[intro music]

Aditi Juneja: Hello everyone and thank you for tuning into today's episode of Self Care Sunday's. Today we have Maxwell Emcays, who is a Chicago-based activist, artist, author, and youth mentor. But before we get started with Maxwell, I wanted to ask for your help supporting the podcast via Patreon.

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If you'd like to help us out, please check out Patreon.com/SelfCareSundaysPodcast. That's P-A-T-R-E-O-N dot com slash Self Care Sundays Podcast. Thank you in advance! It's the generosity of our listeners that helps this information be accessible to so many people in the first place. Let's get started! How are you today, Maxwell?

Maxwell Emcays: I'm doing fantastic and yourself?

AJ: I'm good. So um just to dive right in, I'm wondering if you could talk us through a typical day um in your life and how self care plays a role.

ME: For me yeah that's super important. I'm constantly looking inward, checking my balance, paying attention to the vibes that are around me, the things that trigger me, the things that make me feel a certain way and try to watch out and try to enhance certain things that sort of lift up my vibes and keep me in the zone. Um so in relation to self care, for me it's just about always paying attention to how my spirits and body feel and making sure they're in the right balance.

AJ: So on a daily basis um what does that look like for you? Do you have particular moments in the day where you pause to kind of pay attention to those things? Are there specific rituals that you do? How do you kind of make sure that you are taking the time to pay attention to how you're feeling.

ME: Like today I uh started my day out with a run and that's a typical way for me to do my detox and deep thinking time period so I'm kind of flushing myself out and bringing in ideas and questioning a lot of other ideas and seeking for answers. So typically my biggest regiment is running and I go out for, you know, a nice decent run. And in that time I'm asking a lot of questions, seeking a lot of answers and receiving them, and just kind of having a conversation with myself um throughout that time. Um and then usually after that run I really feel pretty much refreshed. I feel ready to go. Um I have certain ideas that came about during the run that I'm excited to get to. I have certain questions that are now answered that I want to implement. So usually after a run, it's about getting things done. Um and just also my body, my body just feels so much better um I feel good about myself for just, you know, going out to run. Just feeling great physically and mentally. So that is something that I do a few times a week and when um I'm not doing that, I typically-- the day before I have a to-do list for my day. And then I wake up in the morning and just think about what I'm going to be doing and take care of that.

AJ: Yeah that makes a lot of sense. How did you discover that running and kind of planning your day was what worked for you as a way to kind of ground and center yourself and make sure you're taking that time for reflection?

ME: I discovered that in a time where I had to make my own schedule, make my own time, and I realized that the idle time that I didn't have um you know caused me to feel a little bit lost uh and feel a lack of purpose. So it was me looking for patterns that in my life that kind of showed okay whenever I had a to-do list whenever I had something to do the next day and I knew specifically what I wanted to do um I just woke up with a purpose. I woke up eager and ready to go. Um so I started to tweak that and make sure that was something that I did, you know, on a day to day. And then the same with running um I started to notice when I-- if I just didn't feel good, I just didn't-- my spirits weren't high, if I had a run schedule or after a run, there was a vast difference. So I started to just kind of balance those things and kind of factor them into how I planned out my day and also uh my eating as well. I also mapped that out and saw the patterns that I was experiencing. I noticed whenever certain things would kind of throw me off and I noticed whenever I'm in the zone, I'll look for okay why and how was I in the zone then and try to make sure I'm repeating those things.

AJ: It's so interesting, what you're saying is really kind of about just observing yourself, like doing what works, and then like modifying and like experimenting almost to figure out what works for you and then kind of like doing what works and then changing what doesn't.

ME: Exactly, exactly.

AJ: Yeah, so I'm wondering-- you're an artist. How does art kind of play into all of this?

ME: Art plays a role of I guess a way to exude and filter and express things in a healthy way, um certain frustrations or ideas, um I'm able to know that they're out in the world in a way that they're comfortably placed somewhere. I don't have to burden myself with those ideas anymore. So I think that they kind of detox me with any, just any ideas or concepts or theories that I have I know that they exist in space and time um in a manner that I have worked hard to communicate. So they give me a sense of comfort about my ideas.

AJ: Um it also sounds like it's about like a productive outlet for, you know, what could be frustrations or anger or, you know, any of those kinds of emotions that can sometimes lead to destructive behavior.

ME: For sure. Certainly. Um and it's a way for me to be subtle um and make particular statements in ways that sometimes hints to myself without having to be assertive about particular ideas and then from there I don't have to speak on them so, yeah. That's correct.

AJ: Was um the *Never Forget Chi* project kind of in that vein?

