



## Official Transcript

### Season 1, Episode 6

### Leena Jayaswal: Turning the Lens on What Mixed-Race Means in America

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**Leena** [00:00:17] My whole purpose in doing this was to make sure that we were hearing voices that were often unheard of. We also wanted to explore what it meant to take out the whiteness and in being mixed. And so our kids get the, "What are you?" That's part of this process, is trying to get people to understand that that's a really inappropriate question to ask and why does it matter.

**Megan** [00:00:37] From ADECIBEL Media, I'm Megan Rummler and you're listening to ADECIBELvoices, a podcast that features intimate conversations with Asian American trailblazers who all have one thing in common—unabashedly pursuing their dreams while transforming the fabric of this nation.

**Megan** [00:00:56] From food to business to tech to the arts, this is Asian America, up close and personal.

**Megan** [00:01:04] For anyone in the film industry or for those that enjoy going to film festivals as cinema enthusiasts, then you know we're in prime festival season.

**Megan** [00:01:12] Although the New York and Chicago Film Festivals have just finished both the South Asian and Tokyo International Film Festivals are currently taking place this week.

**Megan** [00:01:21] Our guest today is documentary filmmaker and award-winning photographer Leena Jayaswal.

**Megan** [00:01:27] Leena's films have been broadcast throughout the country on over 100 PBS affiliates through National Educational Telecommunications Association and through New Day Films.

**Megan** [00:01:37] And, her work features deep expertise and interest in issues that intersect race representation and identity. Leena is currently co-directing and co-producing a feature-length documentary titled, "Mixed" with Caty Borum Chattoo.

**Megan** [00:01:52] "Mixed" is a film that explores both the meaning and experiences of being mixed-race in America 50 years after the historic 1967 Loving versus Virginia Supreme Court decision that made interracial marriages legal in the United States.

**Megan** [00:02:07] Leena Jayaswal, welcome to ADECIBELvoices.

**Leena** [00:02:08] Thank you for having me.

**Megan** [00:02:11] You know before we explore how you became an award-winning photographer and documentarian, I'd love to know more about your upbringing.

**Leena** [00:02:20] I was born in England and we moved around a little bit when I was younger. We were in England and then Canada and then eventually landed in the United States.

**Leena** [00:02:29] My dad was a doctor. He's now retired and he wanted to live in the United States. So we took a little bit of a journey to get to Ohio, where we landed. And, I grew up mostly in Ohio until college and then I moved to DC and have been here pretty much ever since.

**Megan** [00:02:48] You know, you mentioned that your family immigrated from India and then to England and then to Canada and finally settled in a small town in Ohio called Medina?

**Leena** [00:02:58] Medina, near Akron, Cleveland area. And, we were one of the first immigrant families to be there to move to the town, to the small town.

**Leena** [00:03:07] It was pretty interesting, you know. We were sort of sometimes this sort of experiment that people would look at and say, oh they're so different than from what we are. And, so that had brought on some challenges.

**Leena** [00:03:19] People asked me where my green card was and things like that when I was 6 or 7 years old, like taking the bus and walking home from the bus.

**Leena** [00:03:26] Overall, it was a really pretty friendly community and great upbringing.

**Megan** [00:03:31] What kind of doctor was your father?

**Leena** [00:03:33] He was a cardiologist. Yeah, so he again was one of the first immigrant doctors in the community and then created a great practice. And, there wasn't a place where we could go in Ohio, even today, where people don't stop him and say, hey you took care of my so and so. Or, Dr. Jayaswal, my mother was your patient or something. You know, so, he had a big impact on a small community.

**Megan** [00:03:57] So then, as you reflect on your childhood having lived in England and seeing what that was like, even though you were pretty, probably very young. But then in Canada and then finally in America, do you remember what impression that might have left on you?

**Leena** [00:04:13] Like everybody else who's growing up and having experiences being teenagers, you sort of want to assimilate to whatever culture is right there.

**Leena** [00:04:21] And so, I do remember kind of pushing back a little bit on the Indian identity just because being a teenager, right? You know, you just want to be with whatever you see is in front of you.

