

Neighbors, Episode 5.1

The Manifestor

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Segment 1

Tisha Wilson Hey! I see you! Hey!

Jakob Lewis Katherine Tisha Wilson, who just goes by Tisha, teaches a fitness class at the community center close to my house. It's for a company called B.Fab.Fitness. It's a dance class with some boot camp elements thrown in. You gotta think hip-hop zumba with squats and push-ups.

Tisha Wilson Don't look at me like I done lost my mind, because we about to go hard, or go home. Alright, so get your spaces out. We ready?

Jakob Lewis As DJ Khaled's "Out Here Grindin'" blasts through two speakers, Tisha runs in place while about 100 women and around 5 or so men follow along. They turn around, then they all start twerking, then into a side by side dance move that I just can't quite explain. Everyone pushes it, but no one pushes it harder than Tisha. If you listen closely you can hear her give out a crazy scream.

Tisha Wilson I can be tired. I can have literally run a marathon the day before and come in Monday night, and as soon as I get there and I see their faces, the magic just happens, you know? For that hour, nothing matters, we're all one, no color, none of our problems. I mean you have all walks of life giving it 100 percent. It is truly amazing to watch.

Kim Baldwin Hey, this is Kim.

Jakob Lewis Hey, Kim. This is Jakob Lewis. How are you?

Kim Baldwin Hey, good! How are you?

Jakob Lewis This is Kim Baldwin. She's been going to Tisha's dance class for about two years, and like so many people in that class, She loves Tisha, but it goes beyond just liking a fitness instructor.

Kim Baldwin I mean you've talked to her. Her story is nuts. I'm just, I'm real proud to know her and she's who I like to surround myself with. I like to surround myself with people that are hungry, who want things, who work really hard to get it. Honestly it's just, like, manifestor. She manifests shit.

Tisha Wilson You are brave! You are strong! You are fearless! Down one! Up One! Down one! Up one! Down one! Up One! Down one! Up!

Jakob Lewis I'm Jakob Lewis, and from Nashville Public Radio, you're listening to Neighbors -- a show about what connects us. Today, Tisha's story. A woman who inspires others, but has not always felt very worthy of admiration.

Jakob Lewis I met Tisha in a large apartment complex in a suburb of Nashville called Antioch.

Tisha Wilson Hey.

Jakob Lewis Hey, How's it going?

Tisha Wilson It is going good. So I just got off work, so pardon me.

Jakob Lewis It's about 8:30 a.m. Even though she said she just got off work, she really just got done working out, which you'll hear a lot more about later. But that was after she did in fact work all night for the graveyard shift at a hospital.

Jakob Lewis Aren't you like, so tired?

Tisha Wilson Uh, well, you get used to it. I've been doing this for about six years. Graveyard shift for six years, so after a while you get used to it.

Jakob Lewis Tisha works a lot. She has three jobs: teaching a fitness class, which you already know about, she's a nurse at Vanderbilt Hospital, and works another nursing job for the graveyard shift every Friday and Saturday. That means yesterday, she went to work all day, left there to go to her second job and work all night, then after she got off she went and worked out, and now she's talking to me. It's probably the worst time possible to do an interview.

Jakob Lewis I need at least eight hours of sleep. I'm impressed.

Tisha Wilson I know, I know. Well, it's not by choice. It's not by choice, it's by force. I just cannot lose again. I just can't lose again, so I do whatever's necessary.

Jakob Lewis I soon found out what Tisha meant by losing.

Tisha Wilson When I was 15 I met a guy that was way older than me, and he became my husband.

Jakob Lewis At 16, Tisha dropped out of high school. Her mom thought she was making a huge mistake, both with the guy and with quitting school. They stopped talking for about 5 years. As for her father...she never knew him. But she says she was always looking for someone to fill that role. She found a kind of father in her husband, and in turn lost herself.

Tisha Wilson I just adapted his ways, his lifestyle, and I never took into account, that I needed to grow. I mean, I was 16 years old.

Jakob Lewis They had three kids together, and around the third one, something in Tisha started to change. That's when she was --

Tisha Wilson Pretty much coming into the woman that I am now, and I was realizing that you know I like music, I like dancing. I like so much stuff, you know I'm a very big girlie girl, and it was just at that time I just felt like I was trapped.

Jakob Lewis And the truth is she was. She started to assert herself more and she and her husband just couldn't see eye to eye about the woman that Tisha wanted to be.

Tisha Wilson And it got pretty hectic from there.

Jakob Lewis They fought often, and those fights led to a defining moment in Tisha's life. One that changed her path forever.

