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Christmas Shoes & Smiles
Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh
Michele Cushatt

Sheila: Hi! Welcome to *LIFE Today*. I'm Sheila Walsh here with Randy Robison. James and Betty are taking a well deserved day off.

Honestly, I'm so thrilled to have this particular guest on our show. She's a friend but she is also kind of a hero of mine. So let me just introduce her. Please welcome Michele Cushatt. Welcome dear friend.

Michele: Thank you! So glad to be here.

Sheila: You have this fantastic new book out, *I Am: A 60-day journey to knowing who you are because of who he is*. But before we get into that, let's just lay out the harsh reality of the journey that you have been on. Take me back to the first day when you discovered that there was something wrong.

Michele: Well, it was probably about six and a half years ago now. I had a sore inside my mouth on the side of my tongue that would not heal. But I was 39 years old at the time. We assumed those kind of things are nothing important. So I went to the doctor just as a precaution and he said, "Oh, don't worry about it. It is nothing." But what I found out later was that he was wrong.

I found out that I had squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue, cancer of the tongue. I didn't even know something like that existed. And definitely for a 39-year old mom and wife to have something like that. So in just the span of seconds, my life completely changed very radically, as you can possibly imagine.

Sheila: The first surgery, was it kind of minimally invasive?

Michele: Yes. The first surgery, although it was shocking at first, the doctors felt like it was caught early; it was cancer caught early, the best case scenario. They told me a number of times I had nothing to worry about. It was gone. They got it all. It wouldn't come back. But they were mistaken.

Randy: We should probably clarify that what you were diagnosed with, the squamous cell carcinoma is one of the most aggressive forms, if not the most aggressive form.

Michele: Yes, it is very rare. It is not very common. Although it seems to becoming more common lately, but it is very rare and very aggressive. So because it is in the tongue, which is a muscle, it has great potential of spreading. And so although they weren't concerned about that in the beginning because it was caught very early, what I didn't know is that it is a very tricky kind of cancer and very difficult to catch and stop.

Sheila: And it came back one more time but then I remember you were with us at *Women of Faith*. Wasn't that when you realized that it was back again and this time it was going to be way more drastic?

Michele: Yes, exactly. So it came back in 2014, early in the year. Once again they thought they caught it. They got it all and did a radical surgery. And seven months later while we were on tour with *Women of Faith*, it came back a third time. However this time it came back so aggressive, so advanced that they gave me two weeks to get my affairs in order.

And then they put me into surgery, a nine-hour surgery where they removed two thirds of my tongue. They cut me open from wrist to elbow to help rebuild my tongue. They also cut open my neck and my legs to basically rebuild everything to give me a chance of being able to function. Then after about four weeks of recovery from that surgery they started pretty radical external radiation and chemotherapy. In their words, they needed to take me to the brink of death in order to give me any chance of life.

Randy: How painful was all this?

Michele: There are no words. There are no words for how painful. Quite frankly, and I'm always cautious because it's almost more than most people can even imagine or bear but I didn't know a human being could go through that kind of physical suffering and live.

I didn't have any appreciation for human pain until that moment. I've had kids and gone through other things but there is a level of suffering that most of us hopefully never experience. I got a taste of that and it was hard.

Sheila: In the midst of all that, Michele, how on earth do you still function as a mother? Because I know some of your story and I love you. But I found as I was reading your book again, I refreshed myself, I sat and wept as I read your book because I think, how do you even take the next step, never mind be a wife, be a mom?

Michele: The reality is most days I could do little but just will myself to live one second at a time. There was no ability to function. There was no mothering going on. There was no being a wife. It was me on the couch for months having to make a moment by moment decision to live. That's very hard to even -- we've started this conversation and go right into the deep end of the pool. It was literally a second by second struggle to find the will to live.

That's an amount of suffering that -- I know there are some people right now that are in that place and so I want to make sure we honor the fact that that's how life is sometimes; where it is an almost impossible struggle to make the choice to live.

Sheila: One of the things I find myself wondering because you're a very gifted speaker, writer, and most of us, when we get to a certain age, we think, well, we don't really judge who we are, our self-esteem by what we look like or what we sound like but I wonder, this level of devastation, how did that impact how you saw yourself?

Michele: It is still impacting how I see myself. If you would have asked me, okay, so my surgery, my speech changed about two and a half years ago. So I've been living in this new reality with a body that has a very real physical disability for two and a half years now. If you would have asked me three years ago if I found my worth in my appearance or my talents or my relationships or anything else like that, I would have said, "Oh no. Absolutely not! I love Jesus. My worth is in Jesus."

But it is one thing to say that, it's another thing to have every bit of your being completely altered and changed. And what that does is it forced me to face the reality that I did find some of my worth and my value in how I looked and how I talked. My ability to sound intelligent or to do a job as a speaker or whatever it is. So having that all removed or altered in a significant way, it was like being stripped completely bare and what's left when you're completely bare?

