

Wynne Leon (00:04)

A podcast that celebrates the art of teaching, learning, giving and growing. ~

I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode I'm with author Mari Sarkisian Wyatt. She's written an incredibly powerful memoir, *Saving the Fourth Generation*, about her quest to have a third child via in vitro fertilization. She magically puts words to the complexity of the IVF process and what it's like to have goals and obsessions we're suffering ups, downs, griefs, and miracles for.

Mari and I talk about the different types of goals we have as we go through life and her Armenian grandmother's wisdom about what it takes to make them happen. There's so much legacy in Mari's story because her quest is in many ways a response to the shattering drama that came from both of her grandparents' families being decimated in the Armenian massacre of 1915. We talk about Mari's way forward.

as the sole child of her generation to have kids, she tells us how she navigated both the price and process of IVF. Her story is heartbreaking, miraculously, and completely gripping. We talk about her advocacy for her artistic son and how writing about her IVS process 20 years after the fact provided some healing and delight in the miracle of family.

Mari's story involves a lawsuit, so in accordance with the settlement, she's not on screen for this episode. Nonetheless, Mari is entrancing as she shares the power of her journey and the warmth of her voice. I know you'll love it.

Bye, Mari.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (02:16)

Hi Wynne

Wynne Leon (02:17)

So good to talk with you. ~ You've written this book, *Saving the Fourth Generation*, and it's such a beautiful memoir that touches on so many deep topics. IVF, health insurance, pregnancy, family planning. ~ Can you give the elevator pitch for this book?

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (02:37)

Sure. Thank you, Wynn, for inviting me to be on this podcast. And thank you for calling my book beautiful. The premise is very simple. age 45, I decided to have a third child. And I spent the next six years enduring a series of unfortunate events and abject failures in the uncertain world of infertility. Along the way, I met parents and hopeful parents who had suffered even worse setbacks and tragedies.

So this is basically the story of what women and their partners are willing to go through to have a child. Even though I started out with noble intentions to get my autistic son and my

neurotypical daughter and other sibling to be around to help and support them after my husband and I were gone, my quest, as you well know, quickly became an obsession, ~ which actually harmed my children in lasting ways. So this is also a book about goals,

and obsessions and selfish ideas and how they can hurt the people that you love, even though you don't intend it. The message, however, is if you just keep working toward your goal one step at a time, someday you might just succeed and hopefully your family will forgive you.

Wynne Leon (03:56)

And you capture those ups and downs that, I've been through the IVF process. We've just talked about it. I have two beautiful children that I conceived by IVF, but I've suffered a miscarriage in the middle of that too. ~ you know, this book is a personally just spoke to me so deeply. You talk about those goals and you use this beautiful analogy of the butterfly,

bee and murder hornet about that desire throughout and you use it throughout the book. Did this come from your wise Armenian grandmother?

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (04:32)

Actually the hierarchy, the three different kinds of desires, they did come from my grandmother. But the insect metaphors were my own creation. ~ I don't think they had murder hornets when she was alive or she didn't know about them. But my grandmother would say that if you have a desire, I can't do her accent, have a desire that remains in your head. She said, if you say, wouldn't it be nice if, but you don't do anything about it?

never happened. So I compared it to a butterfly that kind of flits around in your head without a specific destination. But my grandmother actually called it a diamond ring that you keep in your pocket. She said, if it stays in your pocket, no one sees it, it doesn't shine, you must take it out. so that was the first level of desire. The second level is the one that she said, if you want something you need to work, you need to work for it.

And so I compared that to a busy bee who's constantly buzzing around in your mind telling you that you have to do this, you have to work. But the third level of desire, which I compare to the murder hornet, that's the overarching obsession, which you kind of have to have to get through IVF. She didn't think of it in the quite the negative terms that I did in terms of a destructive hornet.

When I was about 10, we were all watching a documentary about immigrants. And someone on the show complained that a certain ethnic group was pushy and aggressive. And my grandmother said, of course they are pushy. If you need something, you push. The nice ones, you think the nice ones got here? The nice ones didn't make it. The nice ones

got buried back home. So that became the hierarchy that I kind of distilled from her wisdom.

and put it in the book. And then she kept on saying to us, if you want something, you have to keep at it. And she said, it doesn't matter who complains. It doesn't matter. You don't have to think of anyone else. You don't have to think about the Turks. You don't even have to think about your family. You just do it. And then she finally said, how you think Samuel and I got here, it was not because we were nice. So that was the basis.

