

Jerry: Hello, brother. It's great to see you.

Ashanti: It's good to see you, too, Jerry.

Jerry: Ashanti, before we start, can you just take a moment and introduce yourself?

Ashanti: Yeah. Um, so my name's Ashanti Branch. I'm from Oakland, California. Um, raised by a single mother. Uh, grew up a fatherless son. My father died before I was born. Uh, when I got my act together I decided I was gonna go to college. I wanted to be rich.

Jerry: Hm.

Ashanti: ... you know, 'cause I, I knew that poor wasn't fun and was absolutely (laughs), really, they told me if you go to college and get a good job, make a lot of money, you could live happily after. I was, like, sign me up for that plan. And cause I was good at math and it was a way to be able to push myself past, like, okay, I can do this. And, um, went to college. Became an engineer, civil engineering. I studied at Cal- Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, which is, like, one of the top engineering schools in California. And then I started working and making money and then I was like, wait a minute. This is not happy ever after. This is like happy at Friday around 5:00 PM. And then, you know-

Jerry: (laughs)

Ashanti: ... and Sunday around (laughs) 7:00 PM it starts fading away. And it wasn't the work, it wasn't in the work. It wasn't fulfilling overall. I thought, I thought the dream of happy ever after literally meant what that meant, right? And I was like, this is not working. And, um, something in teaching called me. I mean, it was a long journey story, but, uh, I'm making it really fast and, um, teaching called me. And I was, like, wait. Teachers don't make money. Like, I wanna be, j- I'm definitely not gonna be rich teaching. So it was like one of them confusing callings in your life where I was like, I think I'm supposed to do something different. And teaching was like, this is it. I'm like, no, it can't be that because that doesn't make money. And I was, like, I was equating my, my, my journey to, like, overcoming the, growing up poor and it means that you can't go back there. (laughs) Like, that's the, that was the growing up, that journey of, like-

Jerry: You want, you, you wanted to get out and, and you never wanted to get back?

Ashanti: Never ever wanted to go back. My mom was a teacher. So I knew teachers didn't make money. And I had made a declaration at 15- years-old that, I'm never gonna be a teacher because I couldn't even get in this program called Upward Bound which helps first generation students go to college, because they were like, well, you're, you're not first generation. I'm saying, uh, we're poor. We're

definitely first generation. They're like, well (laughs), your mom went to college. I'm like, you mean my mom went to college and we're this broke? You know? Like, so I was clear that whatever my mom was doing, I was not gonna be doing, you know (laughs)? But it was, it was that, it was that thing. And then, and what I realized was that, I'm supposed to be a teacher. And, um, you know, I, I was raising my siblings at seven-years-old, I was helping with cooking, cleaning. I was helping raise a house, you know?

Jerry: Yeah.

Ashanti: And then, long story short, I became a teacher and in my first year teaching, I was doing a horrible job. I was, like, w- what happened? Like, you know, like, I came to this job 'cause it called me. I definitely didn't plan this for myself. Um, but it was because I had some young men in my class who were really smart and they were failing. And I'm like, "You can't fail my class. You're smart, like, you're brilliant. I can see it in you." But they couldn't see it in themselves. And there's a rule at our school that you can't show how smart you are so they acted like they weren't. And I started this program called Ever Forward. And it was about, like, I'll buy you lunch once a week. I told them, in exchange for lunch, you're gonna teach me how to be a better teacher. Like, what am I doing wrong? 'Cause I, 'cause I think I'm smart. Without trying to brag, I'd, I'd, I'd say, I'm, I'm smart. You're smart. Why are we creating failure? Like, you should not be failing my class.

Ashanti: And, Ever Forward started out of these lunch time meetings which was around, dude, there's so much more going on that I'm missing. And then, them helping me figure out what I was doing wrong as a teacher. Like, what things I can improve on. And, we began to w- meet in the middle. And, and the, you know, and they-

Jerry: What's the one thing you figured out about that whole sort of the mutual failure that was going on?

Ashanti: Yeah. Um, that I had forgot what it was like to be a student. I had forgot that when I was in school, like, I would hide my tests in my backpack so my friends wouldn't see that I was doing good in school. Like, that I was pressured sometime with my friends to g- help them get answers on a test and I'm like, (laughs) I don't wanna get suspended. And I was trying to, you know, do the right thing and I realized that a lot of them really wanted to do the right thing but the pressure of around- the surroundings were daunting. And, there's a rule at that school that smart's not cool. So if you wanna be cool, and you're a young man growing up in this community, you definitely don't be no, friendly with the teacher. You definitely don't pal up with the teacher, right? Who's the authority figure and 'cause you have to be, show how tough you are. And no matter what they ask you to do, you have to fight against it. And I was like, oh, that's what's happening.

Ashanti: And so I realized that my job was to, to take off this authority hat in most cases, that I don't need to have power over, we're gonna have power with. And we're gonna start helping you, so, you know, if you can't carry a backpack, then we're gonna do the homework here after school. I'm gonna give you detention so people will think you're in trouble, and you're gonna come in here and do your homework and then you go home with no homework, right? Like, we're gonna find you a way to navigate the system. And that's what I learned, that they, and that th- when they realized that each other was going through stuff, it opened the w- door, and I was like, "This is what I wish I had when I was your age. Somebody like to, that saw that there was so much going on in my, my head, my heart, my house (laughs), that I didn't get to talk about." And that's how it-

Jerry: Let me repeat it back to you 'cause I think I, I think I've got it and-

Ashanti: Mm.

Jerry: ... because I, I pick up this story that, I, I, I knew none of this before. And I pick up this story, even our life, when you and I first met ... long after that. And, um, and, and I see the connection immediately to what Ever Forward is really about. And, and in a sense, what I'm hearing is that you began to teach at a deeper level, which is to teach these young men, or as our, uh, as our brothers would say, young peace kings to drop the masks.

