

Shelby Stanger:

The presenting sponsor of this season of Wild Ideas Worth Living is Subaru. One thing I just learned that I thought was very cool is Subaru is donating 50 million meals to help feed people in need during the COVID-19 crisis. They know this pandemic is devastating our country and has left hundreds and thousands out of work and unable to feed themselves or their families. Through the Subaru Love Promise, a commitment to support their communities, Subaru and their retailers across the country are making a donation to provide 50 million meals to Feeding America. This action called Subaru Loves to Help will make meals available at 199 local food banks across the country. In addition, Subaru retailers will be doing other things to help these local food banks, including food deliveries, donations, and volunteer events. Subaru knows their ongoing support will be necessary as local communities work to get back on their feet. Subaru Loves to Help just one part of the Subaru Love Promise, one more reason that makes Subaru more than a car company.

Shelby Stanger:

What's going through your mind when you're in the middle of a race?

Joe Gray:

It's very different and it really depends on your mental state going in and what you're looking for, why are you doing it? What's the importance of this race? Are you just running for yourself? Are you running for a brand? Are you running for your country? So it depends on the race. I've come into so many different races with different mindsets. Some races it's about you're going out there to go to the well, you're trying to see what you can do or you're chasing a time and that's the main focus or there's other races where, say the World Mountain Running Championship, you're running for your country and there's a lot of pride with that. You got the US flag on your chest, your brands are looking at you, they're looking for you to do something well, you have goals that you're looking for. So it all depends on what you're looking for, but I think anyone can enjoy it though, because at the purest level, we're all explorers. I always called myself Curious George when I was coming up, it's kind of why I love trail running is I've technically been a trail runner for years. I used to always go in the woods looking for trails.

Shelby Stanger:

As a kid?

Joe Gray:

Yeah. Trying to see where stuff went and trying to find random stuff that "Oh, let me see where this forest goes and I want to find the edge of it". and so it's something that I've always done. And I think everyone can enjoy that that facet of exploration.

Shelby Stanger:

Just like professional runner Joe Gray, all of us have an explorer inside of us. A little voice that wants to climb that hill to see what's beyond it or a louder voice that actually convinces us to go on some pretty wild adventures, but not everyone has the same opportunity to be an explorer. It's something Joe Gray has seen at the starting line of almost every trail, mountain or snow shoe race he's running his career. Joe's often the only Black athlete competing and that's something he'd really like to change. I'm Shelby Stanger, and this is Wild Ideas Worth Living. Joe Gray is the first Black person to make the Team USA World Mountain Running team, as well as the first Black American to win the USA National Mountain

Running Championships. In 2016 and in 2019, Joe won the World Mountain Running Championships. Total he's won 18 US National Championships. And he's represented the USA 31 times in international races. But even with all this success, Joe's often frustrated by his sport. The lack of diversity, not only in pro running, but also in the media coverage and sponsorship opportunities, that's something he knows is keeping young Black kids from wanting to pursue the kind of running he does. That's why he's doing something about it. Before we get into how Joe's making an impact. Let's go back to Joe's upbringing, where he spent time in Germany as an army brat and growing up in Tacoma, Washington. Just know we recorded this episode back in January of 2020 at the Outdoor Retailer Expo in Denver. That was back when gathering and hugging and being around people was still normal. Times have changed and in light of the recent events, Joe's story feels more important than ever.

Shelby Stanger:

Tell us a little bit about where you grew up. It sounds like you grew up in Germany where you really got to explore some amazing forest. And then you grew up in Tacoma. Talk to me about those experiences and how they're different and how you found running so early.

Joe Gray:

So I was born in the US. My dad was military. So around the time when a Desert Storm was going on, they forwarded a lot of the families over to Germany while the fathers went towards the Middle East and had to do what they had to do. So kept the families closer than they would have been. But yeah, we got the opportunity to go to Germany for a few years, in my first few years of elementary school there. And it was awesome, the school system in Germany is crazy cool. A lot of hands on stuff, we learned a lot about chocolate, milk, we went to farms, we went and learned about animals in the zoo, hands on, really cool stuff.