Randy: Where was God during all this?

Michele: That is a question I asked many, many times. The difficulty is we often equate the presence of pain with the absence of God. How many of us think the moment we feel pain that must mean that God left. For many of us, that's where our faith is either built stronger or is completely destroyed is in those kind of places.

So I had to wrestle with that quite often. Where was he? Thousands of people were praying for my healing and cancer just didn't come back once, it came back -- I had it three times. What does that mean about all of that?

Part of the struggle then was to understand that God, in many ways is actually closer in those

moments of pain, he is not far away. There was a nearness of God that I only could experience in a place of suffering.

In other words, I grew up as a church-going girl who loved to celebrate Easter. Right? Easter is all about the empty tomb. But during my place of suffering I found great comfort in Good Friday and Saturday, in the place of pain and waiting. Because God is not just a God of the tomb, he is the God of the garden. He's the God that was there agonizing over the suffering of mankind and what needed to happen in order to redeem us. I have to tell you, that gave me -- picturing Jesus in *The Garden* before his arrest and picturing his suffering as much as I hate to think of it gave me so much comfort in my own pain that God would do that for us.

Sheila: This book, Michele, because it is really fantastic and also, it came with cards. You sent me the whole package. You know I've put those all about around; I have like a prayer room and I've put all 60 cards, I've taped them up and I cannot tell you how much comfort on dark days.

Michele: Those 60 cards are 60 -- I chose 60 verses in the Bible that are God's words about us. Specific verses where Jesus or God speaks, and speaks his favor and affection over us because when I was feeling completely abandoned and alone and suffering, I needed to hear God's words of affection and love for me in that place; that he didn't see this broken woman that was dying on the couch. He saw someone that he adored and he loved and that he was going to carry.

So those 60 cards are a collection of 60 -- I needed a lot of them. One or two verses wasn't going to cut it. So it's 60 of the most powerful words of God's favor over us that I would just repeat to myself day after day, sometimes second by second.

Randy: I find it interesting because your book is called *I Am*, it is not your story of suffering, necessarily. It's not even a book on healing or anything like that. It is a book on identity. Why was that the thing that you felt you had to speak about the most on this side of all the suffering?

Michele: Well, ironically enough, I planned to write that book before cancer came back the third time. So in many ways it was actually a more divine orchestration than anything I manipulated. The reason I think this is so important is I think we in our human life from birth to death, we get so caught up in talents and appearance and achievements and career and family and all this that we think that that's who we are. But like Job said, "Naked I came into this world and naked I depart." Ultimately, you and I stand before God with nothing but just our barest selves. And God says, "I died for that." That you that has absolutely nothing to offer, that's who I died for, right there without your achievements, without your perfection."

Sheila: I find it really interesting as a woman how you redefine "beautiful" because you tell a story about overhearing a conversation, I think you were in college, and a boy said, and I've had

a experience like that where he was saying, "She would be so beautiful if she wasn't overweight." And how that impacted you. And then you think, now if we could just get to this size or this -- then everything would be perfect. You've discovered that is not going to do it.

Michele: Let me just put it this way. When I was going through treatment I was the thinnest I've ever been in my life and yet I felt so unattractive. Beauty cannot -- we cannot manufacture beauty. One thing I've told myself and reminded so many others is that we were never meant to build an identity, we were meant to receive it.

Sheila: Say that again, that's huge!

Michele: We were never meant to build an identity, we were meant to receive it. Our identity has already been established as the creation of a creative God. That means there is nothing we can do to add to our worth, there is nothing we can do to take away from it. There is no surgeon scalpel that can cut our value away from us. We simply need to receive the favor and the value that God has already spoken over us. Imagine if that would take hold.

Sheila: When I read that it reminded me of I was at my doctor's appointment. I'm coming down on the elevator and I've always hated my arms because I always think, I don't have toned arms. And I'm with this other --

Michele: Did you know this is true? Women hate their arms. Many times.

Sheila: I know I apologize to my arms. But there's this woman in the elevator with me and she's got this really sculpted shoulders and she's very slim and I say to her, "Gosh, I love your arms!" And she said, "Chemotherapy."

And in that moment I felt so exposed by the way that as a believer, as a follower, as a daughter of God, that I have bought into this ridiculous smoke and mirrors that will not hold up when life hits. I think it is one of the greatest gifts in this because you have a unique ability, Michele to tell the unvarnished truth but in every crack hope is springing out.

Michele: Yes! It is everywhere!

Sheila: How has this journey of yours impacted your children?