ME: Um yeah there's definitely elements of it where I'm taking certain ideas out and then kind of putting them out there. Um yeah certainly, certainly. There's certain ideas that happen that way.

AJ: Could you um, for our listeners who may not know, could you explain what that project was-- or is?

ME: Yes. *Never Forget Chi* is a project that I started um a little while ago. I kind of wanted to make a statement about the city, about the media, and about the way we consumed, particularly homicides, how it was a normalized regular thing-- a matter of statistics, sometimes faces flashed across the screens and then, you know, disappeared. Names that faded away that were remembered for a few days that made us say, "Aww, so sad," for a moment and then, you know, a week later we'd forgotten about it. So *Never Forget* was about addressing that idea. And I started it out with just making stickers of particular kids that had past that I felt, there should be no reason why a lot of people don't know who they are. And uh I started putting up stickers and I realized while I was confronted with families and mothers that wanted something for themselves. So that evolved into buttons, t-shirts, and then, you know, from there it just continued to grow. So then it became a service to the families when I realized that it was really important to them and it really meant a lot to them that someone was actually doing this. So that's sort of where it developed into something going from there.

AJ: It sounds like that, it sounds like that project required or-- I don't want to say required-- that project demonstrated a deep level of empathy and care for people um in your community but also these family members who were going through a lot of grief and pain and I'm wondering how, being an empathetic person um impacted or impacts your own emotional health and how you kind of take care of yourself to make sure that um you can carry that and you can do this work.

ME: Yeah, I think that it gives me a sense of calm and peace. I think that I'm typically not really bothered by certain ideas. I know that even though, you know, the world is the way it is and there's constant improvement and things that we have to do better, I know that I'm doing something, you know? I'm being a part of a positive change so I think in terms of my day to day, I'm able to have that and it allows me to be more effective as well because of that.

AJ: So your website mentions that you first began doing artwork on t-shirts, how did you--why did you start art that way um and was it like an outlet for you when you started or did it evolve into that?

ME: Um I kind of the, me referencing and starting on a t-shirt was kind of also me speaking on a larger idea, you know, being presented as-- So, I started on a t-shirt because that's the only thing I knew, that's the only thing that I had an option for, that was the only thing I had been exposed to. I didn't know what art was when I started to create art. Um my background or cultural frame of reference doesn't have art, particularly fine art, um it has something called "low

art." So I didn't know that I could do anything other than put things on a t-shirt and call it, you know, and there you have it. So the t-shirt kind of represents this limitation that I have been imposed to put my ideas on and then it also represents what does society perceive of me *for* putting things on t-shirts. So it was kind of really important for me that I started out putting things ideas t-shirts 'cause then I continued to address that now throughout my career. I think that t-shirts really present themselves as another way for me and I constantly have to break out of those ideas as well.

AJ: Um I want to talk more about um kind of the identity piece but for those who don't know, just to clarify the question, um what is low art or what is meant when people refer to low art?

ME: *laughs* I'll say one way that I can articulate it better but I would say low art is black art but then if I, you know, say it in a different way. Uh low art is something that is classified kind of outside of the fine art realm. So low art is typically street art, uh it's typically things that aren't in the higher class of art but um culturally, certain cultures are only exposed to certain ways of expression and I don't think that it's coincident that the way those individuals express themselves happened to be considered "low art." So low art is, you know, crafty or just making do with what you have.

AJ: What's so interesting and strange about that is that it sounds like, through your kind of uh broader definition of it, it actually requires a lot more resourcefulness and ingenuity and so in a lot of ways it's sort of a creative type of art form.

ME: Yeah, certainly. Um--

AJ: *laughing So it makes no sense for it to be considered low art!

ME: Yeah, no, no. It's sort of, it definitely, someone just pointed and said, "That's low art," and pointed over there and said, "That's high art."

AJ: Yup, yup!

ME: So it's--it's yeah, so.

AJ: I wonder if the person doing the pointing actually saw the art or just saw the person making it.

ME: There we go.

[they laugh]

AJ: So I'm a little salty, I don't know if I can talk. It's always really frustrating how these constructions come to be um but I do want to talk more about how your identity um informs your self-care habits. Uh you talked a little bit about how it led you, how it--how your identity and your exposure kind of created the foundation for the art you were exposed to and how you went from there and also it sounds like the subject matter that your art focuses on. But also things like running and eating, I'm wondering if you think that gender plays a role in any of those things. I'm just curious about how you think kind of identity broadly shapes the ways um you think you take care of yourself. You actually um didn't say what your background is so I'm wondering if our audience would be curious if you'd like to share.