Shelby Stanger:

That's great.

Joe Gray:

And then on top of that, you're learning a new language. Kids are speaking German and it's really intriguing.

Shelby Stanger:

And people are probably from all different nationalities.

Joe Gray:

Yeah. On the military base, you'll see everything. You'll see people Mexican-American, Asian-American, you see all kinds of stuff. Kids speak in other languages outside of just English and German on the base and when you go off the base, obviously you're going to hear mostly German, but a lot of Germans speak English too, especially where we were.

Shelby Stanger:

When you were Germany, you used to run around you said.

Joe Gray:

Oh yeah, we used to play manhunt. I don't know if you remember that game, but it's kind of like a team version of hide and seek. So me and you would be on a team and we'd go and then the team lets us go hide and they have to come find us. And we have to try to get back to a base to where we're safe. And so we used to do it in the woods all the time. I mean, we would do it in the urban areas as well sometimes in Germany, but we did that in the woods a lot of times. And it was super fun. You had to be fast. You wanted to be the person that everybody wanted on their team. So it was a good thing to be a good athlete.

Shelby Stanger:

So that was you?

Joe Gray:

Yeah.

Shelby Stanger:

Nice.

Joe Gray:

Definitely. I probably wasn't the fastest one. I'm sure there were, I mean, there was a ton of kids that's super... Just at that level, when you're little kids, talent really shows.

Shelby Stanger:

So when did you move to Tacoma? How hold were you?

Joe Gray:

I think it was fourth grade.

Shelby Stanger:

When you moved to Tacoma, did you still run?

Joe Gray:

I wasn't a runner though in Germany. Basketball was my main sport. I didn't start running until middle school. That's kind of when I got introduced to the sport.

Shelby Stanger:

So you did cross country or track?

Joe Gray:

Track.

Shelby Stanger:

Track. What was your distance?

Joe Gray:

At that point you're doing the 800 and the mile. We didn't have cross country. I mean, there is cross country now at the middle school level, depending on where you are, probably even where I grew up I bet you there is.

Shelby Stanger:

So when did you start competitively running for real?

Joe Gray:

I would say that's a mindset too, where you start to take it more serious and you're really involved with the sport and you're concerned with it and it encompasses your mind and your choices and decisions in life. I would say after I lost my first race. I was winning everything and then this guy just spanked me and it changed everything because then it was different than losing in basketball per se. In basketball, you can blame it on somebody but with running, I lost that race and it was like, "Oh man." It just felt different than anything I had experienced. And I was like, "Oh man, I just lost." And it's embarrassing. You feel like everyone's looking at you, looking down at you and jeering at you or something. And it was tough that first time and it did change me.

Shelby Stanger:

How did it change you? Start training?

Joe Gray:

Just more serious. I never really ran. I was just playing basketball all the time and just showing up on race day and doing a little bit of training here and there and never on the weekends, no running. And so I started to take that more serious, running more, running probably five days a week and just really thinking about running and starting to wonder like, "Oh, what's the Olympics, what's the world championship? You can represent your country. You can go to college with this." That was stuff that we had no idea. We didn't realize you could get a scholarship for running. This was stuff I was thinking about in middle school.

Shelby Stanger:

That's pretty fantastic that you were thinking about that in middle school because a lot of kids at middle school age, aren't thinking about that.

Joe Gray:

Yeah. I'm competitive. I wanted the best grades. I wanted to beat you at every sport. Video game, I wanted to be the best with video games. Nobody in my family had went to college and so it was a big deal for me to try to put myself in a position where I could go to college.

Shelby Stanger:

Joe was recruited by Oklahoma State where he majored in criminology and decided he wanted to go into the anti-doping world, but he was also running competitively. And he said being a professional athlete and working in anti-doping, didn't really go hand in hand. In his running career at college Joe's event was the steeple chase. It's a really fun and hard event, a 3000 meter race where you have to jump over barriers and go through a water pit. That event taught Joe technical skills like how to adapt to

different terrains, how to change pace and other lessons that apply to trail running. So then how did you get into professional running?