**Leena** [00:04:32] And so, it was only until I got to college that I started to really explore and think about what it meant to be Indian and what it means to have this identity as an Asian American.

**Megan** [00:04:42] I want to stay in your childhood a bit and talk about when the idea of being a photographer kind of first came into your world.

**Leena** [00:04:52] Sure. So I was very lucky that I had two parents that were extremely supportive of all of the sort of choices that my two sisters and I made. They never pushed us into becoming sort of the stereotypical Asian immigrant kids.

**Leena** [00:05:09] We didn't have to take dance classes or go watch the Bollywood movies. They said, "We brought you here so you have to learn the best of both worlds."

**Leena** [00:05:19] And so, they never pushed us into becoming like engineers or doctors or you know lawyers or any of those kinds of things. And, they really wanted us to be what we wanted to do.

**Leena** [00:05:29] One of my sisters is a teacher and the other one ironically works for Cleveland. She's the COO of the Cleveland Film Commission Greater Cleveland Film Commission. And then there's me who's an artist, photographer, filmmaker, professor.

**Leena** [00:05:44] We had a lot of encouragement from day one from our parents to explore what it was that we wanted to do.

**Leena** [00:05:50] My dad was an amateur photographer and he used to carry, well, we actually, he used to make us carry his camera bag all around.

**Leena** [00:05:57] And, I loved just the heaviness of the camera and playing with the knobs and everything. And so, I kind of grew fascinated with the camera pretty early.

**Leena** [00:06:06] By third grade, I knew I wanted to be a photographer. And so, then my mom just put me in after-school classes or the weekend classes in learning how to make a pinhole camera and taking images and doing that.

**Leena** [00:06:17] And, for my 16th birthday, they bought me my first real single-lens reflex camera. And so, they've been nothing but supportive of this career, even though they knew nobody in it or couldn't help me in it or any of that stuff.

**Leena** [00:06:31] But they've been nothing but encouraging which is, unfortunately, is not the situation for other Asian kids that I know that are around my age. So, I'm very grateful for having the parents that I have.

**Megan** [00:06:43] I like that you described, kind of, the heaviness of the bag and the weight of it and it had, it sounds like, a significance in a way.

**Megan** [00:06:54] Do you remember what kind of camera it was?

**Leena** [00:06:56] Sure he always shot with Nikons. That has fallen on me as well. Like, I traditionally only mostly shoot with Nikons.

**Leena** [00:07:02] He just gave me, he had one of the first Leicas that was produced in India. And, so he kept it and he gave it to me and I just got it cleaned and fixed up and so now I have that camera. It's a film camera and I haven't shot anything exciting yet with it but it's waiting for me to use.

**Megan** [00:07:19] Was the Nikon what you got at age 16?

**Leena** [00:07:22] Yep, my Nikon 2020. Yeah, was my first camera.

**Megan** [00:07:25] So, what do you remember shooting with it?

**Leena** [00:07:28] Well you know, at that time I joined the yearbook and the newspaper in our high school. And even in junior high before that I had like an Instamatic camera that I would just shoot parties and friends and things like that. And would always document stuff.

**Leena** [00:07:42] And, for a long time it was a way for me to sort of hide but then also participate in culture. And so, I could be actively somewhere where everybody else was but I had this thing to protect me.

**Leena** [00:07:54] So I could look through it and it gave me a job of some sort. You know, to be able to protect myself and hide myself from there but actually learn about what American culture is.

**Megan** [00:08:04] Through the lens of a camera.

**Leena** [00:08:05] Through the lens of a camera. But also you know not participating fully but being a part of that scene.

**Megan** [00:08:10] So the process that you're describing, did you realize at the time that was...

**Leena** [00:08:15] Oh no. No, no, no. I wish I was that smart but no, absolutely not. It's only upon past reflection of being like, why does the camera interest me so much? And what did it give me? And, like, what did it allow me agency for and access to?

