studies at the university. Very wise man, the smartest man I know to this day. My mother, Janet Fox, is a history buff; she taught at Kearney High for thirty-some years. In this town there's no place I go that someone doesn't know their name. It drove me crazy; every place we went, I was like, "Ahh". People just come to them, talk to them, and I'm there, waiting and waiting; I hated waiting; I was not a patient kid.

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**WARREN:** The history of Jerry's relationship with Colombia...

**FOX:** My father was the Director of International Studies before he retired. He made a lot of progress in building up the international education system of the university. He was the pioneer of the fair world conferences and the food festival that people enjoy these days; he started that down in his basement. The connection with Colombia, my father for a long time had families that came in and lived with him. I think it started with Pacho in the eighties; he was one of them. Later on, Carlos's daughter, María, and then a couple of others... He had this interesting relationship with Colombians, but I think the main connection was with Hermano Rey, because Hermano Rey adopted six boys from the orphanage.

**WARREN:** Who?

**FOX:** Hermano Rey. His name is Rey Chamba. Hermano means "brother", so he is a priest. He is a priest from Colombia. What you need to know about Hermano Rey, he's the greatest guy that I know in my life, outside of my father. He's the one who was running our orphanage. He ran, I don't know, between fifteen and twenty other orphanages around Colombia. He also ran homes for the elderly; he went around to raise money and help kids and help the elderly.

[0:50:51]

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A culture like Colombia is family oriented, and there are so many orphans because during the seventies, eighties and nineties, there was a huge deal with, not just the FARC [The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia], but also with drugs. Cocaine is one the main exports of Colombia and unfortunately, the side effect of that doesn't just ruin lives here, like you see with the drug related people, it ruins lives in a place like Colombia because the way the drug lords of the organization get members is not advertising in the newspapers, "Hey, you want to be a drug lord? You want to be a member of this? Come by and we'll do an interview." No, they basically use terror, and they go to people's homes. When I was back in Colombia, I wanted to learn about the history of me and why I was an orphan and why there are so many orphans around the area. It made no sense. All these warm and welcoming people, how? It made no sense to me, so, I wanted to find out the answers to these questions. It was important to me to close that chapter of my life.

I went to these towns, and I noticed that there were a lot of women with a lot of kids, and these women, obviously, did not want to talk about it, but the few who wanted to talk told me their stories. They said, "Well, these two are mine and these three are not". It's like, "Wow! Where do these three come from? They came from the streets." "What happened to their parents?" Well, what happens is that the patrols of the drug lords or the organizations drive by these small towns that mostly consist of farmers, and very small businesses and just poor people. So, it's easy to manipulate them, because when you work the land, you care about the land, you care about people.

[0:53:15]

When you have all these military looking people coming in trucks, go to your home, open the door, make everybody come out and point guns at the head of the family, usually the male, and say, "You come with us, or we will kill your family and then kill you." You don't have a lot of options, so it totally made sense. I was able to draw a map of where all these people were driving, why would this town be so heavily affected by orphans and broken families and all this stuff, while this town was not? Who was able to pay them off and who was not? People live terribly... because if I did not go with them, if I was the head of the family, my family would get killed; even if I went with them, they would know where my family lived. The entire time I had to follow what they told me.

So, it totally made sense how they were able to recruit people. Part of the reason I didn't know about my father... there was no record of him, no name, nothing. It made sense that he was one of the victims, that he was taken in the middle of the night or something. They came for him, and the unfortunate thing is that my mom was pregnant. I'm still looking for my sister, that's my biggest goal left in Colombia. The unfortunate thing is that I don't know where to start; I don't have any names. My blood is unreliable because I wasn't sure if I was born in the hospital; the records are all gone. I've tried many times through the orphanage to try to find my records if

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there's anything, and I haven't been able to find them. I'm not giving up, but it's tough. I feel that my sister's somewhere out there. I don't know if I'm the oldest, or if there's another before me. It'd be nice to know. Corruption makes sense when people don't care and when people care too much about what happens. It's really easy to manipulate and use people when they care. When you care then you have something to lose, and you are willing to do anything for them.

[0:55:58]

**WARREN:** Jerry.

**FOX:** My father Jerry made a connection with this amazing priest, Rey Chamba, who adopted six boys from the orphanage. Not necessarily from mine, they're older than me, but he wanted to send them to America to go to school, and he got in contact with my father about that. My father was able to bring them to America, so they could go to school, learn English and give them all the opportunities possible. Obviously, the priest Rey didn't have the money to just send everybody to college in the United States and so, my dad was able to help them tremendously. He opened not just his home, but building that relationship and understanding the conflict, it was important for him to do something and that to me was amazing. As a kid, I did not know all that stuff; later on, I learned about it.