Joe Gray:

Professional running is interesting. So there's a lot of people who I think have a misunderstanding of what professional athletics is when it comes to our sport. There's a lot of people who think, "Oh you get sponsored, you get gear from someone or something that and you're a professional." For me I feel like I wasn't professional my first year after competing in college. When your eligibility is up in college, you can go pro, you're not on scholarship anymore at that point, you're done with your degrees. But actually I was in grad school actually. So I actually got my bachelor's and I was halfway through my master's when I finished eligibility. So that was my first year of post-collegiate. I wouldn't say I was running professionally, even though I had sponsorships because I don't think I was pursuing the American dream. I wasn't really saving enough money to pay a mortgage or to have a car and all this type of stuff. And so I would say probably 2008 or 2009 is kind of when I started to get more money and winning more money and getting sponsorships to where, "Okay, we can save money now, we can invest and do things like that with our life."

Shelby Stanger:

So where you're making a living as a runner?

Joe Gray:

Yeah.

Shelby Stanger:

So can we back up and can you explain what kind of running you do? Because you're a different professional runner. You're not like a professional road racer where you go to marathons every weekend, which I think is the most common form of running most people know about, or track running where we see Usain Bolt crushing it.

Joe Gray:

Right, right, right.

Shelby Stanger:

What kind of running do you do?

Joe Gray:

I pride myself on diversity being able to jump in between different types of racing. So I do it all like trail, mountain, sky running, ultra running, road, cross country, track, snow shoe. I like to do it all. I just love competing. I love the sport. I love the community that's surrounded by the sport.

Shelby Stanger:

So how did you end up becoming professional? Did companies pursue you? Did you pursue them?

Joe Gray:

It goes both ways. A lot of times when you get certain results, sometimes companies will come after you or maybe you fit the bill. Maybe there's something they're looking for in an athlete specifically. Or a lot of times, I would say probably 75% of the time, it was me going after the brands. I found a brand that I really liked, a brand that I feel like could really help me perform and be at my best.

Shelby Stanger:

Can you tell us what sky running is and mountain running? There's a couple of disciplines you talked about that I don't think a lot of people know about.

Joe Gray:

And there is confusion amongst that too. There's a lot of people that have different definitions of it. A lot of it is in terms of sky and mountain, the difference is branding a lot of times. But in my opinion, sky running's usually going to be, or initially it was high altitude competing like over 2000 meter type stuff. Mountain running to me is just more steeper terrain, trail running is less steep, almost a hybrid form of cross country.

Shelby Stanger:

So you do it all. You do ultras, you do mountain, you do snow. How do you decide which events you want to do?

Joe Gray:

Sometimes it's random, but then there's a lot of classic races out there that it draws in really good competition, you want to race some good guys or it's just historic, has a lot of history and you want to be a part of it and see where you stand.

Shelby Stanger:

What's the most memorable race recently?

Joe Gray:

Probably the World Championships for me.

Shelby Stanger:

Was it Mountain World Championships?

Joe Gray:

Yeah, the World Mountain Running Championship last year.

Shelby Stanger:

Where was it?

Joe Gray:

It was in Argentina.

Shelby Stanger:

Cool. And you were representing the United States on the world team?

Joe Gray:

Right. And it was a magical moment for me specifically because I won in 2016 and then I lost... That's the thing is too. I try to tell even younger kids, if running is something that you're going to do as a job, you're going to lose a lot. You're going to probably lose more than you win a lot of times until you get to a certain level, then maybe you're winning more than you're losing. But when it comes to the world championships, I've lost a lot of times, there a lot of learning, but to come back and win this year after I had a big injury. I was kind of off coming into the beginning of last year and just low, depressed. And if you asked me about could I represent my country again? It was just something that I wasn't thinking about. I was thinking about not even running anymore. And to come from that hole and then to win a championship and to lead Team USA to a silver medal, it was very special, very special.