Michele: Oh well. As you can imagine watching a mama go through a life and death experience and they had to see that day after day. It wasn't just a couple of weeks of a hard illness, it's taken me two years to come back to life. So for them to watch their mom go through that has been very difficult and unsettling for them. At the same time, I think it's been a unique

gift because this is real life. This is real life. We are not made to last forever. One thing I am more committed to now more than anything is having those conversations with my kids to help them realize, guess what? We have today. That's all we have. We have today. How are you going to use it?

Randy: I'm curious, having been so close to death and having to face -- you said at one time they told you to get your affairs in order. How has that changed... that brush with death, how has that changed your perspective on life and eternity?

Michele: Oh man. There's not one aspect of my life that hasn't changed. Since I've had cancer three times, I have no guarantees of a full life. They have a hopeful prognosis, but the truth is, is after you've had it three times, I have no promises of living to be 80. So I live every day with the reality that it could change in a phone call for me. It can change that fast.

So first of all, I've had to -- I have to make a choice to be either be captive to fear or to trust the one who has numbered my days. So that's a big change. So I live today knowing God, you have numbered my days. I'm not going to worry about tomorrow. I know you will leave me here until I'm done and not a day sooner or a day later.

But it also makes me more passionate about honest conversation. Not holding back, not leaving things unsaid, not missing opportunities to share the gospel with somebody who is hurting or simply just stop working one day and go to the hospital with a friend who needs somebody to just to sit with her. All the things that seems so urgent, not so important anymore.

Randy: You said you're not guaranteed a full life but what you've gone through, it has forced you to choose to live that full life because the life you live is probably fuller now than a lot of people's.

Michele: And this will sound strange. I would never want to go back to that place of suffering and there are still times that it makes me weep to think about it but at the same time and I mean this with all of my heart, I've been given such a beautiful gift.

There are times that I feel like I'm the luckiest woman in the world because God has given me a glimpse of eternity that I couldn't have manufactured or found any other way. And it's completely changed how I view people and life and each day. And from that standpoint, I just -- I'm so thankful.

Sheila: When you speak you do an interesting thing with women and their shoes; you get them to take their shoes off. Tell us what that's about because it is about two very profound intentional things -- two truths.

Michele: Well, the opening of the book is all about the story of Moses at the burning bush. It is this beautiful scene and it is such a common story that I think we neglect the significance of it many times. But Moses sees this burning bush that is not consumed and he's curious. He goes over there. He parks his sheep and he goes over there and checks out this burning bush. God speaks to him from this bush and tells Moses to take off his shoes. So Moses is there barefooted on the ground. I have no idea what God was thinking, but I think he wanted Moses to be completely stripped bare, barefooted. Like "I'm going to tell you something that's going to rock your world so I need you to have a good footing."

That's when God says, "I'm going to send you to Egypt."

And Moses's question in that moment, I believe is all of our question when God calls us to something. Moses says, "Who am I that I should go?"

In other words, he's like, "I don't have what it takes. I'm not smart enough. I'm not attractive enough. I'm not talented enough. I speak funny."

And so in that moment when Moses is there, I kind of feel like I'm hovering at the edge of my chair waiting for God's answer along with Moses. So God answers him and God gives Moses a two part answer. He says, "Moses, I will be with you."

In other words, he doesn't really answer Moses's question. Moses thinks it is about him and God says, "It's not about you, Moses." He says, I will be with you and then he tells him, "I am sending you." In other words, God's presence and God's purpose.

And what I do at my speaking events is I have all the people in the audience stand up and I have them take off their shoes and get barefooted before God. I'm like whatever God is calling you to right now that you feel ill-equipped for, God is saying, "I have the two footings you need to walk this out: My presence, my purpose." And you strap those two shoes on every day and nothing will be impossible for you.

Sheila: Wow! That is pretty profound. And actually, it's one of the most perfect segues into something that's very dear to our heart at the moment. There are a lot of children around the world and that is their daily reality. They wake up every morning with no shoes, they go to bed with no shoes. But it is our prayer here at *LIFE Today* that this Christmas, we're going to change all that. Would you watch this?

On the mission field

Ralph: One of the things I've noticed is there are no kids wearing shoes hardly. Almost all of them have no shoes. The terrain here can be really tough, even walking in shoes. But much less barefooted. Jahdu was brought to me here. I saw his feet and you can see the toll that it's taken with him not wearing shoes probably most of his life, if not all of his life. You know the solution to these hardships is a simple pair of shoes.

Tammy: You think it is just a pair of shoes but it is so much more than that. What this represents is so much more. It could save and spare his very life. Think about it. Even a little cut that he could get on his foot, stepping then into a bad source of water and infect it.

And so what do we do about it? A simple pair of shoes that really costs very, very little can change a life one child at a time. These little ones are in desperate need. They were so excited walking into this room thinking I get a new pair of shoes.