Understand that you don't know how you are going to impact people's lives by what you do, you can do one thing, or you can do many things, and that relationship leads to other things. When my brother was born, they wanted to have someone close to his age. My brother is a year older than me. When I went back to Colombia, and I asked Rey about the story and how I was adopted, it was a different story from what my parents had told me. Before I was chosen to be adopted, there was a kid who was born with difficulty hearing and his whole language was difficult, so he already had a difficult childhood. He had difficulties, and my dad considered him, but because my brother is also a special needs kid... I always have difficulty explaining my brother...

**WARREN:** Just to clarify, you are talking about your brother here?

[0:58:47]

**FOX:** Yes, my brother in America. His name is Greg. Greg is the person who changed me the most of anybody in the world, because my brother sees the world entirely differently from any other person. When I speak about my brother it is hard to... I still have difficulty finding the words to talk about it because I'm not quite sure. He suffers from something called the twenty first chromosome which is so rare that it doesn't even have a name. In the entire United States, there's only one place for them, and it's actually in Omaha [NE], a home where the kids have similar disabilities. When I describe what he does, people think, "Oh, he's autistic." No, he's not.

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He understands, for example, my brother remembers things that we had for dinner in Cancun, Mexico ten years ago. He will never be able to drive in the streets, not because he cannot handle the car; the kid is 6' 6".

When you look at how tall and skinny, he is... the kid is always smiling. If you ask him, what is the difference between a Ford Fiesta and a Lamborghini? He imagines cars, he has no clue what a Lamborghini is other than it's a car. He doesn't understand the complexities of that. If you ask him, "You want some prime bread or Taco Bell for dinner? He'll choose Taco Bell; he loves Taco Bell. He's been working at the YMCA for many years. He deals with people, he knows your name, he knows everything. He knows how to interact, he has no problem interacting, he loves when people are interacting. He loves to gather people and to have parties and all that stuff. The biggest thing about my brother is that he's everything that I would like to be.

[1:01:22]

He doesn't have a sore bone in his body. When I came to America, I changed between being Catholic, because I was forced to be a Catholic; I didn't have the chance to be something else. It's not like, "Ah, sir, can I be Jewish?", no. When I came to America, I got options, so I chose to be a Christian because it made more sense to me. I had read the Bible ever since I was a kid; I did not understand it, but I read it again. As a Christian we're always looking for examples, to be led by or to lead by; we like examples. We like seeing Jesus's life and reading about it because it's an example how we can live our lives to be better people. If we are honestly trying to be a better person and if you repent with honesty... you try to be better. You will make mistakes but if you learn from your mistakes... And my brother is my clear example of the kind of person that I should be, because he sees the world in a way that it has no crime, no evil, he doesn't understand race, he doesn't understand political power, he doesn't understand greed.

He doesn't want more like all of us, you know. You have a one-bedroom house, then your neighbor has a two-bedroom house, therefore, you want that, a two-bedroom house. You're constantly in competition, you're constantly pushed to do more. What is the purpose of doing something or getting more? Is it just because you want to be a better person, you want to do something with it? Is it because you want to have more stuff? So, you lose track of what is important. My brother has never lost track of that; he sweats and bleeds, it's exactly what he is. He will tell you straight out what he is by his smile, by the way he carries himself, by the way he talks to people, by the way he engages, yeah. One clear story... First of all, I am one hundred and ten percent competitive, I came from a world of competition.

[1:04:29]

Obviously, I'm a competitive person, not as much now, but I used to be. When I first came, my nature was competitive. For example, the kid is way taller than me, we were playing basketball,

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he knows all about basketball, I know very little about basketball, we were playing and I'm beating him forty to ten. How can I beat this kid when he is twice as tall as me and knows all the sport? It just made no sense to me. I got bored with it because I thought he was going to crush me. We played soccer and I kicked the ball three hundred miles, and he just barely tapped it. We played catch and I threw the ball as hard as I could and he was just like, "La, la, la," with a smile on his face, just enjoying the time and enjoying that I am playing with him. And I was getting aggravated because this guy makes no sense to me. He made no sense to me.

