

Bringing light to the world through stories

KATHRYN YORK (PRODUCER): Welcome to the Big and Little Podcast from Boston Children's Museum.

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KATHRYN (PRODUCER): My name is Kathryn, the Museum's Digital Content Manager and Podcast Producer. Today on the show, Boston Children's Museum's Vice President of External Relations, Charlayne Murrell-Smith, talks with research scientist, technologist, filmmaker, architect, and educator, Topper Carew.

Topper recounts his experience growing up in Roxbury, starting out as an architect and filmmaker, and his advice for crafting compelling stories. Listeners may be familiar with Topper from his popular TV sitcom, Martin, but it might surprise you to learn of his rich and varied experiences beyond the film industry.

Later in the episode, we also discuss his upcoming project, "This Little Light Of Mine,"- in space. This project consists of a space payload designed to transport and broadcast a film of children's choirs around the world singing This Little Light of Mine. We could all use a little more light in our lives so why not extend that brightness to the night sky and beyond. With that, let's get started.

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CHARLAYNE MURRELL-SMITH: Hello, and welcome to the Big and Little Podcast. My name is Charlayne Murrell-Smith. Today we're talking with Topper Carew. Welcome to the show, Topper.

TOPPER CAREW: Thank you for having me. You know, I've always been a great fan of your institution, from the early days until now. I think what you guys do for children is special, needed, wanted, appreciated. So thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here this morning.

CHARLAYNE: And thank you. Topper, you have such a rich and interesting career history. From your beginnings as an architect and your work as a film and TV producer, educator, and so much more. Can you share a little bit about your career journey?

TOPPER: I have been motivated by the principles of equity, justice, and excellence. I was a student at Boston Technical High School before it became John O'Bryant. And I was just a Roxbury boy. I'd been a busboy at Harvard, and I saw how these guys would just get drunk and throw roast beef on the walls. And I said to myself, if that's what college is all about, I can do that. So I'll go to Harvard.

So I told the guidance counselor, who was named O'Brien, an older person who had been there for a long time. And he told me that I would be better off going to the Navy Yard as a sheet metal worker. But my grandfather had made me memorize the poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling.

You know, breezing through my mind was some of the lines that I had learned in that poem. "If you can be about yourself when all men doubt you." And so I said to myself, I'm doubting what this man is telling me.

As God would have it, three or four weeks later, John O'Bryant, a Roxbury person, came into the school as a guidance counselor, he brought me down. He said, well, you know, you're interesting to me because you're testing at the top of the high school but your grades don't reflect it. And I said, I'm not

motivated. Nobody is really encouraging me. You know, I learn more at home than I do in school. And my two favorite subjects are track and lunch.

He said, well, I'll tell you what. If you work hard in this senior year, I will get you into the Black H, that was Howard University. And so for the first time in my life, I would walk into a classroom and there before me were Black teachers. Teachers that looked like me.

And I will tell you, in the entirety of my public education in Boston, I only had one Black teacher. Most of my teachers were outside in the community and in my family. People who loved me, who affirmed me, who were culturally competent, who had expectations for me.

And so I went to Howard, studied architecture. At Howard, I met members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and that changed my life. You know, I've always thought that justice was somehow important because I remember encounters that I had had in my young life that I thought were unjust.

So I became a community architect. I had a storefront, I had long hair, I had coveralls. And the kids were peeking in because they'd never seen a person like me at the street level. And so one day, I opened the door, and I put some paint out, I put some paper out. And that was the beginning of something I built called, The New Thing Art and Architecture Center. And that was my intersection with children.

And from that day on, I've always worked with children and family. And my POV has always been equity, justice, and excellence.

CHARLAYNE: You know, I want to pick up on this theme around community for a minute. Because throughout your career, one of the things that really ties all of your work together is your focus on community. So could you expand just a little bit more on what community-focused work looks like in practice.

TOPPER: Well, I'll tell you, it's very, very simple for me. It's, how do you empower people so that the power is coming from the grassroots up rather than the top down. And I was very involved in the Black Power Movement. You know, Stokely Carmichael was the leader of our SNCC chapter. And as you know, he's the one that brought Black Power to the planet.