Ralph: You can be a blessing today by giving a child like Jahdu his very first pair of shoes. So please partner with us to provide Jahdu and children just like him all around the world with a brand-new pair of shoes this Christmas season.

End of clip

In the studio

Sheila: This is awesome and this is so doable! I love this project. I've been in Angola. I've watched children have shoes put on -- I've had the privilege of doing it for the very first time and they're just blown away. They run around the village just so excited.

You may be thinking, why are you talking about Christmas? This is a little early. The reason is because we need to get everything set up. We want to provide 150,000 children with the best Christmas gift they have ever had, their very first pair of shoes. And it is so doable!

You wouldn't believe the joy in their faces when they get that and it is so for so little. When you think of what we spend at Christmas on things we really don't need. And maybe you sometimes think, gosh, I wish I could do something that would make a difference. Well, we're giving you that incredible opportunity to provide shoes for children.

Not only do the children's faces light up, I've watched the faces of their mothers who worried about their little ones walking on these rough roads and putting their feet into water where it's infested with disease. But we can change that this Christmas. We can give gifts to people that might not sit around our tree but hopefully because we reach them with the love of Christ, maybe they will sit around the throne with us eventually when we get to also tell them about the love of

Christ. And it is so doable, Randy!

Randy: It is. When I find a pair of shoes which I buy once every other year.

Sheila: You're such a man!

Randy: I am! But \$36, I think, that's a pretty good price for a pair of shoes; right? For a guy's shoes -- a guy's shoes.

Sheila: Carry on.

[Laughter]

Randy: \$36 will actually buy ten pairs of shoes and they're not junk shoes, they're good shoes. They're very durable and that will put shoes oftentimes for the first time on ten children. Which means \$72 will enable you to give shoes to 20 children. \$180, if you can do that and I know a lot of you can this Christmas, that will provide 50 pairs of shoes. And not only will you receive this Christmas ornament of crystal shoe commemorating your gift to the outreach, you'll get a whole box of those so you can decorate your tree with shoes as a reminder of all the children that you have provided shoes for.

And there is one more aspect, the Shoes and Smiles outreach that we're in right now and that is the smile. A smile is a surgery we provide for a child who has a cleft palate, which oftentimes is worse than just the smile; it prevents them from speaking or eating or even breathing properly. So the smiles aspect of this outreach is something that radically changes the child's life. We can provide a surgery for a child for \$500. That will provide a cleft palate surgery.

So great opportunities. It's just a joy to be able to reach out with the love of Christ around the world providing Shoes and Smiles. We invite you to join us in this. So I hope you will go to the phone, go online right now and make the very best gift you can.

Begin video clip

Announcer: Poverty is a killer and because of it children needlessly suffer; not only from a lack of food and clean water but also from a lack of things we take for granted such as a healthy smile or a simple pair of shoes.

Far too many children living in poverty have never owned a new pair of shoes. And while that may seem minor in light of all their needs, walking with bare feet puts them at risk of life-threatening infections and disease that could lead to crippling consequences -- and even

death.

By responding today you can help immediately secure and begin shipping Christmas shoes to 150,000 children around the world just in time for the holidays. Your gift of \$36 will help provide ten pairs of shoes. A gift of \$72 will help provide 20 pairs. And the gift of \$180 will help provide 50 pairs of Christmas shoes for children in need.

With your gift of any amount, be sure to request this beautifully crafted crystal shoe ornament, a treasure to place on your tree each holiday season. With your gift of \$180 or more you may also request this keepsake boxed set of LIFE's Christmas shoe ornaments.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1,000 or more to help provide over 275 pairs of shoes or two children with corrective cleft palate surgeries and you may request our determined eagle bronze sculpture. Please call, write, or make your gift online today.

End of clip

In the studio

Randy: I do hope you're going to the phone or going online right now to join in this wonderful Christmas Shoes & Smiles campaign. If you do that today and you're interested in this fabulous book by our guest, Michele Cushatt, be sure to ask for that book.

Do you think it is a pretty good idea?

Sheila: It's brilliant. I read it over again. I can't tell you how much this book has blessed me.

But I cannot tell you how much you have blessed. It is a severe mercy my friend. You have walked through a dark, dark valley but I have to tell you the light of Christ shines beautifully through you. Thank you so much.

Please, would you help me thank our guest, Michele Cushatt?

Randy: Thank you for watching. We hope that you'll watch us every day on *LIFE Today*.

Announcer: Regardless of your net worth, estate planning benefits you and your family before and after death, and results in peace of mind. As a free service to our friends and partners, *LIFE Planning Services*, a ministry of LIFE Outreach International can help you with your estate planning needs and chart your financial future! Don't put off this important step to peace of mind through better planning. Contact *LIFE Planning Services* today!

