**Motivational Mondays interview:**

**Alexis / Justin Black – *Airing* 05.10.2021**

**Max Irzhak** [00:00:02] My next guests are a shining example that you *can* change your destiny by taking charge of your situation, unlearning bad habits, and redefining what society considers as normal.

Today, they’re sharing their story of how they overcame incredible struggles growing up in foster care, but beat the odds to reach success.

This is Motivational Mondays. I’m your host Max Irzhak, and joining us are two of my fellow NSLS members: Alexis and Justin Black.

Welcome to the show, it’s great to have you both with us today!

**Alexis Black** [00:00:30] Thank you for having us.

**Justin Black** [00:00:31] Yeah it’s a blessing to be on here, thank you for having us.

**Max Irzhak** [00:00:32] Can you tell us a little bit about your journeys *before* you met each other?

**Justin Black** [00:00:40] Yeah, of course. So as you mentioned before, we both grew up in the foster care system. So I entered the foster care system at the age of 9 years old, and I'm originally from Detroit — growing up in Detroit for about 17 to 18 years of my life. And I entered the foster care system at 9 years old, largely due to my parents’ substance abuse issues. So journeying through the system, of course there’s a lot of ups and downs, you move home to home, and you face a lot of struggles of “why didn’t my parents want me, why weren’t they there for me?” … and so many mental health issues, and so many voids you are attempting to fill — a lot of times with unhealthy habits.

Now, journeying through this system, eventually I landed in a group home right outside the city of Detroit. And in this group home it was mainly focused on four boys transitioning into adulthood where I had plenty of mentors and people that helped me get to college and just believe in myself and build my confidence. And my freshman year of college, I met this Junior who just inspired me and just challenged me to do so much. It started as a friendship, but we eventually became partners — business partners, but also romantic partners. She just inspired me to study abroad and do a bunch of amazing credible things in life, and eventually start my own business.

**Max Irzhak** [00:01:56] That’s awesome. And what about you, Alexis?

**Alexis Black** [00:01:59] Yeah, so, also i started in foster care, around 13 — and that was after my biological mother died by suicide. And i actually found out in high school that actually ran in my family — that my grandma also died by suicide. And right after my biological mother passed, I went and lived with my biological father — who at that time I was only seeing on weekends. But when my mom passed, that’s when a lot of the abuse started with him. Around 13 was when I actually entered foster care, and I was taken out of his home and placed with family members. Lived with them for about five years, transitioned to a different school — so it was my tenth school actually. And my junior year, my aunt kicked me out of her house — she packed up all my stuff and threw it outside, and told me I needed to leave. And that’s when I went and lived with my first foster home — the technical foster home, and it ended up being the most incredible people on the planet. They’re actually now my adoptive parents — I had them adopt me in 2019 in December. And then went off to college to University of Michigan Flint, but transferred schools to Western Michigan University where actually my parents went. And so, I kind of wanted to be closer to them because I felt kind of isolated being back in Flint where I'm from, and transitioned schools and that’s actually when I met Justin was my junior year right after I transferred.

**Max Irzhak** [00:03:23] Sometimes, it feels like life is pre-defined by the circumstances around us.

Whether it’s societal norms dictating how someone should behave, or generational patterns that make us feel like there’s a path that we can’t escape.

What’s your advice for living life according to *your own* standards and not letting others dictate your future?

**Justin Black** [00:03:44] First and foremost it starts with recognition, because a lot of the times we’re birthed into this pathway, into this route that we didn’t choose for ourselves but we don’t even know that this is predestined for us. So for example with me being an African American man, with me growing up in poverty, with me having a history of substance abuse within my family for generations — society can already dictate where my end result will be, where my life will go. But it took me being aware of these statistics of black men, of people who come from poverty, of men who come from the foster care system, people who come from the foster care system altogether. It starts with awareness, and when we are aware of the statistics that are set before us, then we can be intentional about overcoming those statistics.

So it starts with awareness, and then it starts with being intentional on a daily basis saying that i’m aware that there’s substance abuse within my family, so i have to deal with my anger, deal with my emotions, deal with my letdown and my failures in a certain way. Be intentional about maybe meditating, prayer, working out — whatever habits that you practice and that you need to do, practice that on a daily basis and create that daily routine that will make you get to where you need to be and who you want to be in life. And that’s where you need to go, and that’s the route you need to take to break those generational habits and those patterns that were set before you.

**Max Irzhak** [00:05:09] The two of you have accomplished quite a bit in your lives. It seems like you’re really good at setting goals and then *reaching* them.

What advice do you have for people who feel like they’re spinning their wheels but not really moving forward and reaching their goals?