Black Power was about empowerment. About getting people elected to office, allowing people from the grassroots communities to have a voice. The whole attitude was that we're not drum majors, that we're drummers. And the drummers keep the beat going. The drum majors should come from the community. And a great example of that, personally, from my experience, was Fannie Lou Hamer, who came out of Mississippi, who was the head of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and who was a woman who had worked as a timekeeper on a plantation in Mississippi but rose to prominence because of the authenticity of her voice. She was of the people, leading the people, and speaking for the people. So that's the kind of leadership that I like.

CHARLAYNE: All of your work, Topper, has come from a grassroots approach to things. And if you could just amplify a little bit more, talk a little bit more about why grassroots, why that's important, and how that connects to the community-focused work that you've been doing.

TOPPER: I come from the grass roots so it's very important to me. And I also have a very strong point of view and experience in the issues of community control. So when I was in DC, after having left Howard, and was at The New Thing, I was part of a movement that caused the two elementary schools in the neighborhood to suddenly come under community control.

They elected their own school board, they hired their own principal, they reviewed the curriculum, the teachers. And so I've seen it work. When I was in Mississippi, I saw the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party work. It went to Atlantic City and it challenged the Democratic Party, and that forever changed the flow of politics in Mississippi.

And as a consequence of the Mississippi campaign, we got the Voting Rights Act. Grassroots empowerment can make an incredible impression on the powers that be because suddenly, it's the people who are at the grassroots level, that have been historically disenfranchised and not as involved in the democratic process.

I just believe in it. I mean, it became a part of my development, and it's now a part of my DNA. And, you know--

CHARLAYNE: Yeah.

TOPPER: And it's also a part of just my human belief that our brother and sisters' keepers. And that we should make sure-- there should be no poverty. That there should be no racism. There should be no sexism. There should be no ageism. We should have a society that is blessing everybody, and lifting everybody, and making sure everybody has great health, great home, great food, the whole deal. And so that's just a part of my thing.

CHARLAYNE: I know you're a strong person of faith and that at one point in your life, you even thought about being a priest. You frequently say that your work is your ministry. So this last part that you just-- what you just talked about, really ties into kind of who you are and what's in your DNA. But I'd love to hear a little bit more about that piece. About your faith and the work that you do as a ministry, and how that ties into-- even your thinking about being a priest at one point in time.

TOPPER: If you were to review the many episodes or films that I have produced, you will never hear profanity, you will never see violence, you will never hear the N-word, and that's been a lot of work. And that's by choice.

The first thing I wanted to be in life, it was a little bit challenging. Because when I was about 13, you know, spirituality knocked on my door very hard. It may have been because I was an altar boy and I got swept up in all that kind of stuff. I said, you know, I think I might become a priest. And I was serious about that.

And then when I was 14, I discovered girls. And so that kind of put that on hold. And I just had to be real. That was a strong feeling.

And then later in life, in my 20s, when I became a very good friend of the bishops of DC, one of whom had been in the South with SNCC, and they knew that I had initially expressed that desire and was still interested, they offered me an ordination. And to get that ordination, I would have had to give four seminars.

But in realizing that my faith wasn't strong enough because they were to be seminars about the testimony of my faith, I saw myself sitting in the fourth seminar and getting struck by lightning, and then it was just a pile of ashes where I'd been sitting. So I couldn't get past the contradiction or the fact that my faith wasn't strong enough.

And so when I came back to Boston, which is my home, I went to visit the Episcopal Divinity School, because I could make that choice one more time. I didn't think that I could report comfortably after having been so independent most of my life. I realized that I should continue to live the commitment that I'd made early on in life and that is that my work would be my ministry.

I do not talk about it. I don't go into a pitch meeting and say, oh, by the way, my work is my ministry. I just trust my values and my belief system, which is one that follows the great law of all of the great religions of the world, and that is that we are our brother and sister's keeper. And I try to live by it. By the way, I'm not perfect. But I do sometimes get an A in conduct even though I don't always-- no, A in effort, I should say. I get an A in effort, not always an A in conduct.