Tisha Wilson I'll never forget that day. That day is what causes me to work hard. I just got an email and text message that said I'm not welcome there anymore, and before I could get to my place of residence my stuff was on the street.

Jakob Lewis Her husband had evicted her and their three children with no notice. The door was locked, and Tisha and her boys had no place to go.

Tisha Wilson Being homeless is one of the most humiliating things ever to experience, you know. I didn't have silverware, I didn't have mementos, I had clothes and my kids.

And I'm not blaming him, I just wish it could have been handled better. I think there were both -- both of us had parts on it but I do feel like I got on the short end of the stick by being put out with just them three having to start over. So there was a lot of things I did that I'm not proud of, such as, you know, working and leaving them at home. Or, you know, sometimes if I couldn't find somewhere to stay I was made choices to stay in a car. So, you know.

Jakob Lewis She depended on a combination of shelters and friends. It was embarrassing for her. She was haunted by her story: high school dropout, single parent, homeless. And she had questions about her worth that didn't seem to have an answer.

Tisha Wilson I was still struggling with why I couldn't find somebody to love me. And so I ran into a couple of years later, my second husband.

Jakob Lewis Now, Tisha didn't tell me the whole story of how they met or fell in love, but I do know his name was Frank and that Tisha thought she found a second chance.

Tisha Wilson: I was so in love with him, and I was so embarrassed of my past failures, especially the marriage to my kids father, that I was determined to deal with this by any means necessary. What I did not realize was that Frank had his own demons, such as alcoholism and gambling.

Jakob Lewis I think it goes without saying that that wasn't easy.

Tisha Wilson I have never experienced bailing somebody out of jail, or experienced somebody being so mean to you and not remembering what they did the next morning.

Jakob Lewis She said all of this started to really affect her. She was depressed and having a hard time getting out of bed. She gained a lot of weight and her self esteem was at an all time low. But she was trying to do something about it.

Tisha Wilson I was already walking to work.

Jakob Lewis That was only because they only had one car and Frank used it. But, she would also try and workout.

Tisha Wilson You know, little tapes. Richard Simmons, because everyone on there looked like me, so you don't want to work out to somebody that is like skinny mini.

Jakob Lewis She was making some effort, but she still wasn't not happy with herself. How she looked, how she felt, who she was. This is best illustrated by her morning routine. After her walk to work she would get there early, so she could shower alone, in the dark. She didn't want

anyone to see her and she didn't even want to even see herself. Like I said, she was usually the only one there, but one day a coworker showed up. It was a brief encounter that changed the course of Tisha's life.

Tisha Wilson Yeah, she kind of came in, and the whole bathroom was closed, the whole bathroom was closed, and she knows I'm there, and so she just said, Katherine, and I said yeah, and she said, the lights are all off, and I said I know. And she just simply said you do know that this is not the way to live. And I didn't say anything you know, and she didn't say anything, she cut the light on, she washed her hands, did what she needed to do, and she cut the light back off and left out, but for some reason those words just stuck with me and it really lit a fire under me to the point where I started really working on myself. I even pushed back, like on stuff that I normally would tolerate.

Gambling, women, infidelity, and it got to the point that I just could not save him and save myself. And then I had to realize that I was raising three boys that one day will ask me why, you know, why did you stay with this, you know, and so I had to make a very hard decision and I, I had to get a divorce, so I walked away again with that egg on my face that I just didn't want everybody to see, and so I walked away. It has definitely made me a stronger woman. I'm very scarred, but I'm very stronger for it.

Jakob Lewis Hear about Tisha's radical transformation into the motivator she is today after the break.

Segment 2

Mark Franklin Jakob?

Jakob Lewis Hey, how's it going, Mark?

Mark Franklin Alright.

Jakob Lewis This is Mark Franklin, AKA, "The Beast."

Jakob Lewis You available now?

Mark Franklin Uh, pretty much.

Jakob Lewis The Beast is Tisha's friend and kind of accidental trainer. Tisha is now 40 years old, her divorce was only about two years ago, and since then she's gotten, well...ripped. She's lost over 100 lbs. She runs everyday at 4 a.m. with a group called "The Goons." She also works out at a gym, and that's how she met The Beast. Her and a girlfriend wanted to add some strength training to the mix, and back in the corner was this guy. They got to talking and immediately hit it off.

Mark Franklin It was like I think the first day, we had a nice conversation, and that's when she got to know some things about me and that's when she asked about pushups.

Jakob Lewis Tisha learned that Mark was in the military and really wanted to learn from him how to do boot camp calisthenic type stuff.