Wynne Leon (06:53)
Right.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (06:54)
my three levels of desire. But it's interesting because I remember a movie called America, America, about an immigrant wanting to get to this country and what he went through to get here. And I thought, I can't remember was the guy Armenian or Greek. So I looked him up and it was Greek. But as I was reading, one of the critics called the movie, a hair raising movie about that immigrant experience.

So I thought, okay, my book is a hair raising memoir about the infertility experience.

Wynne Leon (07:27)
Yeah, well, and I'd love that you bring in that that immigrant experience from your grandmother because part of the part of your goal your desire came from just the absolute trauma of of those previous generations And your whole family was wiped out in the Armenian massacre of 1915 do I have that right?

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (07:44)
Right.

Both

my grandmother's whole family and my grandfather's whole family, they were actually wealthy. Everyone has a story of being wealthy in the old country, but they sent a nephew to Ferris State Institute to study petroleum and automobiles because they were actually approached by Standard Oil in the old country to become agents of this developing ~

oil industry. And so my grandmother and my grandfather were dispatched to be chaperones for this young man in 1913 expecting to go back. then in 1915, everyone in their family was murdered and they were never allowed to go back.

That affected not only them, but their children and my generation, as I said in the book, no one had kids. My cousins didn't have kids. My brother didn't have kids. I was the last one

who was even old enough and I was 35 when I had my first child. Right. With autism. So I had this goal of keeping my family going too.

Wynne Leon (09:01)

Right. And you do that history and the previous generation so well because you start the book with that psychology 101 text, think that's if you traumatize cats, next generation is going to be severely. the third generation is going to be even more reclusive and there won't be a fourth generation.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (09:27)

Yeah,

there won't be a fourth generation. Right.

Wynne Leon (09:31)

And so, in light of that, your IVF journey, it makes so much sense because you're not only trying to provide for your immediate family and your children, the two children that you already had, what their future would look like, but also save that fourth generation. Because as you said, you were the only one.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (09:55)

Right. was the only one left. And now my older daughter, in terms of genetics, DNA is the only one left. And she is starting to feel that. She's in her early 30s. But I keep telling her you have to have kids for yourself, not for the past. Right. Although I wouldn't have believed that if someone told me. So it's weighing on her mind.

A friend of mine whose family, whose father lost everyone at Auschwitz, his children, his son has autism, his daughter is neurotypical, but he would say, Hitler cannot just postpone the extinction of my family by one generation. He really feels that sense that his family has to keep.

that he has to keep his family going and I kind of felt that too that the Turks can't win. We have to keep the family going.

Wynne Leon (10:56)

Right.

And so that gives so much context to all that you went through in those six years of IVF to create that third child. And you make such an incredible point about IVF on page 55. IVF requires a certain level of trust. In fact, an enormous level of trust. You can't see the eggs. You can't see the embryos.

and IVF failed much more often than it worked in those days. So how would I even know if there were any eggs retrieved, any sperm selected, or any embryos at all? I couldn't. I just

had to have faith. I had to believe that those pictures on the waiting room walls were real people and not paid actors. ~

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (11:45)
Right?

Yeah, did that ever go through your mind? You must have gone through your mind too.
Yeah.

Wynne Leon (11:50)
Well,

I was fascinated. you know, as we talked to this before we recorded, did this 15 years after you did. So there was some differences between your journey and mine. And I think clinics failed or succeeded more in my time. But even then, my fertility clinic gave me a white stone with the letters B-E-L-I-E-V-E etched in it.

When I graduated, I know, I thought that was so interesting. It was when I went through the 10 week ultrasound with my son and it struck me as so interesting that, you know, it's a scientific process. They're, you know, based on the science of this, but it's an interesting nod to the miracle part of the process.

Whether it's etched in stone or it's Lucky Numbers, which is one of the ways that you thought about it. Yeah. We've got to hang on to something to get through all that uncertainty and trauma.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (12:45)
And you're right, you know, there are ways to terminate a pregnancy, but you cannot force nature to initiate one. I've heard the Chinese have invented artificial wombs in still that time, until that time comes, there's still this miracle that somehow is beyond our control. I still belong to an IVF donor Facebook page because I still have 14 embryos I would love to donate to somebody. And now people have pictures

of their blastocysts, do genetic studies. So there is some proof that I did not have in my day.