My dad and I totally understand it. My dad spoke at one time five languages, been to most places in the world, knows people from all over, is well-versed, educated, read thousands of books. He knows his stuff, he knows how to build things, he knows how to cook, he knows how to dress, he knows something about everything, he is a truly a Renaissance man, so I understand that. He's also a military German, so it creates a potent combination; he can be stubborn, he likes his way, he thinks his way. If you are not doing your job, he doesn't care who you are, he would tell you, "You are not doing your job." It's tough, because he expected greatness from me from day one; he wanted me to learn English, but not just English, he wanted me to learn proper English. He wanted me to speak well. I loved to push his buttons, "Hey dude, what's up?" And he just looked at me with this looking [imitates his father's voice] "Excuse me? That is not English." Just things like that, that's my father.

And then you have my mother, who is a genuine bookworm, very articulate, very wise, a history buff, Swedish. It's a different kind of woman. She's not German, thank God. She was the one who explained, "Look, your father wants you to do this because..." With my father there was no "because..." You just had to do it. With my mother it was, "because it is important, because you learn something." If I was going to choose from one of those two for punishments, I would choose her, obviously.

[1:07:55]

My punishment in Colombia was you got beat up with branches that the priest had in barrels of water to keep them nice and flexible, so they'd welt the skin, you know. You knew when you got punished. You were hurting for a long time, not just physically, but emotionally. My punishment in America was, [imitates his dad's voice] "Go to your room." I'm like, "Alright, I got stereo there, tv there, comics. Alright, I can go there and chill." Obviously, my punishment or the things I that I considered harsh is like, "Man, there's this big guy who could just pick me up and toss me across the room and all he has on me is just "go to my room?"" When I got in trouble, I was like, "Oh, man, this is the life." Obviously, they knew that it was not working for me, so, they started taking things away from me that I cared about. Then I started listening because at first is, "This is too easy. I never go hungry anymore..." Anyways, there you have my mother and my father. I started building a relationship. It was hard at first because language barriers, culture, everything was a barrier.

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My dad was the only one spoke who Spanish, so, I was able to communicate with him, my mom was, "Wait until your father gets home" and so, I was, "Okay." Then, there's my brother who made no sense; he just did not react to anything I did. In Colombia there was an equal opposite reaction for anything like this: I push you; you push me back; it made sense. I stole, I got in trouble, it made sense. I was hungry, so I ate, it made sense. My brother, no, I pushed him, he's like, "Ha-ha". It was just so irritating because everything I did was just irritating me more. The thing is, I was very competitive and very aware of myself, obviously not a bookworm like Americans were, but I had a master's degree in streets arts so, you have me in an environment with all these kinds who came from middle class environments. And most of them have their computers. At sixteen they get their cars and stuff like that. A lot of my friends had that, and they had all these legacies; their family names were very important to them.

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They had this God-fearing sense about them and so, I was like, "How can I use this?" So, from middle school, I started telling some my story, that I came from this orphanage and, people, "Woah, really?" They started looking at me like I was interesting and exciting, so I was, "Hmmm." So, I started telling kids this story, and especially to girls. Girls started listening to my story and pretty soon, I was like, "Oh, yeah, English is so hard, so difficult. I cannot understand it." so they started doing the homework for me. They started taking notes for me. They started giving me stuff and inviting me to all this stuff and I was like, "Man, this is pretty sweet." I had that going for me. In high school, I didn't want to lose, I was ultracompetitive, I was doing sports, wrestling, taekwondo, boxing, and all this.

I was different, and I had, obviously, the Spanish accent, you know. Girls at the time liked it because I was different, so I had that. Then, there's my brother; just looking down the hallway, there he is walking around, smiling. I had no clue what he was doing or thinking. It just drove me crazy; I was like, "Do something. You have all this, and you aren't doing anything." Just drove me crazy to the point that I didn't want to do anything with him because I got irritated, you know. He asked me, "Oh, you want to go play catch?" "No. I got something else." "You want to go swimming?" "No." Not because I didn't want to do it, because I didn't want to do it with him, because he irritated me. This went on for a while because I didn't care about him at all. I just looked at him like someone who should be something else, but he's not. I didn't respect him. Because if I was able to manipulate you and use you, you are no longer important to me, that was my world.