Joe Gray:

And then I wanted it to rain for the race day. I was I need it to be sloppy to give me a better chance and we wake up and it's just nasty. And I was like, "Yes, I needed this." And so it was magical in a lot of ways.

Shelby Stanger:

So you thrive when it's a little bit nastier, a little bit grittier?

Joe Gray:

I think so. I'm probably just weird.

Shelby Stanger:

No, you're probably just tough and you like it.

Joe Gray:

I like bad conditions, whether it's hot, super... I need something it to be tough to where there's a mental aspect that if you're not about that life, you're not ready to compete. You don't want to be on the start line. I want to be there.

Shelby Stanger:

What's the race? So for the Mountain Championships, what the mileage or distance?

Joe Gray:

So the Classic World Mountain Running Championship, it's the one that's been around for many years, it's usually between 10 and 15, 10 and 16 K.

Shelby Stanger:

10 and 16 K and it's at elevation of?

Joe Gray:

I've had some where it started pretty high and some where it started sea level.

Shelby Stanger:

What's a typical day like for you?

Joe Gray:

It depends on the time of the year. There's some days where you're doubling, you're running twice a day, usually you're running in the morning. You might have one in the evening time. I like to change it up. I don't like to run twice every day. I don't like to run every day. I take some time off, make sure I'm resting and stuff. So it just depends on what's coming up.

Shelby Stanger:

So you specifically, you're at the most elite level when it comes to this sport, which is so cool. And I can see, you look fit, you've got the mindset, I can hear it in your voice and you love it. Any tricks or tips?

Joe Gray:

Trying to make me blush.

Shelby Stanger:

Well, any rituals you do before a race? Well, I can just tell, I can tell when I'm talking to a good athlete. I can feel it. I can sense it. You've got that about you.

Joe Gray:

I appreciate that.

Shelby Stanger:

You got that whole air. So any tricks or tips or rituals you do before a race?

Joe Gray:

Prayer is a big thing for me but I'm not asking for anything when I pray. I'm usually thanking for the opportunity and just being thankful for the opportunity because I don't... My belief is that no matter who you believe in, I believe in God, I don't think God is going to give you anything. He already gave you everything that you have and you are supposed to use those gifts accordingly. So I'm thankful for those gifts and then the opportunity to be where I'm at on that start line. And so I always make sure I pray in terms of giving thanks before races.

Shelby Stanger:

That's so interesting because I've been learning a lot about gratitude and they say that when we're in gratitude, our cells are so much more able to do the things that we need them to do. You're able to heal really fast. You're able to recover really fast. You're able to focus really fast. Synchronicities happen. And so that's really interesting that you start your race with gratitude.

Joe Gray:

Yeah, definitely. I mean I think now I've been a pro for a long time. I look at my career, there's a lot of guys that came in the sport with me that aren't here and I realize longevity in the sport, consistency in the sport and being given these opportunities consistently over years, that's a huge gift. I could be doing



something totally different. I could be dead. I could be in jail. There's a lot of other options based on what I was doing in my life earlier. This is a huge gift, blessing.

Shelby Stanger:

What do you mean what you were doing in your life earlier where you could have gone another way?

Joe Gray:

Just I was hanging out with the wrong crowd. I was doing a lot of bad stuff.

Shelby Stanger:

In Tacoma, growing up?

Joe Gray:

Yeah, definitely Tacoma. I mean, even kind of in Germany too. I mean when kids are bored and when you get a bunch of kids together and they can make bad decisions.

Shelby Stanger:

How do you think you didn't go a different way?

Joe Gray:

I really feel like sports is a huge factor. Like I said, I'm really competitive so wanting to be competitive at nonconventional things and crime and things like that didn't seem as intriguing anymore when you're an athlete and you're good at a sport. It's like, "Oh, I can do something really cool with my life. I'm not going to be at McDonald's or selling drugs or something that. I could make good money, go to college." And then you're at that age you're girl crazy so being good at sports helps. There's a lot of different things and incentives that kind of push you away from a negative lifestyle.