Wynne Leon (13:23)
Well, just even the difference that we were talking about where in your day, they they grew the embryos in the lab for three days. Right. And so they didn't have as much of a sense of how long or how well that they would mature from then. in my 15 years later, they grew them for five days and had and that sort of ~ helped to predict a little bit better which ones would implant well.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (13:49)

Yeah, I've heard that. I've heard that. my daughter blasted early. actually, they there were at day three, she was had still blasted and that's, that's the story for life. Thanks, sir. ~

Wynne Leon (14:04)

I love that.

Right. But, you know, you talk about the we talk about the effect of trauma on future generations, as we just mentioned with your Armenian family and your grandparents families. But there's also healing in unpacking and writing about our history and patterns. And one of the things that you say about your son, your autistic son,

is that caring for his sister healed him in more ways than I could have ever imagined, especially after he spent years blaming himself for Armen's death. Yeah.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (14:42)

That was a beautiful thing to to behold. He was 13 years old. He was just he had just been very sick. He almost died from a mystery illness that we never quite understood. And then he said that he fell instantly in love with the baby. I originally thought that a girl would give a playmate for my daughter, Sonya who

neurotypical and had to deal with this weird brother of hers. But Matthew just, he said, I just fell in love and I immediately wanted to be a baby again. And it was interesting because he had missed a good chunk of early childhood because he couldn't communicate and he couldn't play with other children. And he was walking around the house reciting the alphabet. yet he went back, he did a kind of rebirthing with her. He would crawl around the

room with her and because he's had so much therapies. Yeah. I would, you know, let him babysit. would come home and he had turned the entire living room into a maze with boxes so she could crawl through it for proprioception. And I'd come home and she'd be up on the ceiling and, you know, he'd be holding her above his head and I'd say, what are you doing? And I'm just, you know, helping her with her intero ception or whatever it is. And then when, when she was two or three, let him

let him take her to the playground. And the kids really liked having his older child play with them. So at last he got to engage in imaginative play. Right. He had missed. one time I came to the playground and this woman said, oh, you're the mother. So that was and they're still very close. They're still very close, although she's gone her separate, you know, everyone's gone separate ways now.

Wynne Leon (16:25)

Like...

Yeah. Well, and you, so your youngest now, the girl that you had, from IVF is 23. Do I have that right? That's great. And one of the, just mentioned Matthew being sick. mean, the other, you know, real innovation that sort of switched while, you know, while Matthew was young and when he was experiencing that illness was that autism became

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (16:45)

Yes.

Wynne Leon (17:04)

more researched or more science-based so that you actually went to a, because you did a lot of advocacy to try to figure out what was going on with him.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (17:13)

That was something, that was an incredible journey of luck actually, because when he was 18 months old, I'm a copy editor as you know, when he was 18 months old, I was asked to do a book called The Sound of a Miracle by Annabel Staley about this thing called autism. And I vaguely heard of it. I'd read a Life Magazine article about an autistic boy who would only eat McDonald's hamburgers or something.

And the book was wrenching. She not only had an autistic child, daughter had other daughter had died of leukemia, her husband left her for a man, someone stole her car. was wrenching. And then she discovered a sound therapy called auditory integration training. And my son was about 18 months old and I was crying through this manuscript and I went and I hugged him and kissed him as he was sleeping. And I thought,

Thank God my son doesn't have this. But very shortly after that, he started demonstrating symptoms of autism, which I thought maybe I had invented, but then he wasn't speaking. He was shied away from social experiences. And so when he finally got diagnosed, I was told that it was a very rare condition that only one out of 3,000 kids had it.