CHARLAYNE: So let's talk a little bit about this, about your film producing life. Because you've done so many great works. And I think our listeners may be familiar with your TV show, Martin, and also probably some of your work on WGBH or PBS. But can you talk about how you got into the film producing business, and then also about the power of storytelling.

TOPPER: Yeah, I think that's a good thing to talk about. When I was in DC and I was a community architect, someone introduced me to filmmaking. And we all love great stories. Many of the films that we see are on the spine of a story.

I got introduced to filmmaking by teaching it to children, and then learning how it could be a very powerful tool by telling the stories of the people who I was representing as a community architect. People used to say to me, you know, you're a good filmmaker, because I was winning awards. And I say, no. No. No. No. I'm an architect. And they kept saying, no, no, no, you're a good filmmaker. So I got offered a fellowship to MIT for a year, to do anything I wanted to do. And I figured, well, maybe it's that time. And I turned it down the first time. But in the second year, I took it because I wanted to spend time with my grandmother, who, essentially, was my Big Mama. I wanted to spend time with her because she was getting old.

So I said, oh, wow, I got a chance to explore this filmmaking thing further, because MIT, at that point, had a film school. I got to come home and spend time with my grandmother, who really taught me, or introduced me, to storytelling. Because when I was a little boy-- you know, my mother had me when she was 18, 19 years old. And so we lived with my grandmother.

And so when my mother was still being her young self, and she might be out, and I was there alone, I would call my grandmother and say, Nana, can I come and get in the bed with you? And she had the best bed. I mean, she had the thick sheets and the fluffy pillows and the whole thing, and I'd get in her bed.

And so I would tell her stories. I was like three or four. And years later, I realized that she was half asleep when I was telling the story because she'd go-- and then I would say, and Nana and then this is what

happened. This is what happened. And she'd go, mm-hmm. She had a whole string of mm-hmm. So that's where I started storytelling.

CHARLAYNE: So Topper, why do you think Martin continues to resonate like 30 years or more later, and how does that connect to storytelling?

TOPPER: It continues to connect because it's a romantic comedy. Most people don't break it down and analyze it in that way.

It's about a knucklehead-- and I can testify that I've been a knucklehead on occasion-- and a very, very intelligent and beautiful Black woman. And it's about-- they're having disagreement every week, but the fact is that their love is so strong that at the end of every week, they're still in love with each other.

Now, how do you guarantee the comedy? I would get my-- I would send buses to Compton and to watch and bring in Black audiences, and have a rehearsal on Monday. We would tape it and then we would look to see where the holes were of where people were laughing. Because if you know the Apollo experience--

CHARLAYNE: Yes.

TOPPER: You come out on the stage of the Apollo and you're not happening, that audience will throw tomatoes at you, right. And so--

CHARLAYNE: They'll boo you right off.

TOPPER: They'll boo you right off. So if we ran the show and the audience is not responding, we know we got work to do. But we also trust the authenticity of the Black gaze as opposed to the White gaze, you know.

And so the success of the show is that you look at the show, you might see your uncle, you might see someone who's like a cousin of yours, you might see someone who's like a friend, someone who's like a boyfriend, a girlfriend. And it has an authenticity about it that has caused it to last for 32 years and be intergenerational.

CHARLAYNE: So I'm going to give you words out of your own mouth. You said, good stories equal honest and truthful, and they're compelling and resonating.

TOPPER: Well, that would be the case.

CHARLAYNE: Let's talk about your new project, "This Little Light Of Mine."

TOPPER: It's out of my heart. Intended to be heartfelt. And basically what it is, is a film of children's choirs from around the world singing, This Little Light Of Mine.

Now, I love that song. And I particularly loved it when Fannie Lou Hamer from Mississippi, a timekeeper on a Mississippi plantation, who rose to power and prominence. And what's so interesting about that song, by the way, is so many children know that song. Either because they've sung it in school, they've sung it in church, they've sung it in after school groups, or whatever.