**Leena** [00:08:31] And so much of that I don't know if I would have had access to if I wasn't on the yearbook or if I wasn't on that newspaper. I was a very social person. I had a lot of friends from different clicks and I think that also helped. Yeah.

**Megan** [00:08:43] That's so interesting. After high school you landed in the Washington D.C. area for both undergraduate and graduate school.

**Leena** [00:08:51] Graduate school was in yeah, in Maryland, in Baltimore.

**Megan** [00:08:55] And so, you received a B.A. in Visual Media and Anthropology from American University. Which, full disclaimer is my alma mater too. Go Eagles.

**Leena** [00:09:03] Go Eagles.

**Megan** [00:09:04] And an MFA in Photography from the Maryland Institute College Art in Baltimore Maryland.

**Megan** [00:09:10] Explain to me why visual media and anthropology?

**Leena** [00:09:12] Like I said, I knew in third grade I wanted to be a photographer and at that time my parents wouldn't let us live in New York City. New York City was very dangerous when I was getting ready to go to school, so they wouldn't allow us to move to New York.

**Leena** [00:09:27] And, I got a scholarship to American. I came to American and I studied, at the time what it was called was, Visual Media but with a concentration in photography.

**Leena** [00:09:37] And my first semester there I took an anthropology class that just blew me away and I loved it. And I was like, well this really makes a lot of sense for me as somebody who wants to document things.

**Leena** [00:09:47] I should be able to understand and articulate the best practices of studying other cultures. And so for me, it made perfect sense to do this combination of a major, double majors.

**Megan** [00:09:57] I don't know if this is a good segue or not but, you know, thinking about what it's like to be a person in the creative industry as a female a while back, I came across this study that says, you know, the racial breakdown of artists in America who earn their primary income by working in the arts is only 3.9% for Asian people.

**Leena** [00:10:20] Washington Post article. I know that article so well.

**Megan** [00:10:23] So in the context of, and that's a recent study which means I guess

**Megan** [00:10:24] I guess the question is, what were the percentages before?

**Megan** [00:10:33] What was it like for you being a female in the creative industry and not only a female but a person of color?

**Leena** [00:10:41] Sure. So I was very lucky that the professors that were role models to me and then as mentors still to me were mostly female and or people of color.

**Leena** [00:10:52] I had one professor, Ann Zelee, who just really took me under her wing. I'm not still quite sure what she saw but she said, you know, I'm going to help you.

**Leena** [00:11:03] And she did absolutely that. And the only reason I'm sitting even here talking to you today is because of her. I owe everything to her.

**Leena** [00:11:10] And she really actually even was like, you should think about teaching. Have you ever thought about teaching? Because I think you'd be a natural for it.

**Leena** [00:11:18] She helped me get my position at AU. When she retired I stepped into her shoes. I was very lucky and fortunate to have women and people of color, kind of along the way, the entire time in college.

**Leena** [00:11:30] That's not the case of the industry, right. That's changing. It's getting better but I never kind of thought of myself as that identity though. You know, I just was like I'm going to be a photographer. I'm going to be a filmmaker. I'm just gonna do it.

**Leena** [00:11:43] So I didn't really look at it through the lens of being a woman or a person of color. I was just like this is what my goal is and this is what I'm going to do. So I never thought about it like back then. Now of course I have. Because now I know the statistics and I know how hard it is.

**Leena** [00:11:59] And, I also have met friends who have very similar trajectories like mine but had mostly male professors. And, you know, they sort of saw how the field was and decided that's not what was best for them. If I had that experience I probably would have decided that photography might not have been the route for me.

**Megan** [00:12:16] So, how did you segue then from photography into film?

**Leena** [00:12:20] When I got to graduate school I was thinking about doing a thesis project and I had taken some film classes as part of my visual media degree but I didn't like it. And I wasn't very good at it. And, I was like ugh, I just have to take this for the requirement and then I can just go on to doing photo stills.

**Leena** [00:12:38] But then I got to college and I had this idea for my thesis to do a film on arranged marriages. And so, I basically was self-taught. I just picked up the camera and figured it out, read the manual and then made lots and lots of mistakes.