ME: Oh culturally, umm. Let's see. I'd say it's heavily rooted in um Afro-centric and uh African ideas so that would be culturally where the framework comes from in terms of how I was raised and the ideas that I am aware of, exposed to, and um we're taught to adhere to. So yeah I definitely um even within my own family structure I've had to feed into the idea of having to be tough and strong and endure. So when we're looking at, you know, running and those type of things, those type of uh pushing ones body like that comes from a place of trying to be tough and trying to make it so when I was doing those things, I was doing physical exertions, a way to, you know, bring my mind into a place um, because back to what you were saying in terms of identity, for me identity wasn't-- I wasn't allowed to be uhhh sort of--

AJ: Get your nails done.

ME: Pardon?

AJ: To like get your nails done?

ME: Right, right. Or display quote unquote what would be perceived as maybe weak or something like that. I come from a background where I, you know, have to be tough and kind of build it from scratch and, you know, so I think that identity does play a role in who I am and I think there's some pros and cons to that particular identity construct but definitely ways in which it hurt me and ways in which it helped me. So I'll say pros and cons, so I think a con for example in my life would be this whole, having to be uh to be tough um and not being able to ask for help. I think that's hurt me in my career um because, you know, I try to do it on my own um and that goes to a society and culturally, my particular background. It's one where I have to do it, I can't ask for help. Um but it's also produced someone that I'm proud of. It's made it so that, you know, I have a significant amount of pride in what I have now. I know that it's something that I achieved and I know that I built it, you know, from the ground up. And so like I said I think that the pros and the cons to that, that's an example of a way of which I was affected by kind of expectations placed on me.

AJ: Are you the kid of immigrants?

ME: Yeah, yeah. That is correct.

AJ: I feel like, so I'm also the child of immigrants but I feel like there's a unique experience um there which is just kind of being pulled between two cultures but it's also this thing of like no matter what you do or no matter what struggle you feel like you're going through, you're like, "Well, I didn't move halfway across the world!! So.."

ME: Yeah definitely. Yeah so in that sense, you know, you're expected to be tougher because you know I'm that example, you haven't endured what they have. So for that reason, whatever scenario you're in, you're going to have to um suck it up.

AJ: "I think as you're articulating really nicely like her a first like this strength and pride that comes from that but also of course pressures

ME: Yes, definitely. Um one of the things, like an emotional disconnect that that came out of that particular ya know scenario where you're having to be that tough often you're not able to access your emotions in order to be that tough so, that emotional disconnect is something that has to to repair and handle appropriately before it becomes further damaging to those around you or the next generation that you bring into this world so thats ya know an unfortunate byproduct of ya know that type of conflict in growing up.

AJ: Yeah what's what's interesting, is I think even um, I think often times we don't always appreciate that even those who present as tough or seem not in touch with their feelings or like whatever the framing one wants to use like people still have all their feeling whether they show them or not! (laughs)

ME: Correct

AJ: SO there's like ya know a monster or a monsoon inside of you and just like ya know. But was art like an early outlet for you?

ME: Um I think that uh, it was, art was not an early outlet. It was always something that I I just did ya know and once again if I go back then I could understand it or redefine it ya know underparticlar art categories but when I was a child I did illustrations. My dad taught me how to draw. I used to draw with my siblings um but it was it was a drawing it wasnt art. It wasn't something that had akue. It wasn't something that others could appreciate, it was just something that my dad said good job and my mom said good job or my siblings sadi good job. Um it was for me to just put down ideas and it was just that. I didn't know anything about anything other than that. I didn't know that there was anyway to to use that particular that "talent." It was like, It was when i was actually enrolled in college already far into the art curriculum that I knew what was even going

on i'm from three I felt an immense sense of empowerment form it once I realized what this thing actually was. I was like woah like this is...

AJ: “Oh shit I can do this!”

ME: Yeah, yeah that's what it was. It was like oh yeah ya know I remember the feeling that I always used to feel just like oh they messed up they should have never exposed me to this, this is not something you should have showed me because now I will ya know use it and um it in in a way for me it's like ya know they accidentally taught the sale how to read kind of scenario ya know they accidentally kind left the door open and he learned how to read and now its like ugh shoot, so that's how that's kinda my experience with ya know discovering art and I think that's what it means to me um it means that, its the book that I learned to read that I should have never have learned how to read.