So filmed these choirs. The film is going up to the International Space Station. It's being transported by rocket. It will be loaded into the International Space Station. It's in a payload that contains the film, which is contained in a broadcast studio the size of a shoe box.

CHARLAYNE: Wow. Wow.

TOPPER: So the astronauts take it out of the cone of the rocket, they take it to a compartment, they plug it in, and then it transmits as data back to earth to a website called This Little Light Of Mine In Space, which we are putting the finishing touches on.

It will go around the earth on the International Space Station 16 times a day, broadcasting continually.

The website will allow you to see it as it's broadcast from the International Space Station but also will have another window where you can see the film 24 hours a day. So it's kind of an experience.

You'll be able to see when it's coming over your location, you'll be able to see it when it's coming down directly from space, you'll be able to watch the film for 24 hours if you want, and you'll be able to go outdoors and see-- if it's nighttime, look up, and it will appear as the third brightest star in the sky. So it's an experience for kids.

Why did I do this? There's a lot of darkness on the planet right now. There's a lot of war, there's a lot of division, there's a lot of racial animosity, there's a lot of anti-Semitism, there's a lot of dark and negative stuff. I wanted to bring some light. How appropriate is that title? This Little Light. How important are children?

And I always remember something that my paternal grandmother taught me. And that every person that you meet in life has a little light inside of them. And sometimes that light is dimmer with others and brighter with others, but everybody has a light. So you should meet everybody, you know. And you should recognize that everybody has a little light inside of them. And that little light is a light that wants to shine and be good.

It's very powerful when you see these little children earnestly, passionately, excitedly, you know, singing this song and presenting it to the world. And knowing that it's dedicated to the children of the world because they matter. That's it.

CHARLAYNE: So important and so timely. Do you have any advice for kids who are out there and interested in pursuing filmmaking or sharing stories as a career?

TOPPER: Yeah, as a matter of fact. Everybody has access to a phone. And those phones have now become cameras. And everybody has either been photographed or photographed a birthday party or a friend or an experience or something they might just see in nature. That's where filmmaking begins. And filmmaking has become more democratized and more accessible and more affordable because of our phones. You can even edit on a phone now.

So I think the pencil is important, the pen is important, but we live in an age where visual literacy has ascended. And I encourage young people to believe that they can do that. That they can tell little stories. Now, I know not everybody's going to go down that path. But for those who want it, they got their phone, they got their imagination, they got their family, they got their friends, so those are all the actors. And then just get busy making because it's the experience that counts.

I just saw "The Fabelmans," the Spielberg thing about his life, and about him as a young boy just starting to make films. And I encourage kids around me. I'm shooting a film, Friday, and I'm asking a parent, can this son shadow me so I can-- he lives upstairs over my grandson. Can your son shadow me so I can show him? And I'll even give him a credit and I'll even give him a little pocket money, you know.

But I think it's-- it's just-- if you're feeling it, get into it.

CHARLAYNE: Yeah.

TOPPER: I have this thing I always say, that dreams can be, and hope, irregardless of how frail, is too strong to kill. That courage is right around the corner, you just have to call on it, and faith is real. So what happens for so many kids is they don't believe they can be in the space. They just don't believe they can be in this space.

I didn't know when I was in high school that when I was ducking school and going to the Uptown Theater for \$0.35 and eating my lunch in the theater, then going home like I'd been in school all day, that one day I was going to be in the media. I had no idea, you know. But they didn't have filmmaking at my high school. I didn't even know there was such a thing as filmmaking. I discovered it.

And so, so much is discovery and so much is confidence. And listening to young people. You got to spot this stuff because sometimes you run upon these kids that are drawing cartoons and thinking about that, or writing little stories, or are very good at visual expression. You got to encourage them.

CHARLAYNE: Topper, you have something called the 10 P's. And I'd love, if you have that in front of you, to just go down that list.

TOPPER: Let me get that out. OK. Here are the 10 P's that, somehow, are linked to the notion that we should love children and, particularly in teaching and encouraging them, we should affirm them, it's very important thing, to affirm them, and we should share cultural competencies with them, and we should set expectation.