Ashanti: Yeah, yeah. (laughs) Yeah.

Jerry: Right? And so, you know, we met, I'm gonna tell this story. We met December 2019 and a dear friend of mine, Chrystal Bell were leaving a facility, uh, a retreat at 1440 and it was focused, uh, primarily a nonprofit executives 'cause it was part of their service week.

Ashanti: Yup.

Jerry: And on one of the flights that fall I happened to watch a documentary called, *The Masks We Live In*, which, uh, features your work with young peace kings.

Ashanti: Yeah. Yeah.

Jerry: And young men of color who are really struggling with, uh, the messages that they receive.

Ashanti: Yeah.

Jerry: And at one point, I look out and I realize, great. That's Ashanti Branch.

Ashanti: Oh, man. And I didn't know that 'cause it, w- I, that first night, I was like, you know, I go to these things a lot and I'm like, one of the only, you know, black men in the space. Maybe there's m- one other.

Jerry: Yeah.

Ashanti: But it was very few. And I'm like, okay, I don't, I don't know what I'm gonna say I wanna say something. And I'm mostly just listening and taking notes. I take, always take notes. And something that first day, something said, "Open your mouth," right? It was just like don't come here and go back th- the same leader you were, right? Like, if you're gonna learn it, like, learn it and, like, like, like voice it, right? And I was like, be brave, be bold. That's what I tell my young people all the time. Be bold, right? I forgot what I said, but I remember just, you heard me. 'Cause every time I go to these things and I say something and people were like, "Okay," and then they (laughs) go on to the next thing, right? I don't know if that's what they do, but I just, I, I, that's what I feel but you heard me and you just stopped. You were just like, take a breath right there.

Ashanti: And when somebody holds a space for that moment and I remember just really feeling in that space. It was powerful. It was life-changing. And after that I got the book, and I read the book in, like, a week, right? It was, like, oh my God, this is what I've been trying to talk about, right? This is, it m- it just made so much sense. And, um, I'm glad. 'Cause originally I wasn't gonna go to that session. That was a part of the weekend and I was like, well, you know, there's all these, these other things, and something just said, "Go there. Go there."

Jerry: I do remember that moment when our eyes locked and it felt electric, brother.

Ashanti: Yeah. Yeah.

Jerry: And I looked at you and, and I just said, "I see this man."

Ashanti: Yeah.

Jerry: And I don't even remember what we said.

Ashanti: (laughs)

Jerry: I don't remember. But it was a room full of 70 participants.

Ashanti: Yup.

Jerry: I went up on the stage, the sage on the stage-

Ashanti: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: and it, you know, an old white guy with white hair-

Ashanti: And no shoes.

Jerry: ... and no shoes 'cause God did not invent the human species to wear shoes.

Jerry: (laughs) I still don't have shoes on.

Jerry: And, uh, (laughs), and there you were.

Ashanti: Yeah.

Jerry: And I just, I was like, I know this man.

Ashanti: Yeah.

Jerry: It was like, yeah, this is actually a kindred soul.

Ashanti: Thank you, man. Thank you.

Jerry: Because the work that you do with that, those young men, right?

Ashanti: Yeah.

Jerry: I mean, I work within the container of entrepreneurs in leadership. But really, you know, I'm just smuggling in consciousness to quote my former partner. The work you do is as a teacher, but really, you're just smuggling in consciousness.

Jerry: You know, what we're both trying to do is hold people's hearts.

Ashanti: Yeah, yeah.

Ashanti: And I think the da- the, the exciting part about that, and for me, th- what I didn't know when I first started is, I didn't know, I didn't have anybody to help hold mine. So I started Ever Forward 2004, first year teacher, still not figur- not knowing what I'm doing as a teacher still, but no, I know the material, but the relationships, I was still figuring out. And when those young men began to come every week not only for lunch but for these conversations, like, I was carrying all of this stuff. And no one even taught me how to let go of my own stuff. So I'm carrying my stuff and their stuff and literally, I remember the year, maybe year two and a half, year three, ended up in a ambulance on the way to the hospital, like, not knowing what happened, but just knowing that I was about to, like, pass out in the middle of cla- We were actually doing a circle in class. We were doing a circle-

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ashanti: where I let them, you know, once a quarter, at the quart- the end, like, we'd do this circle where we'd come together and we'd talk about, we go deep, right? And they're, like, they come in the room. It's like, what's going? Why are the, why are the desks in ch- in a circle? And we go deep and it's, like, they realized there was something different that day. And, and I remember, I was taking all their stuff in. They're telling all. They're just like, letting go of it. And I'm like, okay, I, I'll carry it for you. And literally, I told my IWE, which is like the student worker, um, I said, "Hey, um, go to the offi- or go to the phone and call the office and tell them to send an ambulance." He's like, "What?" I was like, "Listen. Just listen. Go to the, go to the phone, call the office, tell them to send an ambulance. I'm about to pass out." Like, literally, I remember saying it to him and he was like, I was like, "Go now."

Ashanti: And so, uh, the student, you know, the last student was going and I remember, like, man, thank you. Oh, thank you, thank you. "Okay. Everyone take a deep breath. Okay. Here's what we're gonna do. I'm gonna let you all, um, leave class a little early today. Just stand outside. Don't go anywhere, but stan"- Now, my students know that Mr. Branch doesn't even let people leave when the bell rings.

Jerry: Mm.