Mark Franklin And for the record she could not do a pushup.

Jakob Lewis Can you describe, like what level it's at now? What kind of training you guys do?

Mark Franklin Insane. In one word, insane.

Tisha Wilson I carry other people on my back.

Mark Franklin We'll get up in a sit-up position.

Tisha Wilson I can bench press my body weight.

Mark Franklin But we're holding the 45 plates.

Tisha Wilson I love to do push ups all the time with 45 lb weights on my back.

Mark Franklin We do pull ups, different variations.

Jakob Lewis It's intense. Her instagram feed is just a daily reminder of what the human body is capable of.

Jakob Lewis Do you think, are you ever going to pull off the throttle a little bit? Are you going to keep getting up at 4 a.m. for the rest of your life?

Tisha Wilson I don't see me stopping in the near future. I am totally committed.

Jakob Lewis So, how did she get from working out to Richard Simmons tapes to here? Well, after her coworker confronted her in the bathroom about showering in the dark, her walk to work turned into jogging. The jogging turned into a full blown run. She ran a 5k. Even signed up for a marathon. In fact last weekend she ran a 25k. But the real lifesaver on her fitness journey was finding a fitness dance class.

Tisha Wilson A girlfriend of mine that I went to high school with reached out to me and told me about a class that they do at night, and the first night, I love to dance, I was hooked. We were in the back row, sweating to death.

Jakob Lewis She became a regular, going to four classes a week. She learned all the routines by heart.

Tisha Wilson And everybody knew me that way, you know that's the girl that's always dancing.

Jakob Lewis One day, the instructor didn't show up, and everyone just turned to Tisha.

Tisha Wilson And so they were like, do you have the songs on your iPhone? And I was like I do, and we just plugged it up and oh my god, 70 people were there that morning and we went in like nobody's business.

Jakob Lewis When the manager of these fitness classes heard about what happened he reached out to Tisha, and hired her.

Tisha Wilson Just like that.

Jakob Lewis Every Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, Tisha is at the community center near my house, leading a gym full of people in dancing, push ups and squats.

Jakob Lewis What has she done for you?

Anonymous Fitness Student 1 Motivation. Motivation, and you gotta love her humbleness. She's wonderful.

Anonymous Fitness Student 2 Very positive, very positive. I mean, she always gives something inspirational at the end of the night. It's good.

Jakob Lewis The group is made up of black, white, and Latino men and women. Tisha tells me about several of them, how she's seen them transform, including a music teacher named Frank who lost about 150 lbs.

Tisha Wilson But it's not even about the weight loss, it's the confidence that they are now.

Jakob Lewis A transformation that Tisha really resonates with.

Tisha Wilson There's times that I didn't want to get out of bed, I didn't want to do anything. And to have people look at you, two time divorced, high school dropout, literally, your gas tank is on "E," you had to take change in to get gas to get there, and for somebody to say "you inspire me," it's something that you can't even fathom. For the longest time, I couldn't even look people in the eye. I had to turn my back just to teach class because I felt like I didn't deserve the privilege of even being amongst them.

This class wasn't about me. This class wasn't about nobody but you guys. This is for you to better yourselves. Take what you learned and do it at home daily, but never let somebody tell you you can't. You shall and you will. Stay focused. Stay determined. Be strong women. Be strong men. Because the world needs more leaders like you. Thank you guys for getting up this morning.

See, what people don't realize is that we all have thing that we carry, and that can make us together. That can bring us together. It doesn't make us different, it makes us stronger. I didn't realize that, and so I now realize that my role is to give others hope when you feel like there's no hope. They see somebody that won't stop no matter what. I don't really care, I can tell you this right now. If something catastrophic happens to me tomorrow, I will still keep fighting.

MUSIC: "FEELING, RED" BY CALEB SHIVER

Jakob Lewis Neighbors is from Nashville Public Radio and produced by me, Jakob Lewis, with production assistance from Caleb Shiver. Music in this episode is by Podington Bear, and this song is by Caleb Shiver. The shows editors are Emily Siner, Mack Linebaugh and Anita Bugg. Special thanks to the Frist and B.Fab.Fitness. Neighbors is a proud member of The Heard, an audio collective of amazing shows all over North America. Check us out at theheardradio.com, that's h-e-a-r-d. I'm Jakob lewis and I'm reminding you to get to know your Neighbors.

Tisha Wilson I will say this is the happiest that I've been because I truly know what I want, what I like, and what I don't like. This has been the first two years that I can truly say that I've made choices on my free will, and I make mistakes, and it's fun, because it's my mistake to make.