**Leena** [00:12:53] Recorded things without audio. Great footage to use. And then had to go back and rerecord. Or, just had the camera mic on and you know everybody was like you can't just have the camera mic on.

**Leena** [00:13:05] I was like, why? The camera mic is picking it up it's fine. But then going to edit and you're like oh, that's why. Yeah, you need an external mic. So making lots of mistakes which I'm grateful for because again, that's part of the learning process. And once you make that mistake once, you don't do it again.

**Leena** [00:13:21] And so then, I just kind of decided to do this thesis in video and learned how to make a short film shooting on big ole beta SB tapes.

**Megan** [00:13:35] So I want to go back to something you said. You said you didn't like film when you took a couple of courses. What was it that you didn't like?

**Leena** [00:13:41] I love the still image and I love being in the darkroom. Having nobody else there and nobody can get to you, you're just concentrating on your work. In a day and age that's so busy now. It just allows you to breathe and stop.

**Leena** [00:13:54] And so for me film, moving image didn't give that same excitement to me as the still, being in the darkroom does.

**Leena** [00:14:02] I think it's actually harder. Photography is harder than the moving image because the moving image and film you have audio, you have narration, you have people guiding you along the way to telling you the story.

**Leena** [00:14:13] And in photography, it's one frame. And you've got one frame to communicate your message. So, I think it's a little bit more of a challenge than it is sometimes in film.

**Megan** [00:14:20] We'll be right back after this word from our sponsors.

**Stacy** [00:14:24] This podcast is brought to you by our sponsors 8 Media Group, a Washington D.C. area video production company whose mission is to create collaborate and resonate. Find them at [8mediagroup.com](http://8mediagroup.com).

**Megan** [00:14:37] If you're just joining us we've been talking with documentary filmmaker and award-winning photographer, Leena Jayaswal. Leena's work has been featured in critical, film festivals and newspapers for the Indian diaspora.

**Megan** [00:14:49] Her award-winning photography has been nationally recognized in galleries around the country and she was given the prestigious Gracie Allen Award for Outstanding Documentary and short format from American Women in Radio and Television.

**Megan** [00:15:04] Leena let's talk about your new documentary, "Mixed."

**Megan** [00:15:07] Can you tell us about the film?

**Leena** [00:15:09] Sure. So it is a journey film of two moms, one brown, one white going across America in search of what it means to be mixed-race. My film partner, Caty Borum Chattoo is white and I am Indian. And the two of us travel around. We have kids that are of mixed-race. And we travel around and we talk to pop culture icons we talk to authors, psychologist and families that look like ours.

**Leena** [00:15:36] And young people in search of how to be better parents when we're thinking about our kid's identities and what those stories that we don't really hear but now we're starting to hear in the media to share with our kids.

**Megan** [00:15:50] So what did you discover?

**Leena** [00:15:52] So we've learned a lot about ourselves. And we've learned a lot about how to parent our kids. We've learned things like they may not identify in the way that we want them to identify. And their identities might change over the course of time.

**Leena** [00:16:05] So when they're young they might identify with one race and when they get older they might identify with the other or they might identify as being mixed the entire time.

**Leena** [00:16:14] And we have learned that if we input our own decisions on them, of like, no you have to be this or this or this, that we're actually doing real harm to them in their identity formation.

**Leena** [00:16:26] And so we want to protect that and we want to be able to give them space to explore their different identities and realize that whatever they come up with is best for them. And also within the same family if you have siblings, like one sibling might identify one way and the other might identify another and that's perfectly all right.

**Megan** [00:16:44] I mean what was kind of the genesis of you know why is this important to make and document?

**Leena** [00:16:49] Sure. So at the time over a little bit over five years ago, I had made a video art installation called, "I'm Not the Nanny."

**Leena** [00:16:56] So when my son was born, I was playing with him in the park and a woman came up to me and we live in D.C. And, predominantly the nannies are women and women of color. And my son has light skin and she looked over this woman looked over at me and she's like, "Oh you're so good with him. Who do you work for?"