So, this guy was just a pushover, he was just nothing. I'm still like, "Why do people like him? Why do all these adults look at him and smile, and he's so popular?" And I didn't understand anything about that, you know. One day, we were sitting down, and he was upstairs, I was downstairs, we were watching tv, he comes down, running down, "There's something bad on tv." "What? There's always bad on tv. "Change the channel." So, I changed the channel, and there's

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the war going on, people are dying and so, he is like, "People are dying," "Yeah, it's a war." And he just looked at me with this expression that he had no idea what was going on and I looked at him and he looked at me.

[1:14:14]

I asked him a question, "Do you know why they're dying?" And he's like, "Yeah, because they got hurt." "But you know why they got hurt?" And he just kept looking at me as if he didn't have clue, and I'm like, "Okay, these guys over here are hurting these people here. They're shooting these people; they're killing these people." And he looked at me like he didn't have a clue what the hell I was saying. "Greg, those people here are bad; they're killing these good people, we got to stop that." He keeps looking at me like, "What the hell are you talking about?" I'm like, "Oh my gosh." This light went on, and my brain is like, "What is wrong with this kid?" Now for the first time, I knew there was something wrong with him, but I did not know what was wrong with him, does that make sense?

It is like understanding something, if people tell you, "This is pizza," but it tastes like chicken, so, how can it be pizza? Something like that, I don't know. And so, I'm like, "Gosh," so, I begin to talk to him to figure out what he was thinking about this whole issue of the world and conflict and all that stuff, and one thing led to another. I just started asking hundreds of questions and it got me crazier because I'm like, "This is simple stuff, how can you not understand that?" One day my dad was going up to his room and I noticed that my dad messed up his room, I'm like, "Hey, dad, how come you messed up his room? He spent all this time cleaning it. He cleans it four times a day, you know. He should go to my room and clean it." My dad looked at me and said, "He needs to understand that the world's not perfect." "It is not perfect?" I'm like, "No, it's not perfect, what does it mean?" "Yeah, I know that it's not perfect. It's full of chaos and stuff like that." "He doesn't know that." I'm like, "What? What do you mean he doesn't know that?"

[1:16:51]

Putting it all together when he's talking about the world and all this conflict, and how clean he keeps his room and all that stuff and all this stuff, and I'm like, "Oh my gosh! It totally makes sense now. This kid has absolutely no concept of conflict, of strife, of anything like that. It's like, "Wow" Later on, I began asking my dad all about this, because we are filtering my brother's world. We are dictating where to go and where to turn; in his own world he would just keep going straight. The reason he can't drive is because he would not understand that the red light means "stop." He would just keep going. His world just keeps going, honestly. The best way I can describe him is, there's a highway and he's driving and just keeps going straight. He sees what is on both sides, he sees in front of you, he sees you, stops, talks to you, he sees a Black person, stops, talks to them. He doesn't understand they're black or white, they're just people, he doesn't understand any of that.

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When that hit me, when that actually made sense to me, it totally changed my life because for the first time in my life, I looked at him, not here [points low] but up here [points up]. He really was doing everything that I wanted to do, but it was so hard. I had filled my heart with so much anger and frustration and pain that I told myself that there's no way I can go back, that I cannot be someone like him. He kept showing me and demonstrating to me that it was possible, and I began to change, and I realized that my actions had a purpose.

What was the purpose? Was I really helping someone? Was it all this for myself? There's this guy who genuinely cares and it doesn't matter who you are, he would stop and talk to you, and he would give you whatever is in his wallet at any given moment without even thinking about it. Yet, I was making excuses for everything I was doing and, realizing that made me aware that there are examples, there is true magic in the world, that there is something better than ourselves. He is very valuable in my life because he was able to show me so much by doing so little, by just being himself.

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There was really nothing wrong with him. It was something wrong with me. When I realized that, he changed me, and I just wish that people would see him how I see him. I believe in miracles; he gave me that because my life has been one miracle after another. The opportunity to live among amazing people, to have a life and to have an opportunity to do something with that life. I took many chances when I was young, and I was fortunate to have very few scars from it, but then to have an opportunity and not to do anything with it, I feel like it'd be the biggest regret or the worst decision I could possibly make in my life, so I have to do something with the opportunity given to me.

**WARREN:** If you could think of one thing that you really miss that you had to leave behind when you came here, what would that be? And how does that affect you now? What would you tell someone else who was going to start his or her life again here in the States after having difficulties in their own country?