Ashanti: So the fact that I'm telling them that they should go outside the class early like they, th- is, they're, like, "You trying to set us up? You setting us up for something?" Like, they thought (laughs) that, I'm like, "No, r- for real, for real, for real. Like, go outside just to, get your backpacks, everyone just go out. Don't do anything. Just go outside." And literally, they started knowing something was up but I, I, I, I didn't wanna pass out in front of them. And literally, I literally, as soon as they all went out the door, I lay on the fl- on this bean bag on the floor, and I was just like, "Oh my God, what's going on?" And literally, it was because I had nowhere to take all my stuff. So I'm carrying my own life trauma, drama, stuff, all of theirs that they had been willing to share with me so I can hold space for them 'cause I had no space.

Ashanti: And it wasn't until, I mean, that was 2006-7 I think I went to the hospital that year. And then 2010 is when I joined a men's team. I, I didn't even, I didn't even know men's teams really existed. Right? I was creating what I didn't even know existed. But I was creating what I knew I needed when I was in high school. So it's almost like this weird, kinda like, I think they say you're (laughs) th- like the ancestors, your energy, your body, like, your body knows and it's like something that's just part of you, right? It felt right what I was doing for them even though I didn't have it for myself, but I didn't know where I was getting it from. I was just kinda like, okay, we're gonna just make this space.

Ashanti: Now this happened during class, not during Ever Forward club 'cause I was doing Ever Forward club every week. This is me doing this circle in my class and that' when, and, you know, there was nothing happening. The doctor said, "We don't find anything. You're, you're fine."

Jerry: What did you discover in 2010 in the men's group?

Ashanti: I got invited to this Men's Circle. A man, he was a teacher. He was like, "Hey, you know I, I'm a part of this Men's Circle. You know, I'd love to invite you." And I'd heard about Men's Circle before but it was, like, exclusive, right? So it was like, a buddy of mine was a part of this Men's Circle and I was like, "Oh, I would I- can I, can I go?" And he was like, "Oh no, this is private." (laughs) I'm like, "Oh." I felt kinda weird about it and I was like, "All right." So when this I- other invitation came in 2010, like, a couple years later, I was like, "Yeah, I'll go."

Ashanti: What I learned in that circle was that you can trust men. I mean, I didn't grow up with a father in my house so there was no, I didn't really trust men. I mean, there was, there was very few men who I had really deep connections with outside of, like, you know, either, you know, a party on the weekends or hanging out and, you know, like, fu- like fun stuff.

Jerry: Right.

Ashanti: But like, talking, talking in details and intimate stuff, like, and to have this circle, my first time there, and men are like, like, what is going on here? Like, how do, where has this been all my life? And when I, when I was there, literally, I, I saw what I was doing in Ever Forward.

Jerry: What do you mean? What were you doing at, uh, Forward? What did you see?

Ashanti: Yeah. I saw men going around the circle, checking in telling how they were doing, how their day was, what's going good, what struggle, what they're struggling with. Which is exactly what we're doing at Ever Forward. And they had structure around it, around, we're gonna, we're gonna create this space. And I was, I was new, so I'm like, just wa- I'm watching, but I'm like, but I'm not only watching, I'm feeling it, right? I'm like-

Jerry: Right.

Ashanti: I'm like, this is what I've been trying to build. Then this is, like, 50 men, this one. At the time that I went to this circle, there were like 50 men in this circle. There was a, there was a fire in the middle, like, it was, like, wild, right? I'm only meeting in a classroom with pizza or food, right? But it was like this, this is what I was trying to build. I think I found there sh- there could be trust there. the young

men were starting to trust, right? I knew that that was important but I didn't have a place that I could go to find trust, right? I heard someone say this once, but like, sometimes we create what we, what we need, or what we need, right?

Jerry: Yeah.

Ashanti: And I think that what happened with Ever Forward was, I knew that I needed that in high school but I didn't, it didn't exist. And when I created it, I didn't have, I didn't have all the right answers, I didn't have all the right words for it, but I remember that- it being like, some people were, like, confused as why you need, why is a, why do boys need a space?

Ashanti: But because young men are not talking about how they feel on a regular basis, in my community. In my community, it's seen as weak, soft. There's a bunch of other vulgar names they'll call you if you desi- if you've ever dare talk about feelings, show feelings. They'd be like, "You all up in your feelings." It's an insult to people as opposed to being, like, "Man, I'm so glad you're letting your feelings show," (laughs) right? 'Cause what we see, i- in our com- my community, our, you know, our jails are full of men. In the United States, 94% of people in prison are men. 94% of, uh, either, there's something wrong with men, which I don't think that is-

Jerry: Genetically. Psychologically.

Ashanti: ... right. 94%. That's a, that's a, I mean I, I don't like a lot of data sub- because people mess with data. But 94% of the people who are locked in cages every night, something gotta be said about what's going on. But I think it's because when men are boys, they're told, "Suck it up. Stop crying like a little...". You know, all the things that they do to, to, to conform you to be, like, don't show emotions. And then we wonder how they can be adults and be emotionless.

Jerry: You said it, brother. You know, I mean, this, it, this is, this is kindred souls speaking here. You put a new flavor on it which is that, you, and I'll put myself in the same category, you and I have created in our lives the very structures that we needed when we were younger.

Ashanti: Mm. Yeah.

Jerry: Yeah. And, you know, you said something really powerful. Just now, you talked about the lack of social s- the, the way boys are socialized to respond to their feelings.

Ashanti: Yeah.

Jerry: And there's a consequence to that which is, uh, you know, now, 94% of incarcerated folks are men, um, that, I don't know the percentage, but we both



know that the vast majority of them are folks of color in particular, black and brown and, and the, the, and that has as much to do with, um, the systemic oppression and racism in our society but what you're also speaking to is the consequence that, you know, what we later label as toxic masculinity.

Ashanti: Yeah.

Jerry: Right? Which is we don't teach these skills and you said something really powerful. "I didn't know you could trust men."

Ashanti: (laughs) Yeah. Yeah.

Jerry: Right? This is a man, talking to another man saying, I didn't know you could trust men. And for those folks who are listening who don't identify as men, the men that you love in your life are hurting. because the vast majority of us don't know that we can trust other men.