Joe Gray:

And back when I was younger, women was a thing. They didn't want the guys per se, who were just bad. It got to point where the bad guys did get a lot of attention when we were young but then when you got older, it's like women like my wife, she wasn't into that. Like, "What? Who are you hanging out with? You're doing that?" Nah, she's not going to give you any time of day and she didn't. I tried to get with her hardcore in high school. It wasn't happening.

Shelby Stanger:

Wow. You've known your wife since high school?

Joe Gray:

Yeah. I met her when I was 17.

Shelby Stanger:

Tell me about your wife and what she does and how she helps you in your running.

Joe Gray:

I was having a conversation with some good friends last night and just about how I'm so thankful for a woman like her, because she's allowed me to grow up, mature. She's been there. She's been my friend when I needed her to be my friend. I could lean on her and she could help me get out of that hole. And she's just a good person.

Shelby Stanger:

Does she run with you ever?

Joe Gray:

We have run together, but she's not so much into it now because she's been pregnant for the last few years. Or pregnant or breastfeeding and just not feeling like running.

Shelby Stanger:

How many kids do you have?

Joe Gray:

We have another one coming here soon.

Shelby Stanger:

Wow congratulations.

Joe Gray:

That'll be second. We had our anniversary race that we've been doing for a few years, but we haven't done it because-

Shelby Stanger:

What do you mean anniversary race?

Joe Gray:

We have a race where we race each other around our anniversary.

Shelby Stanger:

That's really cute. I like couples who race together.

Joe Gray:

Yeah.

Shelby Stanger:

Joe's a talented runner and he's passionate about his sport, but the world of trail running, it's not perfect. The lack of diversity is something that's always bothered Joe. He's not the kind of person who would just ignore it and keep running though. Joe is doing something about it. When we come back here about how Joe is tackling the problem and what you can do to help.

Shelby Stanger:

This episode is brought to you by Hoka One One. Hoka produces premium performance footwear for athletes of all types. Born in the mountains, Hoka shoes were initially distinguished by their oversized midsoles. Today, they're designed with the same enhanced cushioning, inherent stability and problem solving inspiration to meet the running, walking, fitness and outdoor needs of a wide variety of users. With a bold and often unexpected approach, Hoka empowers athletes of all levels to feel like they can fly. Shop their lightweight cushion trail shoes at your local REI or at rei.com and follow @hokaoneone on Instagram to see how athletes like you are using Hoka to meet their goals and find joy in movement. It's time to fly.

Shelby Stanger:

When Joe was younger and became passionate about running, he noticed there weren't a lot of people of color being represented - not in the magazines, not in the coverage of races, not in advertisements for gear. Now that he's a professional runner and he has his own platform, Joe wants to use his voice to encourage young runners of color to get out there. That's why Joe started project Inspire Diversity. A recent article came out about you about how you wanted to tackle running's lack of diversity. Can you talk to me about that?

Joe Gray:

Yeah. So specifically it's talking about the outdoor type stuff like the trail mountain running type stuff, because all my career... I mean, you look at photos, podiums or start lines, I'm the only Black dude out there. And nine times out of ten, it's no problem, everybody's usually... Especially in the mountain running community, you don't see a lot of racist people. No one's yelling out racist things or anything that. The reason I'm basically bringing it up is because it hurts minorities and Black people when it comes to sponsorships and stuff. I'm not the only Black athlete that's doing well in the sport. I'm probably one of the better American, just color not involved, but I've had to do a lot to get what maybe athletes who are lesser than me, who are white, they can get different sponsorships and things that because the media covers those athletes, the models, they're all white, the articles are white, everything's very white, predominantly white. The sport is predominantly white. So to some degree it makes sense. But I want to change that because I feel like America's a melting pot. You don't see just white when you go walk around our country. And so I want to change that outlook, especially with the media, so that other athletes get opportunities to extend their career and get opportunities to race and explore the world and be connected to brands and do great things for their community and make the Black community even healthier and more open to outdoors.