So I came up with this list of 10 P's. It's passion-- passion is very important. You got to kind of love it because filmmaking is like construction work. Everybody sees the red carpet but they don't see the process. And the process, as you know, can be arduous.

CHARLAYNE: Yes.

TOPPER: Long.

CHARLAYNE: Yes

TOPPER: Challenging. So process is very important. See ideas purest at the moment of conception, but from that point on, it's all compromised. And where most people fail is they don't give as much time to the process by which you can actualize an idea, so process becomes very important.

Purpose. You know, I had purpose. I had purpose to save those people's homes. I had purpose to register people to vote. I had purpose to make children stronger by realizing an identification with their culture will give you strength not shame.

Persistence. I can't even begin to tell you how many notebooks I have with just thoughts and ideas. And I think you have to be persistent. One of the barriers to success for so many people is they get a no and they quit.

Well, if you're going to be the batting league champion of the American League, you only have to hit 3 out of 10 to be the champion. So that means that you miss 7 hits. You got to get over that "no" thing because you can't have a fear of the process. And if you have passion, you kind of go forward. So that also speaks to perseverance.

It took me 12 years to get "Martin," and a lot of no's on the way to that. I mean, I had some, I had production on the way, but it took me 12 years. There were times when I put my family in jeopardy, and there were times when we had to borrow from one of my daughter's piggy banks to have dinner as a family. We'd go to this place where you could get a spaghetti dinner for \$1.49 and some chocolate pudding for dessert, you know, and we were happy. You have to have perspective.

That goes to what are your values? Are you in the game just to make money? Or are you in the game because you love the game? Are you in the game because you are passionate about the lives of children, or you're passionate about the underserved people in the grass community? And then that all helps to shape the point of view, right.

And the point of view is what guides you. I will do this, I won't do that. I can't even begin to tell you the jobs that I have been offered.

CHARLAYNE: Yeah.

TOPPER: The jobs that I turned down because we weren't on that same passionate plane about equity, justice, excellence. You know what I mean? So I just put a no on that.

Patience. Oh, patience. Oh my god. Can you imagine a patience that Harriet Tubman must have had?

CHARLAYNE: Yeah.

TOPPER: Can you think about that? You know what I mean?

CHARLAYNE: Yes.

TOPPER: The patience that made some people sit on a log and not run with her. Sometimes people have some incredibly good bad ideas. And I would have been running with her.

So, I appreciate both of you and I thank you.

CHARLAYNE: Thank you very much.

TOPPER: I think I probably got that from my grandfather and from the Boy Scouts. Be prepared. I teach that to everybody. Be prepared. You got to be prepared. You got to do the homework. One of my grandsons wants to be in the NBA. He's working hard, trying to make the school team, but I say to him, there's other options. While you're doing that, think about owning a team. Thinking about coaching a team. Think about all the options. Just don't think about getting the ball in the hoop.

And then productivity. I tell people that 10 step stools make a step ladder. And I would see people all the time that were trying to write a feature length script, which is 110 pages, 120 pages, you know how long that takes? And I would say, you should think about this. You love writing? Do you really love writing? If you love writing, write something that's seven minutes long. That's eight minutes long.

It helps you build a reputation and allows you to actualize something instead of driving a cab for five years saying that you're still writing that script. No. Measure your productivity in terms of step stools instead of step ladders. So those are my 10 P's.

CHARLAYNE: That is so important. All of those 10 are so important. Topper, thank you so much for being here today.

TOPPER: I deeply appreciate both of you taking the time and creating the opportunity for me to express myself. And also for the opportunity, letting people know that "This Light Of Mine" is coming. I have a

belief that whatever knowledge that I have gained, which I can share, will hopefully be to the benefit of others.

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KATHRYN (PRODUCER): Thanks for listening to this episode of the Big and Little Podcast, and to PNC Bank for sponsoring this podcast. If you liked this episode, please subscribe and stay tuned for more.