Ashanti: Yeah. Yeah.

Jerry: We don't know that we can trust other men because we've experienced violence at the hands of other men.

Ashanti: Yeah. Yeah. That's exactly right. And imagine even that part where you, if you didn't know that you could trust men, and yet those are the spaces that you have to find yourself in to fit it, and then, everywhere you go, you're almost like, why do I have to be on, put on this show, when you talked about the mask, right? When we first started Ever Forward, I wasn't the, using the language around masks. That came later. But it was what it was. It was like, I gotta, oh, I gotta talk about sports? Okay. I gotta talk about sports. Talk about girls? I gotta talk about girls. I'm gonna hang with this crew, I gotta talk about money and cars and blah, blah, blah, and rap, and whatever, whatever, uh, whoever I hang with, I gotta talk about the things they wanna talk about. And then, if you're not, if you're not clear about your own, being self-aware, like, where do I talk about the stuff that's important to me?

Jerry: Right.

Ashanti: Where do I talk about the stuff that I wanna talk about?

Jerry: Right. Right. And, you know, uh, it, it's, it's like, you know, I grew up in Brooklyn, you grew up in Oakland, you know. Uh, we both had our own experiences as children being wounded.

Ashanti: Yeah.

Jerry: I grew up with, with white privilege that, you know, was, to which I was blind at the time. Um, uh, and yet, you know, uh, uh, despite the differences, there are so many similarities in our experience.

Ashanti: Yeah.

Jerry: And, and I think that, maybe because I took my shoes off there was a, eh, and I suspect it had more to do with the fact that, in that position of power, where I'm sitting on a stage right? Commanding the room in a way, by virtue of the power projected onto me by 70 people showing up and by me showing up and being real-

Ashanti: Yeah.

Jerry: ... and naming the stuff that I have going on-

Ashanti: Yeah.

Jerry: ... I'm hoping that that was the thing that created some safety for you.

Ashanti: Yeah. I think it was, yeah, I walked in, when I came in, came in through the door, there's a door at the top, you know, yeah, you're on 1440 it's just some, uh, multiversity learning space, really beautiful in the Redwoods. Um, used to be a bible college and they've just turned this place into an amazing space. So you come into the upstairs and then there's like, you know, five steps, and then you kinda go down and out. And I saw you on the stage and I'm like, does he, eh, what kinda shoes are those? I was like, well, you, he's, he's not wearing (laughs), he's not wearing any shoes. I was like, well, okay, what, is this the right session? I was making I'm in the right session. I was like, I don't remember the topic saying anything like this, right? 'Cause it was talking about CEO stuff and leadership, and I'm like, okay, yeah, I don't think it, you know, normally I read the s- the description of the people who are gonna... I'm like, okay, I don't kn- And I, I didn't know what I was walking (laughs) into. And then you were reading a poem.

Ashanti: You know, you know what, and know what? You were reading... Oh, I remember it like this. You were reading Mary, let me get it. I don't have their last name. It was, it, Mary Oliver

Ashanti Branch: Lead.

Jerry Colonna: Yes.

Jerry Colonna: Yeah. And so, so a lot of people sort of encounter me shoeless.

Jerry Colonna: Um, but, uh, they'll encounter me and they'll say, "What the heck? Did I drop into the land of Oz? Right. This guy's reading poems, he's crying, he's talking about leadership." Um, but, you know, the, the, the, the method to the madness behind what I'm trying to do, is I'm trying to break, uh, stereotypes. I'm trying to break expectations, and purposefully leaning against the socialization. Because I think it's there socialization. Whether it's me being racialized as White, or you being socialized as, you know, "Suck it up."

Ashanti Branch: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna: "Men don't cry. Boys don't cry." Right. Um, it harms each of us as individuals you know. White supremacy harms, White people. It harms non-White people, but it harms White people you know. Patriarchy is a jail for all of us you know.

Ashanti Branch: The box. That box that's-

Jerry Colonna: It's the box.

Ashanti Branch: You know what? You said a word earlier I wanna talk about, 'cause you said, um, in that context of like toxic masculinity, right. And I've chosen, I don't use that word for, for, only for a certain audience who can't handle that word. Because oftentimes, when people use that ... People who wanna hear it wrong, here what they'll hear.

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: "What do you mean men are toxic?"

Jerry Colonna: Right. Right.

Ashanti Branch: And I think the (laughing) sad part of that language is that people like will grab on to that thing that they can like fight against, and you're like, "I mean, that's not anything near what is being said or what I'm saying." And what I've realized, I heard, I was talking to someone the other day and they were like, they've, they've readdressed it. They call it confined masculinity, right.

Jerry Colonna: Yeah. Yeah.

Ashanti Branch: t's, it's conf-, like, "All I can do is be funny, happy, tough, strong, mascu- ... You know, I, I got all these things I got. W- where, where are the rest of them lists? Where are the rest of list of characteristics that I can be?" And I think for, and I had, uh, I had almost an argument in the middle of Costco with somebody 'cause he said, "Don't tell me you're gonna talk about this toxic (laughing) masculinity stuff." And I'm like, "I didn't even use that word, but tell me more about what you, what you think it means." Right?

Jerry Colonna: Yeah.

Ashanti Branch: And it, and all he was hearing was that people were trying to say that men are toxic, and I'm like, "I don't think that's what that means. I don't." You know. But ultimately, you, you're ready to argue, so I'm not gonna even go in that lane with you. I'm gonna just stand over here and just reflect on what I'm hearing from you. And then I just, I gave him some data, suicide rates, addictions, our incarceration rates. And he couldn't, he had nothing ... He definitely didn't disagree with those things that are a problem, but he wanted to fight on the word. And I'm like, "How many people get, miss the opportunity to evolve (laughing) in their thinking because a word has locked them out I think that's what we miss so many times so often.