Shelby Stanger:

What do you think was the biggest cause of lack of diversity in the running community? Specifically the outdoor running community.

Joe Gray:

I do blame the media a lot for it because you don't get to see people that look you. You're not covering people who look like me.

Shelby Stanger:

Do you think it's changing?

Joe Gray:

It is. What's crazy is I brought this issue up a couple of years ago. After I brought it up and it was public, a lot of different companies and people were DM-ing me, emailing me, asking me what they could do. And that was just a blessing to see that people cared and not even just Black people, it was white people. They wanted to do something. They saw the need for it. And I felt like it's beautiful. I wish I could share those messages because especially right now in our country where we're so divided. When you look at politics, politics have really divided our country, it's making people paranoid. We look at each other differently now. And so it was cool.

Joe Gray:

And I've shared this with some of my other friends, but it's like as a Black athlete, you start to be more paranoid like, "Oh, why didn't I get this deal or that deal? Or why didn't they cover me for this or that?" And now you start to wonder, because we're so divided racially that, "Oh, is it because I'm Black?" And so to see that there's a lot of people on the other side of the fence who really support what you're doing and do see it as an issue was great for me to see.

Shelby Stanger:

What companies are doing well today and addressing the lack of diversity problem?

Joe Gray:

I think Hoka, and I'm not even being biased. I mean, I know some people are going to be like, "Oh, he runs for Hoka, of course."

Shelby Stanger:

I actually interviewed a Hoka runner that's African American, Latoya Shauntay Snell.

Joe Gray:

Yep. I know her.

Shelby Stanger:

She's awesome.

Joe Gray:

Latoya is cool. Yeah. She's cool people. I like Latoya.

Shelby Stanger:

So Hoka's doing really good. Anybody else? Any race community that's like websites and media?

Joe Gray:

I don't like to speak out of my butt and just say something just for the sake of saying it. So it's not something that I've researched a ton yet. It is something that I do plan to review and see if things are changing. Because I was saying how I think the Trail Runner did just put a Black athlete on the cover, which was really cool and I know him and he's actually a great dude too. I can speak about Hoka because I see it. Even from a neutral perspective they have people of color, Mexicans, they have Asians, they have Blacks. It's a colorful group. We just went to the athlete summit and it was like, "Man, there's a lot

of diversity here." But there's other companies, you go to their summit, it's like they clearly didn't get the message and they don't care.

Shelby Stanger:

Well, you're doing some stuff to change that. So tell us a little bit about Project Inspire Diversity.

Joe Gray:

Yeah. So this kind of rooted from my childhood, me getting into a sport, somebody gave me some shoes and I remember that motivation that it gave me and I was so excited. I couldn't sleep. I was like, "Oh, I can't wait to run in these." I had them on walking in the house. I'm just jazzed out about it because my parents never bought me anything like that and not that they wouldn't have. My parents, if you're doing something positive, they'll get it for you. Not the richest people in the world, but if you're doing good in school, they'll make sure that they're supporting you and my parents always been good about that.

Shelby Stanger:

I get this because my fiance talks about the time his middle school coach gave him a soccer ball or he actually had to collect cans at school and the person who collected the most Campbell's Soup cans won a soccer ball, and he slept with it. So you had running shoes and it transformed you?

Joe Gray:

It just motivated me so much. And with the Project Inspire Diversity and with the issues that I'm raising right now, I wanted to be able to get my sponsors behind me and see if they'd be willing to give product as I picked, basically hand picked, I asked the community to send me names and things like that and-

Shelby Stanger:

Send you names of?

Joe Gray:

Black athletes, young Black athletes who are in the sport, distance runners who maybe one day may go into trail running or something that. But just to keep them motivated in a sport that there's not a lot of athletes that look like them, it's tough. And I know how it was for me coming up. I didn't have anybody that looked like me. I looked to a lot of other athletes outside of my sport to motivate me, the late Kobe Bryant, who we just lost. It was very sad for me because Kobe was one of those guys who definitely motivated me to have that tenacity and that work ethic when I was young. Even though he was a basketball player, he inspired me in mountain and track and stuff like that and distance running.