**Leena** [00:17:15] And I was like American University. And I just didn't even get it, right. You know I just, it didn't clue into me. Again, my armor was off, right.

**Leena** [00:17:24] I was hanging out at the park playing with my son so I didn't have my shield protecting of against racist comments and anti-women comments at that too.

**Leena** [00:17:35] And I just was like, what? No, no, I am a professor. I work at American University. She's like, oh, I thought you were the nanny.

**Megan** [00:17:43] And this was how long ago?

**Leena** [00:17:46] He's 10 now, so that was at least over nine years ago. Yeah probably nine years ago about nine years ago.

**Leena** [00:17:51] And then it happened repeatedly. You know there were times when we would be in Chipotle and just the two of us would be sitting around and having a conversation and joking around and laughing. And, you know somebody would be like, again ask like, oh, you're such a great nanny or something.

**Leena** [00:18:06] And so I had done this one-minute video installation piece on that. Being like I'm not the nanny. And also this idea of having a mixed-race kid and how sometimes in your own home community you're also looked down upon for not having like another Indian kid.

**Leena** [00:18:22] I mean I've had people from the Indian community tell me, oh, you should have another child one that looks more like you. And you know those kinds of comments like that they think are appropriate and okay.

**Leena** [00:18:32] And so it goes both ways. It's not just one-sided through there. And so I just did this little piece about that. And Professor Caty Borum Chattoo heard about it. And she and I work together.

**Leena** [00:18:43] We teach in that same School of Communication but we teach in different programs. So I didn't really know her work or know her before. And she stopped me in the hallway and she was like, "These are my kids." And showed me a picture for kids.

**Leena** [00:18:55] And I said now that really inappropriate comment of, "They don't look like you." And now I know through this journey that's not appropriate to say and she's like "I know they don't." And then I knew she had a background in documentaries and I had done documentaries before that as well.

**Leena** [00:19:11] And, so she's like, "Let's just grab lunch and talk." And, I remember us sitting and talking and she said, "You know, I'd really like to make a feature documentary but I don't want to do this on my own and as a white woman on my own, doing a documentary on race, you know, especially mixed-race."



**Leena** [00:19:24] And I was like, wow, she's already thinking about it that way. And I was really appreciative of her consciousness of those kinds of issues. And I was like, "Yeah let's do this." And so the more we talked about it the more we actually realized just how much on the same page we were. And that has never wavered.

**Leena** [00:19:43] We have been, in my opinion, and I hope that she would say the same, an excellent team throughout this process. We have really formed a strong bond and friendship of our own and as we've you know sort of journey through this and questioned our own ways of bringing up our children and being really vulnerable which is hard to do.

**Leena** [00:20:05] The first year we weren't in the film so it was just a traditional sort of documentary that the two of us would be producing and then we were interviewing people.

**Leena** [00:20:13] About a year in, everybody we knew was asking us, why are you making this film?

**Leena** [00:20:18] Well, because of our kids. Well, how do we know that? Where's your perspective on it? And so, from her beloved people and from my beloved people we came to the table one day, and I was like, I think and she's like "I think we need to be in the film." And, I was like, "I think we need to be in the film."

**Leena** [00:20:34] And so we call ourselves the reluctant characters because we didn't anticipate that we were, you know, we had thought about doing this in a little bit more of a traditional documentary sense.

**Leena** [00:20:45] And then we realized, the hook would be parents trying to learn. Because we don't know what it means to be mixed race. I'm not. I'm mono-racial. She's mono-racial.

**Leena** [00:20:57] How can we speak to the mixed race experience? We can only speak from one side of that equation as a parent and so it made better sense for us to be the ones going through the journey and then giving mixed race people their own voices as we meet them and come across them. Rather than us kind of saying this is what it means to be mixed-race as producers on the outside.

**Megan** [00:21:17] As you figured out, you know, your reluctant characters and now you're part of the story, what did you learn? Was there anything surprising that you weren't expecting to learn?

**Leena** [00:21:28] It's so interesting about how bias is formed. And how within all of us we have unconscious in bias and even when we were producing the stories it was really interesting that Caty would reach out to the white characters and I would be reaching out to the people of color.