Jerry Colonna: I think you're right. What, uh, what, I typically don't use that phrase because I'm trying to push against the notion of association of those two, two things. What I often say is, there's nothing masculine about toxic behavior.

Jerry Colonna: You know, by pushing at that um, what, what I'm hoping to, to raise is consciousness about what is, uh, healthy? What do, what does it mean to truly be a good man?

Ashanti Branch: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna: And, you know, what the teacher and writer that comes to mind right now is Richard Rohr, or R-O-H-R, uh, who's, uh, I think a Dominican priest in the order of St. Dominic. Um, uh, in which he, he defines the uninitiated men right. And, and what he speaks to is, uh, that part of our challenge is not just that our boys are socialized to actually be distant from their true selves and hide behind those masks, but that, that as boys, uh, enter manhood, um, we lack the rituals that initiate, uh, boys into manhood.

Ashanti Branch: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna: Um, we lack the elders sitting in a circle. Um, which I know you have done. Um, and to, and to, to point and say, "Sit up straight eyes forward, do your work be loving, be caring."

Jerry Colonna: Our society is so disconnected from what indigenous cultures have been doing for millennia right. And, and, and, and there's this, there's this break that happens.

Jerry Colonna: I wanna bring us forward into, to, to back into this notion of circles of men, if you will.

Jerry Colonna: And, and I know that we each have, um, benefited from being in such circles. Um, and of course we have our, our own group.

Jerry Colonna: Which I'll put in a little context. Um, it was about a year ago that a number of folks, and, and it surprised me because, uh, they were Black. They are Black.

Ashanti Branch: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna: Reached out to me over social media, um, and I made connections in ways that I was surprised by. Yes, they read the book and I felt some resonance.

Ashanti Branch: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna: And there was a realization that, um, perhaps there was a, uh, a way that we could come together in a group and through actually multiple points, um, we invited you into the group as well.

Ashanti Branch: It's been amazing.

Ashanti Branch: When I first knew that I would be able to reconnect with you there, but also in this circle of just like being human. I think that in your book, you know, when people, when I, when I read it, I felt like, like I knew you. Like, even though I don't, I saw you on stage for those two to three days, like when I read the book, I was like, oh, "Okay." I get it. I get it more. I get it even more. It makes more sense." Right.

Ashanti Branch: The quotes and the poems and the koans, right, and all the, the, the connections, and it was just like, "Yeah." And I think there's just, and these, uh, and because I listened to the podcast so many times, just like the, the nuggets of, of like, "That's the, that's the piece that I needed right there in this moment." And it was something that I need the pieces again, right. I'm like, "I'm not, I haven't learned that lesson yet." So I'm here to relearn them. But I think in that space of being able to come together, I learned that ... You know, I've been a part of men's circles since 2010, and I've been, you know, a couple of different organizations, right? Like, you know, the first it was, you know, MDI.

Ashanti Branch: That's my main, that's the team I started in 2010. Then the ManKind Project. And then, you know, last year, Every Man, I went to their ... But before the pandemic. And then this, like a month ago, a couple of weeks ago, I went to this event from Sacred Sons that blew my mind. Man. And what I, what I realized for myself was that, um, the work needs to keep going. It can't be like, "I went to one event and now I'm good."

Jerry Colonna: (laughing).

Ashanti Branch: Like it's not like where it's like, initiation into, into manhood is this idea that you go through this and now the community, um, holds you in honor as a man. But you don't just get to sit in the laurels of like, "I am now a man, and therefore, I don't have to do anything more." It's like, you keep serving, giving. You keep-

Jerry Colonna: That's right.

Ashanti Branch: Can I share a poem with you?

Jerry Colonna: Please, please.

Ashanti Branch: It's called The Warrior by Hafiz.

Ashanti Branch: The words resonate with me a lot. It says, um, the warriors tame the beast in their past so that the night's hoofs can no longer break the jeweled vision in the heart. The intelligent and the brave open every closet in the future and evict all the mind's ghosts who have the bad habit of barfing everywhere.

Jerry Colonna: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ashanti Branch: For a long time, the universe has been germinating in your spine. But only a spa-, only a Saint has the talent, the courage to slay the past giant, the future anxieties. The warrior wisely sits in a circle with other men gathering the strength to unmask himself, then sits, giving, like a great illumined planet on the earth. That's, uh, The Warrior by Hafiz.

Jerry Colonna: That's amazing.

Ashanti Branch: Man, like all the stuff that keeps coming back and coming up. If, if you were, like if you, if you were a, a, a, if you were a s- really wise and brilliant, you'd be like, "I don't want to think about the old stuff. I'm not gonna worry about the future stuff. Let me just be right here in the present." But that's hard to do. It takes a lot of work. It (laughing) takes, it takes daily work, right. But to recognize that if I could come together with men to like just have a space to like take off my mask and be like, "I, I got stuff going on I need to talk about. I don't have it all together. I don't have it all figured out."

Ashanti Branch: And to know that they got you. They don't need to fix you, they don't need to tell you how to fix it, but they can ask you questions. They can illuminate the, the, what, what you're saying so they can see, "Hey, you, you did, you know, you said this." I'm like, "No, I don't know what ... I don't ... Did I say that?" to reflect back, to hold the mirror up sometimes, and sometimes to like, let it be a window so you can see through it, right. Because sometimes if we get stuck in the mirror, we just like, we see the messages that are the internal messages. But what, what

if you could just say, "Hold on, let me ... What if I see past this? What if I can see past what I'm stuck in right now? What would it look like over there? Okay. It would look very different." And they have been just help you navigate those words that you're saying, but that sometimes seem to be going in circles. I mean, I think that that's the power of the circle, and it's the power of what these men come together get to do. What, what I, I found that they've done for me.