AJ: It sounds like in that way um there’s something dangerous about having the access to the skill

ME: um I mean only as dangerous as a slave learning how to read is, ya know um

AJ: Well dangerous in the sense, well i guess could be two fold, I guess there could like be consequences to you for having that ability or maybe the flip side is that it then kind of opens up lots of means of expression um and is not dangerous but disruptive to the world

ME: Certainly and I think that’s what real good art is. I think it’s disruptive. Its uh pushes, its its yeah it certainly is. So uh yeah ya know danger is a use loosely, but yes. It is a power, I think power..

AJ: Yes power is a much better word.

ME: It’s a power. There’s a power there that so yeah. So once again reading is a particular power that is uncovered and then ya know if one is exposed to that um we take that for granted but those that don't have access to education but once they’re exposed to education you see them ya know it's crazy how that kind of devise a world in many ways, in terms of literacy, so that sort of like a power

AJ: Yeah I think for me as I've done ya know movement work and activist work, I entered it through um a very like legal, formalist lense I think that really only ever over

time I've learned legal skills to do legal work that I've actually realized the importance of art that I was like, ya know so I'll say like Hamilton has probably changed more peoples minds about things that any law has in my lifetime at least and like theres just tremendous power in the ability to get people to see things in a different way and i think really artists are uniquely situated to do that.

ME: Absolutely. Definitely. Especially uh when whatever expression has been previously dominated and or been something that's excluded um once you're able to figure out how to ge that inclusion in its yeah powerful and dangerous.

AJ: Uh but dangerous in a good way. It's good trouble.

ME: Absolutely. Yes.

AJ: Um so you're also um a youth mentor and I'm curious if you could talk about community care, working with kids and how you think education through art differs more form reditional forms of education.

ME: Yes um so perticulaty with mentoring I created my own curriculums um and currently I mentor at the juvenile detention center in chicago, IYC. Um im not exclusively using art in that space but i am in the sense that im using myself um as a canvas for the young men um to kind of see and visualize a different reality so um that is how I I currently use art um for those, that particular group.

AJ: When I've done mentoring in the past, I've found that laot of what you are working on, i don't know if the right word is transmitting or like sharing um, is is a lot of it is kind of how do care for yourself? How do you express yourself in healthy productive ways? And I wonder if that's been your experience as well?

ME: Yeah um it's definitely - it's there's a whole ya know another conversation about health within that particular system, and based on the fact that a lot of the kids come from underserved areas, so there health is ya know really in question in terms of the type of food that they need the fact that they're pilled up whenever ya know they're behind bars so definitely the self care aspect of things is is super important and I do speak to them about that um ya know, it's immensely important. And to deal with a whole nother idea integers of self care, um when we were talking about that group but it's also this whole idea of it it goes like to the point where no one even has value in themselves. Um when one is in that scenario often they dont have value for their own self before they could even care for it so I do try to evoke and inspire uh the idea that

they should value themselves and then care for themselves. So yes self care is definitely a big part of mentoring. I've seen a lot of outbursts, and you know, you can tell there's just a million layers of crap that is underneath that is unresolved that leads to that. Just a very short, sometimes emotional imbalance. I think that is due to a lack of being able to access one's emotions and having them in check. I think it does come from society structures. It's way worse in neighborhoods that are underserved because you have to be tougher just to survive in that neighborhood. You have to super masculine and overly masculine. Those individuals I feel have really deep scars and really unresolved emotional issues.

AJ: Yeah, I think it's interesting that way you phrase it about the idea of keeping your feelings in check. I imagine it is challenging. I mean, I don't imagine, I have had this experience. It's challenging to keep your feelings in check if you're not really thinking about how you're feeling because you have to kind of acknowledge the emotion in order to find a way to address it that does not involve you hitting someone. At least for me it did.

ME: Right, that's true. That's also a skill-set in itself. I don't think that too much comes intuitively. I think in some ways it's something we learn to do. So if one does not simply have that skill-set or hasn't been introduced to that, they're like to not know how to handle that.

AJ: I wonder if you have any thoughts about, like, art in schools? And how art in schools can kind of play a role in some of this?

ME: In terms of therapy?

AJ: Yeah, in terms of therapy, but also even there's all these, we're seeing all these teacher strikes around the nation and budget cuts, and it makes me wonder, you know, often one of the first things to go is the arts. And studies show that students who have access to the arts do better in school in their academic subjects. And I'm just wondering if you have - if as an artist and as someone who works with kids - if you kind of have an opinion about that.

ME: Well, personally through my works, I worked with schools that are being shut down in Chicago and a lot of them don't have art programs. And, I was unaware of the particular data that you're referencing, but I'm sure that that's absolutely correct. It's unfortunate, it's super unfortunate that the underserved communities are the ones that

get their budgets cut in that way, and particularly get hit in the arts. I am totally for and wish and would support if others saw that need, as well. So yeah.