**Leena** [00:21:44] And we didn't even realize that. Those were not active choices that we were making. But I think something subconsciously told us like, you know, Caty if you're talking about race. Who wants to talk about race, first of all, nobody.

**Leena** [00:21:56] And then if you're a white person, you know it's very scary nowadays if somebody takes a clip and edits you out and does all these things it could be really damaging to you. Right?

**Leena** [00:22:05] And as a person of color, you're always having to be the person to talk about race and explain race. And so again, like from both sides of the coin, you can understand the reluctance in wanting to be in a film talking about mixed.

**Leena** [00:22:17] And, of course, mixed-race in the United States has a legacy tied to slavery. So again, nothing that we shy away from in the film. But again, not things that people are like let's go talk about this. I want to be a part of this, right.

**Megan** [00:22:30] It's a tough subject.

**Leena** [00:22:32] It's a tough subject and we didn't actually realize how tough it was until we started. And especially like looking for funding for the film has been a challenge because people didn't want to touch it. Because of the legacy with race.

**Leena** [00:22:47] Because of the fact that I'm not black and it's not a black and white issue but that my role is as an Asian woman also has stopped us from receiving funding. Because they would have loved the black and white story.

**Megan** [00:22:59] How fascinating.

**Leena** [00:23:00] So there have been a lot of things that have kind of come up and that I've already experienced. It's not such a surprise to me but I think sometimes Caty was surprised at just how, not that she doesn't know these things exist but just like how actually it affected the process.

**Megan** [00:23:14] So I mean that actually cues up another question that I was curious about. And that is, you know when we think about the portrayal of mixed-race families in mass media, I feel like we're still kind of new at it.

**Leena** [00:23:28] Yeah. So when we started, the only real portrayal of interracial couples was like through Shonda Rhimes. Nothing really family-oriented.

**Leena** [00:23:39] I mean we had, "Modern Family" and then we had "Parenthood." So we had some shows that were starting to show that. But if you remember in 2013 there was a Cheerios commercial.

**Megan** [00:23:48] I remember that one, yeah.

**Leena** [00:23:49] Of a mixed race family and the ad got such backlash and the comments on YouTube that General Mills had to turn them off. They were so vile and vicious.

**Megan** [00:23:57] In 2013.

**Leena** [00:23:59] In 2013. So not so long ago and then we also followed up another story. There was a glossy and you'll see this in the film. There's this glossy magazine in Houston called Houstonia and it's something that you would pick up at the doctor's office and just kind of lifestyle magazine and then you just sort of pick up and skim through.

**Leena** [00:24:16] And there was an ad in the magazine that featured a real-life mixed-race couple with their kids. A furniture ad or something. I can't even remember what it was.

**Leena** [00:24:25] And the magazine got calls from two different people saying your magazine's trash.

**Leena** [00:24:32] And they were like, oh, what did we write about? Like what offended something? And it wasn't that it was the ad. It was the placement of the ad. So we went down and interviewed the editor because he wrote this national, it sort of went viral. You know this response to his readers saying you know people unsubscribe from us all the time, how about if I unsubscribe from you? Racist readers need not apply.

**Megan** [00:24:54] What year was that Leena?

**Leena** [00:24:55] That was probably three years ago.

**Megan** [00:25:00] Amazing.

**Leena** [00:25:01] But now we're starting to see, you know the show *Blackish*, the mom in there is mixed and they are doing a spin-off called *Mixed-ish* that's starting to come out in the fall. And we're starting to see more things around more family-oriented stuff.

**Leena** [00:25:15] And like, I would have joked that the only thing that actually looked like my kid was a cartoon. So half Indian, half white. There was this cartoon on Nickelodeon called *Sanjay and Craig* where the dad was Indian and the mom was white. But again, they're cartoons.

**Leena** [00:25:29] But when it came on, my son was probably right around that same age to be able to watch it, and I would be like, "We have to watch this! That's you! That looks like you!"