[1:22:55]

**FOX:** The hardest thing for me to leave behind was understanding what Colombia really was because even when I lived there, I was an outsider. Being an orphan, you don't get a lot of points for that; but it was hard. I remember as a kid walking down the streets and window shopping because that was all that we could do. I remember that the shop owners would have pieces of brown sugar or candy to give to us, so, we moved along because they didn't want us in their shop for too long. We thought it was nice people giving us candy. There's so much I have learned since then about Colombia by going back and visiting and talking to the people. How beautiful the culture is, and how beautiful the people are; I have learned to appreciate it very much,

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because it has taught me so much, especially about the natural world. I think if it's something physical that I miss a lot it is definitely the natural world, and the other thing is the food.

I miss the food a lot, because I used to go and climb trees and tap on the fruit and then, if it falls down, it means it's ready. The tree will tell you when it's ready. Here we just grab it, and it doesn't matter. All these fruits and there are over a hundred kinds of fruits, most of them we don't even export; a lot of them most people don't know about. It had an impact because sometimes that's all what we had, but sometimes because it was so delicious, we just walked and walked until we found it. Then the food that the people cooked in the streets, I remember the smells of the chicken and the meat and the different things like that; even big cities like New York or LA and other places that I've been don't have the same smells and flavors that I remember. I think that that part of the memories is a big factor in my life because when you're hungry and you're young, you remember a lot about food, a lot of smells, because hunger is such a powerful incentive to you to do things, to move you forward or to make you find the food, so it motivates you, either for good or bad.

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I remember a lot of smells and the crowds talking and seeing all these beautiful colors of hundreds and hundreds of flowers in the markets. I definitely remember that and miss that, and every time I go back, I look forward to the simplest things. The first time I bought a piece of candy, it was so incredible because I was able to take some money from my pocket, give it to them and I got candy in return. For the longest time you just dream about it, you just walk around, you're just right next to the glass, and you are looking, you're excited and you want to taste it all, but you can't, and so they give you a piece of whatever they have for you to sit outside. All this window shopping, not for fancy clothes or anything like that, just for the simplest things.

There were two things that I brought with me from Colombia, one of them which I still have. I have a porcelain little baby Jesus; the eyes are so realistic. I always used to look at it; they had it on a little altar in the orphanage. Hermano Rey always stopped by, and he looked at me because I also was staring at it. Before I left, he told me I could have it; that was really nice. And another one was a chain that had praying beads, like a rosary, but it was a chain and at the end had beads. I don't have it anymore; unfortunately, I lost it, but those were the most important tokens that I brought with me. For anybody who is going through this situation or has gone through this situation or will be through this situation, moving from one country to a whole new culture, it is going to be a struggle, but you just have to think of yourself, make peace with yourself and then make peace with the ones around you. You'll notice that things will get easier, and you will learn to appreciate what God has given you.

[1:28:59]

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Sometimes we cannot choose our families or the place we are born, or the time or location - actually, many times we can't. In other situations, we are very lucky that we get an opportunity, a new chance for a new family, a new culture. You bring your culture, and you have a new culture, then you have something brand new. You just have to be aware, you have to be hungry, meaning that you have to be open to new things, to traditions, to cultures, to people, and not be quick to judge. I think I struggled with that for a while because when I first came here, everybody thought I was from Mexico. I hated that. They didn't even bother to ask me where I was from; they just assumed because I was brown and short that I was from Mexico. Not that I have nothing against Mexico, but I at the time I didn't know anything about Mexico, and it drove me crazy. And then of course, when I said I was from Colombia, "Ooh, aah, drugs and coffee," and all they knew about Colombia was drugs and coffee. Pablo Escobar and coffee.

I had a lot of anger towards that because they just looked at me like a brown kid, who probably is going to end up working at McDonald's or cleaning the streets or working in someone's yard. It was hard for me to understand that because I was like, "What is it about me? What are they looking at? They cannot see someone else who has an opportunity to become anything I want." I just didn't understand that; it bothered me to think that, I was like, "Well, I can prove them right and just be someone like that, but then, does it mean that people who are doing those jobs are any lesser than anybody else? No, I should not be thinking like that because I cannot allow that. So, why are all these people that I consider my friends, my classmates going to the same school thinking and saying those things? Where is that come from?" And I think that's the hardest thing I have learned in this culture, learning to live in that situation of labeling. There is an abundance of labels; everything and everyone has to have a label, what category do you fall under?