AJ: When I was, a few summers ago, I was working in an office, and we did a site visit to Rikers, which is a jail here in New York. And the superintendent, they have a school on Rikers Island, which is a jail, because they have so many people who are jailed there who are between 16 to 18. And the superintendent told me that when they introduced arts curriculum on Rikers Island, they introduced them as a weekend class. In order to attend, you had to complete your academic subjects. And they said when they did that, they just saw like a huge improvement in attitude and attendance and because people wanted to do the art, they would kind of be more engaged with their work and the act of doing art helped them kind of focus and have an outlet so that they would be more focused in their work. I thought that was really interesting. I was curious if you had any experiences in that vein.

ME: I think that I've had experiences where, myself, when I have used art to sort of escape, it's a place where you drift off and zone out and you can look back up and hours could have past by. It's important to have a healthy escape like that. Through my mentoring, I've seen it. I've seen when a young person who's allowed to have an escape and how healthy that's been for them. And also just allowed them to have a perspective about their particular reality. You're not able to look at this particular reality you're living in through other lenses. I can only understand or see how it makes it limited. You know, if you don't have an imagination about your reality, then that's all you see is your reality. I can see in that how that can play a role.

AJ: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. To be able to imagine something else would make a huge difference. I think for most people, but if you're a particularly challenging situation.

ME: Certainly.

AJ: So just as a final question, I wanted to ask you if there are any kinds of self-care habits or wellness habits that you're working on developing presently.

ME: Well currently for Never Forget Chi, I am working on introducing a way for other people to be able to help out. So essentially, it'd be a way for anyone to just log on and send a gift to a family that has lost someone in Chicago. I think it's something that you mentioned or I mentioned, it's something I've been doing, but I want other people to

have that experience to impact the families in that type of way. So that's something that's coming up that's going to be on the website that's going to be available.

AJ: That's great, so it's like you're really trying to expand that community of care that you've been working in!

ME: Absolutely, absolutely, yeah that's correct. The conversation of care is the appropriate way to look at it. It's definitely something where these families have been neglected and ignored, and care is a good way to speak about what it is that I'm trying to do. It's a way to - it helps - i've heard it countless times, how it means a great deal to them and how it helps with their grieving process. So it's definitely a way for them to help them self-care.

AJ: Do you think that, for you, was expanding this also kind of -- I find that often kind of external work and community work kind of comes back to you twice as much as you give, right? Do you find that this expansion and trying to make those moves has had an impact on you and your wellness and the way you're feeling?

ME: Definitely, definitely how I feel. Not my pockets *[both laugh]* but how I, like I said, this sense of comfort and this ability to -- I think it's part of why I can look at the most tragic news and not feel at a complete loss. Just knowing there's something going on. Because I believe in myself. I believe in what I'm doing. I believe that there's an impact happening. So I can't feel hopeless about humanity because I'm playing a role in a better humanity. So I think that, in that sense, that's where the self-care aspect of it comes back to me. I think that it definitely leaves me at peace. It's thrilling to get a hug from a mother who has lost children and tells you what it means, it means so much to them what I'm doing. That's food for your soul that lasts forever. So yeah.

AJ: I think that's such a great way to look at it, because I think often people who do various types of social justice work or activism often feel burnt out. And I think what you're saying is so right, that if you can find those moments that are food for your soul in times that you're feeling exasperated or like you're not doing enough, it can really feed you.

ME: Definitely, totally.

AJ: So, I want to just close out by saying to our listeners, thank you for listening to another episode of Self Care Sundays! Before we wrap up here, I want to offer a special shout-out to our

patrons on Patreon. Their generosity makes our show possible and are a huge reason why you're hearing this episode today.

We are especially grateful for the support of our super contributors:
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Maxwell, thank you again for joining us on Self Care Sundays. It was great having you here. Where can our audience find you on social media?

ME: They can check me out online at NeverForgetChi.org and on Facebook and Instagram at @neverforgetchicago.

AJ: Is that all spelled out?

ME: Yes, it's all spelled on Instagram and Facebook. NeverForgetChicago.

AJ: Great. I'd like to thank the person who made our show art - Leah Horowitz and the amazing artists who made our show music 4WheelCity.

On behalf of our producer Jess Talwar, our communications interns Kennedy Freeman and Sophie Gomez, our audio engineer Cato Zane, and myself thank you for tuning into another episode of the Self Care Sundays Podcast. We'll see you on our next episode.

[outro music]