Joe Gray:

And so with this project, I want to be that guy to give these kids something to help them stay in the sport, motivated and at the end of it, when I've met the last kid and even the kids before that, it's like I let them know, "If you have questions, struggling with something, I've been there, I know what it's like. If it's something I can help you with, reach out to me." I want to be of assistance to people.

Shelby Stanger:

When exactly did you start it? What year?

Joe Gray:

So the first kids that I started giving stuff was in 2019.

Shelby Stanger:

So this was recently. What are some stories that have come from it?

Joe Gray:

Just the followup emails, just getting messages from the kids and them telling me how they felt about it and what I mean to them or how I'm inspiring them. Hearing them tell me something candid about what it meant for them, that was huge. That's all I needed to see. Just an I want to know that it helped because I know that it's going to sprout and they're going to help other people.

Shelby Stanger:

How do you want to see this organization grow?

Joe Gray:

For me, I'm a big believer in not being... I don't want to make it such a big thing to where it's about me. What I want to see is that it helps people individually and then that they pass it forward, they do something for others. I want to just keep helping kids and helping them stay in the sport and see them grow and see something positive come out of it for them and see them make national teams in mountain running. I think I was the first Black American to ever make the mountain team and the first to win a world championship mountain running.

Shelby Stanger:

Good for you.

Joe Gray:

And so I hope to inspire other Black Americans to get into a sport like this and then have our sport look a melting pot like our country looks like. That'll be dope to me. I'll be really happy to see something like that.

Shelby Stanger:

How can other people support you and find out more about this? Because I'm sure there's people listening who are like, "I want to be part of that. Or I want to get some shoes to those guys."

Joe Gray:

Yeah. It's small right now, obviously it's very grassroots, very individual. The biggest way they could help out is when I reach out to the community, when if they see a post from me and I'm reaching out, if they want to give anything to the kids that they want to help out in any way or if I'm asking for funding to provide something for a kid.

Shelby Stanger:

So is there a website or is it your Instagram?

Joe Gray:

Yeah, my Instagram is usually where and my Facebook page, [facebook.com/journeyofjoegeezi](https://www.facebook.com/journeyofjoegeezi).

Shelby Stanger:

Journey of Joe Geezi?

Joe Gray:

Yeah. So Joe Geezi is my handle for Twitter and Instagram. So J-O-E G-E-E-Z-I.

Shelby Stanger:

You've been able to make a career doing what you love, which is really hard. And when I started this podcast, I started it because I wanted people to pursue whatever wild idea they had but there were so many times in my life, I felt stuck. Obviously wild idea of becoming a professional mountain athlete and one of the only Black athletes to do this, any advice to other people who want to make a living kind of doing what they love and don't want to feel stuck?

Joe Gray:

That's simple. Like what you just said, if you love something, don't take no for an answer and stay driven and motivated to accomplish that. Get good at it, perfect your craft.

Shelby Stanger:

I love that Joe's doing something to make a change in his sport. By encouraging other athletes of color and giving them resources and support, hopefully we'll see more diverse starting lines in the future. Of course, I wanted to finish this conversation with a wild round. So I asked Joe about all sorts of things like the music he listens to to get pumped up for a race and what's it like being a dad. What's the song that you really love listening to pre-race?

Joe Gray:

Ooh, man I got a couple. So it depends on my mindset, but I like Miguel, I like Drake, I like Kendrick Lamar, I like Ty Dolla Sign, Earth, Wind & Fire or Gapman too. So yeah, I like those.

Shelby Stanger:

I like it. Favorite go to trail snack?

Joe Gray:

Fuel 100 Electro-Bites.

Shelby Stanger:

What flavor?

Joe Gray:

I like a couple of different ones of that, but the ginger, I'm really digging that one right now.

Shelby Stanger:

The ginger. What shoes do you run in most for Hoka?

Joe Gray:

Right now I would say my favorite has probably been Evo Mafate or Cavu.