Ashanti Branch: And when I have a chance, I try and do it for others to help illuminate. 'Cause sometimes we just need that, that space. I mean, at the time around the proverbial fire, right. And we started meeting during the pandemic. So it's been on Zoom, right. It's been on, it's been... just looking at each other on the screen, but like, I think sometimes, uh, people are gonna underestimate the power of just connection.

Jerry Colonna: Yeah.

Ashanti Branch: Even if I can't be in the proximity of you close, I can, I can hold space with you. That's been so beautiful.

Jerry Colonna: Yeah. Uh, thank you for sharing all of that 'cause I, I think you've, you, you, you, you say it so well and you say with, with such heart and with such tenderness and such bravery. Um, you know, I'm so admiring of the work that you have, uh, have done. It's so clear. And, and, um, you know, to go back to our group for a moment, one of the things that not only did we start during the pandemic, but we also started, uh, right after the murder of George Floyd. You know, while our experience of racism, isn't, you know, the thing we talk about as, as, as if it was an agenda to be, to be, uh, uh, for me being the White identifying person in the room is a really important experience.

Jerry Colonna: And to, and, and, and to, to watch you brave, we call ourselves the warriors, to watch the, you brave warriors, (laughing) right, uh, peace kings, each one of you to, um, to speak truth, um, is an incredible honor. I mean, I, I come away from each of our meetings convinced that in a past life, I must have been really a spectacular person because I am being given such a gift.

Ashanti Branch: Man. Wow, I feel the same. And, and I actually, I just made the connection. I didn't even, I didn't make the connection with that poem and the name of our circle. So that's actually ... Thank you for that connection. When I was about five or six years old, um, my mom may, after we came home from school, she made us watch the whole Roots. The Roots came out on PBS.

Ashanti Branch: And my mom grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas. My mom was raised in a place ... My mom had to leave Arkansas because my, my grandmother was like, "Girl, you're gonna get us killed with your, with your big mouth."

Jerry Colonna: (laughs).

Ashanti Branch: You know what I'm saying? My mom, she didn't tolerate people talking to her any old way. (laughs).

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: But she, even though she like, you know, she left there for those reasons, she taught me to treat people kinda how they treat you. I mean, and, and I think, you know, people have evolved that thought, but treat people how they want to be treated. Yes, but don't disrespect people just because of the color of their skin.

Ashanti Branch: You need to know your history and you need to be a part of how we don't go back and how do we need to like learn from each other. And we treat people well, like they treat us, you know.

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: Some people don't deserve to be in your life.

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: If they're treating you poorly, then you need to move to another place where ... Regardless of what they look like.

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: And I think that just being in that circle with you and really having you understand and get it ... Like get it in a way that not only I get it intellectually because I'm a smart person, but I get it in my heart and I want to make the world a better place. And I think one of the things that I, I've, I've tried to do, um, they invited me to this one private school in the Bay Area to like to talk about racism. And I'm like, "No, we're not doing it like that. Like, you don't just bring a Black man into your school with a bunch of White boys and be like, tell them about racism." (laughs).

Jerry Colonna: Right. Right.

Ashanti Branch: You wanna have one way of creating a, a battle? (laughs) You know what I'm saying? (laughing) Like this, that's not how it works. It's not how it's gonna work. That's not how you, that's not how the ... 'Cause any of them, if I was a Harvard professor who was interviewing them, would have the perfect answer about their thoughts, about the, the danger and the, the unhealthy behaviors or racism. They ... All of them. If I was holding a power, play over them.



Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: But what do you do when you're with your friends hanging out on a Friday talk, talking about whatever?

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: That's like the, the, the, the, in the, even the recesses of your heart, your, your common, your most common and most, uh, prevalent narrative about what you think about it, it's not gonna be fixed by me going in and tell them that racism is bad. Because they're all smart enough to know that that type of thing is not of any benefit, even if they benefit from the, (laughs) from the way they exist. And I said to them, "We gotta take it slow. Like you don't ... Like that, you, you're setting up for a failure. You're setting not only me up for failure, you setting up the experience for failure because there's nothing like, there's nothing I can tell them that I inte-, intellectually they don't already know.

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: The question is, where are their hearts around it? Because they don't understand the lens that they see the world from, the lens they see the world from is from their body. If you grew up in a society that you don't have to worry about the, the peace officers, because they're always peaceful with you, you don't have to worry about the system because the system benefits you, you don't have to worry about the opportunities because opportunities are, are aligned for you, then you, when I try and talk about it being me being afraid of the police, it makes no sense. Like, "Why are you afraid of police? You didn't do anything wrong. Why you, should you be worried?" (laughs) 'Cause you can't see it 'cause it's a lens. It's just exactly how it works. That's how lenses work. They help you see in a certain way that your eyes, your vision needs to be able to see. And I think that it's just been beautiful. So when I, when I've been doing that work with them, it's just like, like, how could we ... Wha- what would it take to get other w- intelligent people, men, men who have privilege and men who have, uh-

Jerry Colonna: White skin.

Ashanti Branch: White skin, that's a great way to say it, to say, "You know what? I'm not only gonna know it in my mind, intellectually when I'm in a conversation that needs to have this said, but I'm gonna operate under that same, um, behavior and thoughts in my actions." I think that's what I was hoping to do with those students. And, uh, we've, we had three sessions and I, I, I think I did a really good job around that. Around coming in with love, right? Because if, if someone hates you, you can just say, "Well, I hate you too."