**Alexis Black** [00:05:23] Yeah, one thing that we do is we set out our goals for the year in say January. Everybody does it, January 1st set out your goals for the year ... what are your resolutions, what are you doing? But most of those actually fail, and that’s because most people are not being intentional on what those are. And also breaking those down into a SMART goal. And for us, every single goal that we create for the year, we create it into a SMART goal. So how can we break that down by month, by week, and ultimately by day. And that allows us to stay accountable with each other where every couple months we reflect over our goals, how do we need to pivot, how do we need to move forward. But if you just create your goals once a year... are you learning, are you growing, are you allowing yourself to pivot and move past that? And as business owners, and as people who are just trying to push towards their goals, that’s not realistic to say “i'm going to look at my goals once a year.” How much do we change in a year? In one year we wrote a book, we got married, we bought a house. And it only took us two and a half weeks to buy a house once we made the decision we were going to do so — which is not the norm, don’t think that’s the norm — but if we would’ve waited until the following year to say “we’re going to create our goals now, and then maybe next year we’ll buy a house”... if we would’ve done that we wouldn't be where we are right now with creating several companies, getting married, buying our house. All these different things that all happened in 2020 because we were able to pivot and reflect on those goals that we set out for 2020. Because COVID happened, the world changed. And the goals that we set for ourselves on January 1st 2020 were 100% different in March when we reassessed as we were quarantined in an RV outside of my parents house. We were like “how are we going to maximize this year, how can we pivot our goals to make the most of this year?” And that’s exactly what we did because we were able to not have tunnel vision based on what goals did we set, and miss out on all those opportunities — and I see too many people that are doing that. They have this end goal, they are doing everything they can to reach that, but they’re missing opportunities in the way that are coming in that may deter them from that streamlined goal that they had set for themselves. And so it’s being open, and I guess just open to really new opportunities that can come forth from it.

**Justin Black** [00:07:38] And one thing i want to add is that a lot of times we set the goal as “i want to sell one thousand books; i want to sell this many books”, but instead of making the number of books you sell your goal, make the *action* your goal — i'm going to do a pitch to 5 people today; every day this week im going to pitch my book to 20 people; i’m going to make 10 social media posts this week; i’m going to spend 5 hours, or however many hours doing promo on social media. Scale it back a little bit before we say “i want to sell a thousand books, and 20,000 books”... you can have that as your long-term goal and your big goal, but you can break it down even further like Alexis said into your daily goals. “Okay, i'm going to spend 5 hours today” or however many hours, creating advertisements and promo for this book on social media; i'm going to do this many pictures for this book; i'm going to try to jump on this many podcasts — have that goal in mind, and then let that build up to selling however many books you want or whatever goal you have.

**Alexis Black** [00:08:44] And i don't know if it’s the type A business-oriented person in me, but i always have those number goals of “make this much a month” or “sell this many books”, but it’s going far beyond that with exactly what Justin said with what are the actions that we’re going to do, and the process of getting to that — and we have exceeded our goal every single month because we’ve been focusing more on the action piece of it… what do we have control over? I don't have any control over how many people are going to purchase our book, but i have control over how many presentations, how many ads, or how many posts we do — that is something *I* can control. And I think that is ultimately something we had to learn in our lives of what *can* we control and what can we *not* control. But it’s good to have those larger goals as your north star pushing you forward — but it’s really breaking it down to “what tangibly can *you* do to push towards that”.

**Max Irzhak** [00:09:33] That’s really interesting in the way you reframed it. Rather than focusing on the actual number, it’s doing the action, building the momentum — and then the results will come.

**Alexis Black** [00:09:43] Exactly, and that is exactly what's happened — we published our book and we really made a list of “what is our *why* behind this, what is our purpose, and how are we going to achieve that?” And that’s how we came up with our action items. And our goal was sell this many books, do this, do that — but again, I can’t control that. So what can we do in our daily lives, and that’s exactly what we’ve done. And because of that the results have come from that — selling the 5500 books, we’re speaking in at least 5 keynote events this year; we’ve done over 40 presentations since November — all of which have been paid, and we weren’t expecting that either. So things are coming, and momentum is building because we stayed true to our why and why we’re doing this, and taking hold of what can we do in our own right that we have power over.

**Max Irzhak** [00:10:36] What role did education play in turning your life around?

**Alexis Black** [00:10:42] Yeah for me, i always tell people that education really was my coping mechanism because i always felt that education was the one thing that nobody could take away from me. When my world was chaotic, everything was happening around me — adults, social workers, family — whoever it was, everybody was always making decisions for me, i wasn’t able to make decisions for myself. But I could always decide how I was going to succeed in my education, and how I was going to move forward in that. So that was one thing that was mine that nobody could take away or change for me. And so that’s why i think i succeeded in education, how it absolutely changed my life. And in high school just having so many teachers and counselors reach out their hand and let me know that they’re there for me. I mean I was having lunch with my counselors, and my teachers. So that was also part of my healing journey was my education, because I had that supportive network around me. And when i transferred to Western Michigan University and i joined the Seita Scholars program, i was surrounded by campus coaches and other individuals that really wanted me to succeed. And so it wasn't just an education anymore — it was how do I build my community and my network of individuals that want me to succeed, and are challenging me, and holding me accountable, and forcing me to deal with things that i didn't want to before. Because education is not just academically. It’s really how are you learning outside of your classroom, and learning more about yourself, and all these different layers related to education.