**Leena** [00:25:39] Or somewhere along the lines in some *Star Wars* cartoon show, because they've taken a lot of the names from Indian names, and so he heard his name Dev being mentioned as one of the characters, and we were like "Oh my God!"

**Leena** [00:25:50] So it's changing, but it's only until recently that we are starting to see that slow change.

**Leena** [00:25:57] So then the families and the characters in the film. How did you find them?

**Leena** [00:26:03] So we looked at news articles and things that went viral. And then we interviewed author, Matt Johnson, who wrote a graphic novel called, "Incognegro" and another novel called, "Loving Day." And so we contacted him.

**Leena** [00:26:15] And then we would just sort of research. We just researched and looked at any article that kind of came up in situations and then we would find families.

**Leena** [00:26:23] We interviewed the first interracial couple and their entire grandchildren and great-grandchildren like everybody in North Carolina. They were the first interracial couple to be married in North Carolina.

**Leena** [00:26:34] We interviewed probably my favorite group because it's not just a white and black mixed.

**Leena** [00:26:39] Like my whole purpose in doing this was to make sure that we were hearing voices that were often unheard of. And so, we also wanted to explore what it meant to take out the whiteness in being mixed and so we interviewed this group of young people from Spelman and Morehouse colleges called, "Blasian Narratives."

**Leena** [00:26:58] And so they're black and Asian and they do spoken word around what it means to be mixed-race with these both these identities. And they were my favorite because they just were so great and they're so performative.

**Leena** [00:27:09] To me, it was what I could really relate to. And they gave us great advice in terms of like talking to kids about race early, how you do it and approach it.

**Leena** [00:27:20] And so we wanted to make sure that we were not just thinking about it in terms of whiteness, which often happens when we talk about race, but we wanted to make sure to insert the others.

**Megan** [00:27:30] Oh I'm so glad you brought that up because you know I have some very cute nephews who are, well they're college-bound now and one of the things and words they made up but I didn't realize it was kind of common knowledge, you know they're half Bolivian and half, well Vietnamese American. So they call themselves "Spasians."

**Leena** [00:27:48] Oh, I haven't heard that one.

**Megan** [00:27:50] Yeah I know. But apparently it's a thing.

**Megan** [00:27:52] And there are lots of other words you mentioned "Blasian," there's "Whasian."

**Leena** [00:27:55] Yeah.

**Megan** [00:27:56] As these kids, the future generation, as they think about their identity and then you're doing this film and we're seeing more and more things in mass media that portrayed, you know, what real families look like. Why is it important? Why is it relevant?

**Leena** [00:28:11] You know the question that our kids get is, you know, what are you?

**Leena** [00:28:15] My generation got "Where are you from?" Right. And I'm like Ohio. No, no. "Where are you from?" Because I couldn't be from Ohio, right?

**Leena** [00:28:23] And so our kids get the "What are you?" And that's part of this process is like trying to get people to understand that that's a really inappropriate question to ask and why does it matter.

**Leena** [00:28:33] And then for our kids to actually have answers to those questions of like, what are you, for themselves and the way that they define themselves.

**Leena** [00:28:40] So I think it's really important not just for the mixed-race community to see themselves, but I think it's also really important for others to understand what that experience is like.

**Leena** [00:28:49] You know to come up to somebody and touch their hair when it's totally inappropriate. Or, to you know follow up or being like, "You're so exotic."

**Leena** [00:28:58] Caty's daughter has, she's got this story about her daughter learning about exotic animals. And somebody came up to her like in school, she was learning about exotic animals, and then somebody came up to her and was like "You're so exotic."

**Leena** [00:29:11] And, she's without dropping a beat, she just was like, "Like a zoo animal? Like what like a zebra?" You know and it was awesome.

**Leena** [00:29:20] You know and so these kids have to prepare themselves somehow for these kinds of comments and we need people to understand that even however well-meaning they are by saying you're exotic or you're so beautiful or mixed-race that's going to solve the answers of race in America.

**Leena** [00:29:35] Absolutely not, it's not. Absolutely not, it's not. And how can you put that pressure on that one population when we've obviously had issues and problems about race throughout the entire history of this country. Right?