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: But how do you come in with love in a way that is healthy and not only, that is not harmful to you? Because one way of like saying, "Well, you hate me. I'm gonna keep loving you anyway." And that becomes harmful to yourself. I'm not talking about that kind of stuff where you're self-sacrificing, where you're, where you're a martyr. I'm talking about, but out of like, in the return of this idea that you don't know me, let me maybe help you see that the what you see on the outside is, is an element that you're making a difference in what we're, how we're different. But there're so many things that were alike. There's so many things we have in common that we miss. And, um, that circle is just a beautiful place for us to do that. So I, yeah, I just wanna appreciate you for, for being in the conversation, be- being in there and being with us. And, um, it's been beautiful for me.

Jerry Colonna: In the time that we have been together, one, you, you, you, you, you, you, you said something about how I, um, I'm, I'm, I'm attempting to see as best as I can. That's my modification of what you said through the lens of, of, uh, the brothers with whom I sit.

Ashanti Branch: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna: Um, to experience, um, to come as close as the racialization that I have experienced being identified as White long before I even understood what those words meant, right, even as a baby um, to, to identify, uh, as that and to try to step from around that lens and to imagine, uh ... Right. I mean, it was just happening. You were just talking being afraid of police, and I saw your dreadlocks.

Ashanti Branch: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna: And I said, you know, "F-, fuck being pulled over for an air freshener." I could, uh, you know, f-, uh, you know ... It was like, I, I could just see you being stopped or being afraid of being stopped.

Jerry Colonna: Which, which is probably even more pervasive than the act of being stopped is the fear of being stopped.

Ashanti Branch: Yeah. And when I was in, when I was in high school, I w-, uh, I mean, I, (laughs), uh, I've always thought I was a little smart and I had a smart mouth and I was like, you know, like I, I knew my, I knew my rights. But, man, when I was in high school, there was no YouTube. There was no video. You didn't know what was really happening. I didn't probably know the danger I was, actually I was in as many times I talked back to police when I was a teenager, right. And I don't

know ... What, what I've always wondered is like, "Is it happening more or is the technology is just giving us this information faster?"

Ashanti Branch: And I'm like, "I can't, I can't ..." When I see a video, I'm like, "I'm not opening it. I'm not opening it. I just can't." My, my, I have to give myself time. I, I can't watch these things. (laughs), I can't watch them. I can't watch. Like it's one thing when you watch a movie, you watch *The Terminator* and somebody is being mowed down and you're like, "Wow, look, it killed all these people."

Ashanti Branch: It's another thing when you watch death for real. Like, there's, there's a whole ... For me, for me as in my, and how I feel around that. And I think, uh, there's this book, uh, I think you may recommend it, Mark Wolynn, uh, *It Didn't Start with You* you know. Like I, my father died before I was born. Like, I, I don't know h-how it, what it means to be bathed in sadness for months. Three months before I was born. Like I don't know how many nights my mom cried herself to sleep trying to figure out what to do next. Like I was in the womb in all of this, and swimming in sadness.

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: Swimming in confusion, swimming ... And I know that I have a ... When I read this book, I realized, that's why I have such an issue with death. Like, I, I don't, uh, I, I have a hard time with death. I know it's coming. I know it's part of life. I get all that. I get all the intellectual parts of it. But just when people pass that are connected to me, I have a hard time. And I, and I, and I'm, and what I've, I'm learning is that it's connected to how I started this, this world out.

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: You know, how I started in the womb.

Jerry Colonna: Yeah.

Ashanti Branch: Emotionally connected to whatever that is. I don't even know, I mean, I don't have all the words for it, but the technical words, but I do know the feeling.

Jerry Colonna: Yeah.

Ashanti Branch: I'm excited I get to do with this work, right. Because what we see with a lot of young people and definitely ... This book, um, uh, Malcolm Gladwell wrote a book about talking with strangers.

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: And he talks about a lot of police iss-, en-, encounters and how this encounter, where one person is stressed and the other person is trying to exert power, and

that they're, they're communicating in some different ways. Like, I know how that feels. Like I, I get anxious, right. And when, if you're anxious, people think you're, you're, you're hiding something.

Jerry Colonna: Guilty.

Ashanti Branch: I was thinking about that, this work around these masks is like, well, look, this is what I'm letting you see. That I'm gonna try and stay calm, I'm gonna try and say cool. But behind the scenes and maybe even not always behind the scenes, I'm like s-, I'm nervous. I'm stre-, I'm sweating. I'm like, "I just wanna go. I was wanna make ... Okay. Give me a ticket. If you're writing me a ticket, write me a ticket and let me go. Right. Just don't, I don't wanna have a conversation. I don't wanna discuss why I was going too fast or whatever. Whatever you're saying is wrong, is wrong. Just give me the thing, and let me go." And, um, (laughing) I'm much more, um, I'm much less wanting those confrontations than I did when I was a teenager. 'Cause when I was a teenager, I looked forward to them sometimes. But now, my heart is like, even when I'm in, like if I'm in a café ... I remember being in a Starbucks and seeing the police come in and I'm just like, "I think I should leave. I think I should leave." And that, and that's a feeling that, man, you can, it's hard to describe to people if they don't know. But when I try and, I just try and say, "Look, fear is real." If you, if you're being chased by a bear in the woods, you would run. (laughs)

Jerry Colonna: Not, not because you're guilty, because you're afraid.

Ashanti Branch: Because of fear. To, to, to, heart-wrenching. Like a b-, a bear a tiger, whatever animal, like whatever that predator, apex coming after you, because you did nothing, right. And that, and that idea of how do we make space for that? And I think for our young men, when we do these masks, you know, when we, when we invite them to make a man ... And not just young men, but all, students all over. What are the things that you can let people see?

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: That you gladly let people see. What are the things that are behind the mask that you don't get to talk about? Man, and when they, when we see, you know, not only just here in Oakland, not only in California, around the country, around the world, people are clear that, that we have to put on these masks and we, when we put them on, to fit in. To be like, "I'm good. It's cool. I'm fine." Right.