Shelby Stanger:

The Cavu or the what?

Joe Gray:

Evo Mafate.

Shelby Stanger:

I've never heard of that one. That sounds really cool.

Joe Gray:

Yeah. I mean it definitely, well, probably not where you live is, I mean it's... Well, no. Yeah, you guys got some rugged stuff out there too, so it's good for rugged terrain. It's a really good shoe.

Shelby Stanger:

Where's your favorite place to go to for training and nutrition tips?

Joe Gray:

When it comes to nutrition tips I like to do trial and error. I'm a big believer in that trying something and see if it works for you.

Shelby Stanger:

What's working well for you right now in terms of how you eat and how you train?

Joe Gray:

Eat what I crave. I've found that to be really good for me. When I look at my blood values, if I'm trying to stick to a certain diet, I felt like I'm depleted in some things. But when I just eat what I want, it's like your body usually tells you what you want. And I eat everything. I'm not a vegan or - I love meat. I love cheese. I love sweets.

Shelby Stanger:

And you're one of the fastest runners in the world so this is really great to hear.

Joe Gray:

Yeah. But I think red meat's a great thing to have. I mean, it's the best way to get your iron and your ferritin levels up real quick. It's got fat already there to help stabilize it.

Shelby Stanger:

How about rest and sleep?



Joe Gray:

Yeah, I definitely, I mean, in terms of, I think it's important. Yeah.

Shelby Stanger:

But do you try to get nine hours a day or eight hours a day?

Joe Gray:

You know what you'll notice about me, I'm not very strict on things. I feel like it's just too much stress in life to always be like, "I need to have this and I need to have that and I got to eat this when I'm here." I just I go with the flow. There's some days where my son wakes up and he wants to play and it's early and it's, "Well I guess I'm up and we're hanging out." And there's some days he might sleep in and I might sleep in and we'll just go with the flow.

Shelby Stanger:

What's the funniest thing your kid's recently said that just made you laugh?

Joe Gray:

The most recent thing, so he's getting at that age now where they can eat a lot. And I used to I'll share my gummies with him on occasion. I gave him some and I'm thinking he'll be done. I had just fed him something, he's not going to want anymore. And he says, "More, more." And he's doing this little sign language thing. I was like, "No, no, you can't have anymore." He said, "Why?" And I was like, "What?" Because he'd never said why. When they're at this age, they have new words. And he said, "Why?" It's interesting that he could understand to ask a question when we don't ask him questions like that that often. At this age, if I tell him to do something and he says no, I don't say why. No you're going to do it because I told you to do it. And so it's interesting that he learns, they just pick up stuff, it's like they watch you talking to each other. And so yeah, I thought that was pretty crazy.

Shelby Stanger:

Representation matters everywhere. Young athletes need role models that look like them. They need to know that their dreams can come true. That if they strive for excellence, they can achieve it. By not being the only Black person running in these races, but also by using his connections and his voice to encourage runners who can identify with him, Joe's leading us toward a more inclusive world where the challenges and successes of professional sports are accessible to everyone. We can also all do our part to help Joe make this more of a reality.

Shelby Stanger:

Thank you so much to Joe Gray for sitting down with me at the Outdoor Retailer Show in Denver, for talking with me and for pursuing this wild idea to make the running world a more diverse place. You can follow Joe's upcoming events and you can get involved in Project Inspired Diversity by following Joe on his Instagram account @joegeezi, that's @ J-O-E-G-E-E-Z-I. Thank you to Joe's sponsor Hoka One One for setting up our interview and to the Outdoor Retailer Show in Denver for letting us use your podcast room. Wild Ideas Worth Living is part of the REI podcast network, it's hosted by me, Shelby Stanger, written and edited by Annie Fassler and produced by Chelsea Davis. Our executive producers are Paolo Mottola and Joe Crosby and our presenting sponsor is Subaru. Tune-in week after next, we'll talk to pro cyclist Amber Pierce about how she's encouraging young female athletes. As always, we appreciate

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