**Leena** [00:29:47] And so to try and educate people about what that experience is and so that they won't make it so hard on the next generation and our kids.

**Megan** [00:29:56] Well, I can't wait to watch it.

**Megan** [00:29:57] How and when can listeners watch it and find it?

**Leena** [00:30:00] Sure. We're right now in the finishing stages of editing and then we're looking for color correction and sound mix pretty soon in the next couple of weeks. And we hope to get this film out pretty quickly.

**Leena** [00:30:11] You can follow us on our Facebook group. Just look up "Mixed" documentary and we'll start to post things when they start to screen all over nationally, hopefully, knock on wood.

**Megan** [00:30:20] And we'll make sure to embed anything that, any information that we have right on our show notes.

**Megan** [00:30:27] You're a really busy person, Leena. Not only are you a filmmaker but you're also a full-time professor in Film and Media Arts at American University and the Director of the new B.A. in Photography, a joint program with, is it the College of Arts and Sciences?

**Leena** [00:30:42] Yes.

**Megan** [00:30:42] Wearing all these different hats, really being the person that is crafting the story behind the lens, whether it be photography or video, what do you tell students?

**Megan** [00:30:54] What do you tell emerging photographers and filmmakers to keep in mind, to keep close to them, as they make their way through the industry?

**Leena** [00:31:03] I would tell them that their voice is really important. I mean we need to hear diverse perspectives and not just repeating the same things over and over again.

**Leena** [00:31:12] And that they're the generation that's gonna be active change-makers. And so they need to remember what their voice is. They need to know what their voice is and they need to be able to express it in ways and know it enough to be able to talk to somebody about what it is their projects are.

**Leena** [00:31:27] We need to foster this next generation because we need to see something different than what we've been seeing for years and years and years. And this is the right time.

**Leena** [00:31:36] I do feel that there is, we're in a situation of change, whether it's good or bad, but there is a situation of change happening and occurring, and we need to foster the voices of the often unheard.

**Megan** [00:31:46] Well, thank you for all your work. We're so happy that we've talked to you. Thank you for coming into the studio today.

**Leena** [00:31:52] Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

**Megan** [00:31:54] Leena Jayaswal is an award-winning photographer and filmmaker whose new documentary examines biracial identity in today's America.

**Megan** [00:32:03] Her new film is called "Mixed" and is a journey of two moms, one white, one brown, who travel around the country in search of what it means to be mixed-race 50 years after the historic 1967 Loving versus Virginia Supreme Court decision that made interracial marriages legal in the United States.

**Megan** [00:32:26] Here's a special note to our listeners, to make sure to check out our website at [adecibel.com](http://adecibel.com). That's A-D-E-C-I-B-E-L.com. There you'll find extended interview excerpts that you won't want to miss, behind the scenes photos and some pretty hysterical outtakes.

**Megan** [00:32:47] ADECIBELvoices is hosted by me, Megan Rummier and co-produced and edited by myself and Stacy Yu. All music is sourced royalty-free.

**Megan** [00:32:57] Be sure to join us next week in honor of Antislavery Day on October 18th in the United States.

**Megan** [00:33:05] We speak with Davina Durgana, an award-winning international human rights statistician. Davina was named to the 2017 Forbes list of "Top 30 Under 30" in Science for her work around fighting human trafficking and assessing risk and vulnerability to modern slavery.

**Megan** [00:33:26] Be sure to tune in.

**Stacy** [00:33:28] Hey! It's Stacy here. Since we're a brand new podcast, we need your help. Send us your feedback.

**Stacy** [00:33:34] We want this podcast to be listener-centered and we'd love to hear from you. What do you like, not like, or wish you could hear more of? Is there an Asian American trailblazer whom you want us to interview? Tell us what you think. Call or text us at 2-0-2-5-9-9-3-3-1-8.

**Stacy** [00:33:54] Leave your full name, contact info, age and where you're from. Messages are recorded. So who knows! Maybe you'll hear yourself on our show. Thanks for listening and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.