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Ashanti Branch: And then what we don't, what we often don't, people don't have a space, is they say, "Okay. Let me take off this mask of being fine and good and cool. And now, oh my God." And, and now when we get to those circles, we get to do that. We get to check in. We get to like, "Man, this is what, this is what's alive me right

now. This is what's like driving my energy right now." And to have people who will just hold space for that, that's, that's beautiful.

Jerry Colonna: Mm-hmm (affirmative). It, uh, I'm so pleased that you made the connection to Mark Wolynn's work. Um, and we'll, in the show notes, we'll put a link to that book and as well as the Hafiz poem. As well as to the Mary Oliver, *Lead* poem, but-

Ashanti Branch: (laughs).

Jerry Colonna: that book, *It Didn't Start with You* was life-changing for me in many ways. Because it helped me make connections to, um, what's known as epigenetic trauma. Which is a fancy word for what happened to our ancestors impacts us. And, um, I wanna just sort of pause and acknowledge that what happened to your ancestors is different than what happened to my ancestors.

Ashanti Branch: Yeah. Thank you.

Jerry Colonna: I think collectively as a society, among the many, many things that we, uh, haven't, still haven't come to grips with is what happened to our ancestors.

Ashanti Branch: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna: Whether your ancestors were forced to flee Ireland because of a famine or forced to leave a country in Europe for poverty or pogroms in, uh, in, in Eastern Europe. Or brought here, uh, uh, as slaves or were subject to, uh, a kind of massacre of, because your ancestors were indigenous to the land.

Jerry Colonna: What happened to our ancestors impacts us every fucking day as a society.

Ashanti Branch: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna: And, you know, in addition to not necessarily socializing our children to deal with our feelings, we as a society are so uncomfortable with the past that, uh, you know, on the one hand we deny certain aspects of the past and on the other, what we do is we say, "Let sleeping dogs lie."

Ashanti Branch: (laughs).

Jerry Colonna: Right. Don't stir it up.

Ashanti Branch: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna: But, you know, I don't know how we heal unless we reconcile with the experience of our ancestors. The positive and negative experiences of our ancestors. I don't know how we get past the divide that rips this country apart

every day until we recognize, um, that, you know, slavery, for example, was a part of the economic foundation of this country, the political and economic foundation of this country.

Jerry Colonna: Just the, the, the shining city on the hill was built by enslaved labor you know.

Ashanti Branch: Man, thank you. Yeah. Thank you for that. I'm gonna just say that. Thank you.

Ashanti Branch: it bewilders me that, that still, that people are willing to ignore what the atrocities that have happened and want to act as if that their brilliance and their intelligence is only the factors that have allowed them to stand in the wealth, the privilege and the power that they have. And that's, and for nothing else, my work is to continue working with the young men and helping them find their voice and, and helping to inspire. I think, it's what I heard, uh, Tupac say in one of his songs. He's like, "I'm not gonna change the world, but I'm gonna inspire the, the mind of somebody who will change the world." And, um, you know, I just take every one day and say, "Look, I'm gonna give my best today. I'm gonna give my, my best today to help young people, definitely our young men in our community find voice."

Ashanti Branch: And because, you know, we have a campaign that's for everyone. It's not just for young men, but our main work is the young men, letting them find their voice earlier than I found mine. Earlier than, you know, 10 years ago, in, in my la-, you know, my l-, in my 30s to finally find a space to take off my mask. And, um, I think the earlier they can do that, the earlier they realize, "I'm not okay being stuck in this mask."

Jerry Colonna: Yeah.

Ashanti Branch: Because if you don't know any difference, then you don't know any different. You don't know there's any other way to feel, to think, that you may get stuck there.

Jerry Colonna: Let me build on what you're saying, because, um, I think, not to take anything away from your experience or responsibilities, but I think it's my responsibility as a White man to call it out. Because I don't know how those systems of oppression change, unless the people who benefit from the systems of oppression call bullshit.

Ashanti Branch: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna: It is not enough for folks who are marginalized by those systems to speak up. And God bless you for, uh, giving voice to those young men, for helping them find their voices. But, you know, maybe the corollary work for me is, uh, to help those who have power, leaders, to speak up and speak out on behalf of the world that they know is possible. On behalf of the world that for the majority of

us, we want to exist right. As I slip slide my way into elderhood which is what I'm really feeling these days, especially as my knee hurts so badly, (laughing) um, that's, that's my calling.

Jerry Colonna: I wanna tell you what an honor and a privilege it is to have you in my life.

Jerry Colonna: You know, the, the, the karma that brought us together, it was a gift.

Jerry Colonna: I am so happy to have introduced you and your work, um, to, to the folks who listen to this podcast. You know, we didn't talk about your journey as an entrepreneur. We didn't talk about, uh, uh, all those other stuff, but we'll get there.

Ashanti Branch:

Jerry Colonna: The more important thing ... And we'll put notes in the show notes, you know, how to find Ever Forward and all of that stuff, but thank you for the work that you do and thank you for coming on the show.

Ashanti Branch: Yeah. Thank you for having me. And, you know, like the easiest thing that people can do like in this, in this moment, is to, uh, to do a recognition of their own masks that they wear. And I, and I just wanna share, like, if you go to ... I mean, you're probably in show notes. There's a website, you can go to make your mask, and just recognize masks from all over the world, because you're not alone, if you recognize there's so much more to you there's just much more than me. And as Jerry and I, as you and I get to keep knowing each other, I get more comfortable taking off another layer of the mask. And I think we ta- like there's, there's masks on the mask, right?

Jerry Colonna: Yeah.

Ashanti Branch: And to know that, um, that I'm not alone. And that's, um, that's a beautiful place to be.

Jerry Colonna: Amen, brother.

Ashanti Branch: So thank you. Thank you.

Jerry Colonna: Thank you. Thank you for coming.