Wynne Leon (18:33)

Right.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (18:34)

little by little. And I was also told that it was untreatable lifelong and I should just put him in special ed. But then I would hear about somebody's therapy that worked a little bit. And I went and I immediately got him auditory integration training too, based on what I had heard from that book. And then I since became friends with Annabel Staley later on. But she said, no, there's things you know,

He wasn't walking very well because his feet didn't work together. So I got him foot therapy. And then I heard about vision therapy. And then I heard about this kind of play therapy. And every time I heard about something, I would go get it. right after he was born

in 1988, right in the beginning of the 1990s, there was suddenly this baby boom of autistic children. But because he was a little bit older,

I would do something first and then people would call me up and say, Hey, we heard that you did what therapy, what do you think? This is before the internet. How did it work? And they would tell me about a therapy. So I would do that. Wow. And then, then I'd find other things or then I would invent something and then other people would hear about it and call me up. And, and so little by little, every time I heard of something I would, I would take advantage of it. And

The big stumbling block was that he could not interact with other children. He didn't know how they would get hostile or he would shut down. And I thought, what if I just hire some kids, some neighborhood kids to come and play with him? I paid them \$4 an hour. I found a woman with five kids who needed money and they came one time, one child per day after school to come and play with Matthew.

And so I've kind of invented the rent a friend, is an acceptable. So, yeah, you don't have to pay a hundred dollars to an adult. You just pay \$5 to a kid or whatever the going rate is. And we did that for many years. We had rented friends and he learned how to be a kid. The rule was you don't have to, you can act like a normal child. You just can't reject him. So, um, I, that's one of, that's one of my.

Wynne Leon (20:27)
It is!

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (20:50)
I'm very proud of that.

Wynne Leon (20:52)
Yeah,

as you should be, as well as the digestive and eating issues that you help solve.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (21:00)
That was Annabelle. She ~ had a conference right when ~ Matthew was so sick that he was dying, really. He was so skinny. was very lethargic. He was hallucinating. And I went to this conference. And it was all about biomedical treatments for autism that I had never heard of before. And two of the doctors there, I followed them around.

you know, like a little puppy and they told me to do various things and within a couple of weeks he had snapped out of it.

Wynne Leon (21:37)

Amazing. That is amazing. really is. I mean, you talk about your six year IVF journey being ~ harmful possibly to your kids. But I mean, I think ~ the level of parenting and advocacy for all your kids is, just remarkable. And I got to say, you know, your camera's turned off because you've written this book under a pseudonym.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (21:58)
Thank you.

Wynne Leon (22:07)
Because as in the book, there's a lawsuit that was mentioned.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (22:13)
Right. I had to disguise all the names and the locations. So it actually took place in a different state, but one that had similar climate, that had a similar hospital situation. because one of our tragedies was due to a medical error, we settled with the hospital, but I had to sign a non-disclosure agreement. there's no way that anyone could trace it back, but I didn't want to.

Right. I didn't want to risk it. Right.

Wynne Leon (22:45)
Right. Well, we appreciate you telling your story and all the different circumstances. So do you think that writing it out, you know, 23 years after the beautiful birth of your amazing youngest daughter, has that been healing for your family?

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (23:02)
Absolutely, absolutely. ~ Yeah, I thought I was over it. But when I sat down to write, I realized that there was still a lot of emotion tied up to the loss. When you lose a child, well, know, when you lose your miscarriage. When I went to the grieving group, someone made the point that it doesn't matter how old that child is, you still grieve the same way.

Wynne Leon (23:29)
Right.

Right? I mean, that's just heartbreaking and amazing because you did the work to do the grieving at the time. And then you come back and revisit it, you know, 20 years later. And just I think that there's so much of a blueprint of of healing and of hope in this book. just I just loved it.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (23:55)
Thank you. You are a writer too, aren't you?

Wynne Leon (23:59)

Yes I do write, I've written technical books, but I also have written in that, we talked about that time when I started IVF and my dad died the next day. so I wrote a memoir about my dad, which I'd been working on before he died, but he died in a bike accident. So it was a surprise.

I spent the nine months of having my daughter in utero. And I swear, I've said this a million times, that in that process of writing about my dad and his death and her birth, I swear they crossed.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (24:47)

Wow, what an emotional time for that. must have been. Well, Edgar Cayce said, the souls, you know, find another body to come back to.

Wynne Leon (24:57)

It could be. mean, it is it's interesting because I just thought that I wasn't going to have any time after I gave birth to write. And, you know, I found my pocket to to do that. But I thought I'd get that done.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (25:15)

How old was he? He must have been very young then.