[1:32:06]

It's toxic. Honestly, I feel that it's the worst thing we can possibly do to each other. All people deserve respect. Whether they're cleaning your street, or they are operating on your brain. They all deserve respect because we all need each other. I think for anyone who's doing this, who is going through this transformation, it's going to be the hardest thing to get over. It's part of the reason I chose to be an educator, because I wanted to pursue something that makes a difference. Not just to tell a story, but to learn from people. My greatest gift is that I love to learn. I'm by far more student than teacher; I will be forever a student because I love learning. I think my parents would agree that I could be a professional student... it took me thirteen years to get my MFA [Master of Fine Arts], because I was not in a rush, because I enjoy schooling. I enjoy being around people who push themselves, who are motivated, who are hungry about tomorrow for whatever reason.

I just like being in that environment; I want to be surrounded by people who promote a positive outlook in life. It's rare to see that today, because there's so much conflict. You turn on the news, it's all negativity, all these different things and how much we hate this, and how much we should

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change that and, no. I think it's important to pay attention to the things that we are doing right and the people who are working towards a better tomorrow. I want to be part of that conversation, I want to be there when people are talking about it, I want to make a difference. If I make a difference in the way a person looks at things, to open their minds to see possibilities and opportunities, I feel that I have done my job.

Unfortunately, I need a title, so becoming a professor is a dream, you need education. Sometimes, you have to do things that you don't want to, but eventually if you keep working towards your dream... Sometimes, we make excuses or do something else, sometimes we are forced to do something else. That's okay, but if you're chasing a dream, even if you fall short, you'll still be happier than ending up in a place where you are miserable.

**WARREN:** You did get your MFA, correct?

**FOX:** Yeah.

**ROSDAIL:** I just need you briefly to say where we are and what you do here.

[1:35:57]

**FOX:** Currently I'm a part time teacher. I hope to be full time teacher, eventually, at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Right now, we are in the ceramics room, which is one of my favorite rooms. This is where I did my undergraduate. I had a lot of great memories here, some tough ones too, but mainly good ones where I was able to create new things in clay. This room, any time I see it, I'm motivated to start working, to do something with my hands. A lot of times people ask me, "Why did you choose clay?" I chose clay over graphic design. I started that for two years, painting, drawing. In clay I can do all the other things that I did in painting. I can paint in clay, I can draw in clay, but it can also be 3D, I can shape it anywhere, any way I want.

It can start with just minerals put together to create from this clay into greater things. It is kind of like my life. I shape clay the way I shape my life; we all start from dirt and materials, and the way you shape your life is what people see and remember. This clay might last a lot longer than I could ever be in the world, but it's a simple philosophy. It makes sense in my mind. If I'm able to do something with my life that is worthwhile, then you should be able to do that with the material. I like to teach by example. If I can't do it, I can't expect you to do it, so I have to practice. In a place like the university, they give you facilities so you can work and push yourself to become not just an artist, but a professional artist and an educator. It's the best environment, and I think that's why I want to be here. This place helped me to shape my future and I want to do the same thing for others.

[1:39:01]

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**ROSDAIL:** Do you have a vision at this point or of you just sort of...

**FOX:** I'm just sort of...

**ROSDAIL:** Like jazz, you're messing around... until you find a groove that you like...

**FOX:** That's what's great about clay, I can start very rough, and then it starts to become something. Maybe this is a rock and I'm climbing the rock, and what I see is my hand; this is an overexaggerated hand. I'm just trying to create some texture. I think of when I lived in Boulder [Colorado] and I used to do a lot of climbing. I enjoy climbing because when I put myself in nature, I am not bashing in anything else or anyone else. I'm just moving along only with my fingertips; sometimes that's the only thing that is holding me from the rock. Sometimes that's important to see or understand; that it is not just about reaching a goal, but pushing yourself so, sometimes I like to make sculptural things that resemble experiences that I have encountered in the natural world.

I put a lot of emphasis on the hands because as an artist, your greatest tool besides your brain is your hands, so you have to take care of your hands. Your hands can do so much if you push them and apply them and make that leap that sometimes you are separated from it. Sometimes, you want them the same, I'm not quite sure what I'm doing here. I like doing sculptural pieces more than functional pieces on the wheel, because I have more of a dream, because it doesn't have to be clear. I can just keep adding or subtracting, this [points at vase next to him] is much more organized and structured. The only time it causes much more chaos is when I paint on it, when I draw on it; when I'm sculpting, I can really let loose, and it doesn't have to resemble anything that I recognize, or that you recognize.

[1:49:14]