Wynne Leon (25:17)

He was 79. So I was 46 when my daughter was born and 50 when my son was born. So my dad was, he was young, but it just, it just a fluke of an accident.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (25:31)

And he was healthy. I must have been if he was biking.

Wynne Leon (25:36)

and in a gated community in a way that you just wouldn't expect except for it just happened.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (25:45)

I'm so sorry. You know, that's why you have to wake up every morning and just be grateful that nothing is going, when something, when nothing happens, as I said in my book, it's a miracle.

Wynne Leon (25:55)

Yeah, you say that and so beautifully in the epilogue of your book. There's so much to be grateful for. And I think that's and maybe that's my biggest takeaway from your book of of this IVF journey. I mean, we're so grateful for the children that we have, the generation that we created. Sometimes we don't remember the losses. And it's important to to track those as well.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (26:17)

I used to think, okay, five years from now, I will have a child. I will forget all about this. ~
And now it's 23 years later and I haven't forgotten, but it's just, it's a part of my life. ~
When I spoke to the grieving, the grieving counselor who had lost her only son at five years old, she said, it just becomes a part of your life. It doesn't necessarily heal, it becomes, it's bearable. It's something that you.

that is just part of your experience. Although if I hadn't had my daughter, I think it would have been a lot different.

Wynne Leon (26:56)

Hmm,

probably for all of you.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (26:59)

That's true. Yeah.

Wynne Leon (27:01)

~

Matthew, your oldest son wouldn't have had all that healing experience of being able to be a child and help raise a child.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (27:11)

Yeah,

it meant a lot to him. because my daughter couldn't cry when she was born, which is a very interesting way to have a who can't cry. But we had to watch her all the time. So I would hold her in my right arm because I'm left handed and copy edit with my left hand. And she would watch this pencil go back and forth.

And then Matthew would hold her. And then when I needed a break, I took her to the kid zone at the YMCA and she didn't want to leave us because she was with us 24 hours a day. So he would just hang out with her. And again, the kids thought this was really cool, this older kid. So he actually stayed there as a volunteer for almost two years. And he... ~

he really, you know, it really helped him a lot because he got to be involved in that imaginative play. So he wouldn't have had that experience without her. And then another interesting thing too she became very dependent on us and her dad, who wasn't living with us at the time, wanted to take her swimming so that he could bond with her. But she was already

bonded with Matthew and wouldn't play with Wesley in the pool. Wesley kicked Matthew out of the pool and said, this is my time with my daughter and you can't, she can see you, but I don't want her swimming with you. And so he would sit down at the side of the pool and this attractive high school lifeguard ~ would talk to him.

And he said, know, have autism, I'm sort of a boob and at the time he wasn't really in school because he didn't go back to school until he was about 17. That's a whole other story. And she said, well, what do need to know about social skills? So she was bored and it was a Friday night and she wished she were somewhere else. And so she taught him how to be a teenager. It was a really beautiful thing. She taught him the rules of engagement and how many times you call your friends and

know, how many, what's acceptable and what isn't, and she really taught him how to be a teenager. So yeah, I know, and he actually wrote, he's now a writer himself, he wrote a book about this, about learning how to be a teenager from this lifeguard. So if Wesley hadn't kicked him out of the pool, that probably wouldn't have happened. ~

Wynne Leon (29:26)
Amazing

Isn't that amazing? mean, it reminds me of something from Nikki Giovanni, was a poet laureate of Virginia Tech. And she talked about how all experiences, none of them are wasted. And she'd likened it to her grandmother's kitchen where, you know, all the food that came into her grandmother's kitchen was put to use in some way. And she talked about our lives being the same, you know, all the things. And I love that story you just told because it illustrates that.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (30:08)
That's a wonderful analogy. Yeah. And that you have to make use of everything that you're given too.

Wynne Leon (30:15)
Right, right. Well, you've done such a beautiful job of that in this wonderful book, Saving the Fourth Generation. So thank you for coming on to talk about that.

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (30:24)
Well, you're welcome. Thank you. It was great to meet you and talk to you.

you

Wynne Leon (30:33)
Thank you for listening. Our music was written for us by the incredible duo of Jack Canfora and Rob Koenig. For show notes and more great inspiration, see avita.com A-V-I-T-I-V-A dot

you

Mari Sarkisian Wyatt (30:50)

you