**Max Irzhak** [00:12:08] How has the NSLS helped you get to where you are today?

**Alexis Black** [00:12:13] Yeah, being a part of NSLS actually has provided me with several scholarships, which has been absolutely amazing. Pretty much every time that i’ve applied, i have been awarded a scholarship which has helped me graduate college with over $200,000 in scholarships, and i was able to study abroad eight times, and be a part of so many different opportunities that i don’t know if i would’ve been able to outside of that, or otherwise really. And so it allowed me to really focus on my education, where I know so many other students who are working several jobs and trying to *fit in* their education — where for me I was able to focus on being a student as my number one job. And that’s also why I was able to succeed and excel, because I didn't have to work on those other basic needs. Where scholarships like NSLS and that community and things helped me stay organized, and motivated, and fund that as well.

**Max Irzhak** [00:13:07] Each May, we celebrate Foster Care Awareness Month

A couple of interesting stats:

* After reaching the age of eighteen, 20% of the children who were in foster care will become *instantly* homeless.
* Only 1 out of every 2 foster kids who age out of the system will be successful in finding steady employment by the age of 24.
* There is less than a 3% chance for children who have aged out of foster care to earn a college degree at any point in their life.

The two of you overcame all of these odds and are a beacon of hope for a lot of foster kids today.

What’s your advice for foster care youth who may be listening to this episode? How can they prepare for the world?

**Justin Black** [00:13:50] There’s so many things to say to this but really i would say some of the things that have helped me is to just do outreach. Reach out to organizations like NSLS, reach out to different programs or organizations that have successful people, and really get to a space in your life where emotionally and mentally you can really be challenged to be uncomfortable in certain circumstances in order for you to grow. A lot of times, as foster youth, we are trying to be independent because we’ve been forced into survival mode at such a young age. Some of us have been homeless or had to survive on our own since our teenage years. But i really want to challenge foster youth to be independent, but also be interdependent — which is one of Alexis’ favorite words. Be interdependent on those around you who are healthy, who are successful — and if you don't have people around you who are healthy and successful, try to do all you can to maybe grab a mentor, grab a coach, or someone who is doing something that you want to do in life. And it can be not only just professionally, it can be personally, it can be academically — it can just be “i love what this person is doing with their life as a father, as a mother, and i want to do that one day, and i want to be a part of that one day.” So learn from them, reach out to them, and try to get them a part of your network and your relationship circle. And try to just have people around you who are successful, who are healthy, and try to challenge yourself on those definitions of love. A lot of times we have a false definition of love and what it means. Continue to challenge those definitions of love, healthy relationships as it relates to romantic, family, and other things. And continue to try to grow — and in order to grow you need to be uncomfortable. So continue to try to grow and put yourself in those uncomfortable situations.

**Max Irzhak** [00:15:42] What’s your advice for finding mentors who can guide you in life?

**Alexis Black** [00:15:48] First i would always say look around you, and see is there anybody as Justin mentioned, somebody that you kind of look up to, or maybe they have a skill or talent or something that you just want to learn from. So first i would say look around you, and if you don’t see any of those individuals around you — which i would question that, because there's generally at least somebody — but if there *isn’t*, then for us what we’ve done is we made social media really a part of our community. Because a community is really just based on your definition of what that is. Is it somebody in your household? Is it your neighborhood? Is it digital? So you have to figure out what is your definition of community and so for us a lot of that is actually through social media. So we’ve branched out and found a lot of our mentors through social media, and watching them kind of observing what they are posting, what do they talk about, what do they care about — and do their principles and morals and values align with ours? And do they have something I want to learn from? Like i’ve reached out to some individuals and i said “would you be willing to mentor me? You have this and this skill that i would love to learn from. You ran this organization.” Or “you’re just an incredible person and i would love to learn how to be just more like you”. And asking them “are you willing to do that?” And you would be surprised how many people are just blown away that you’re even reaching out and asking that question. And some people may be really honest and say “you know, i just really dont have the time for this right now, but check in with me in a couple months.” So it's up to you really to keep the ball rolling and follow up with them. They’re not necessarily going to do the work for you. But it’s up to you to reach out and self-advocate and ask “would you be willing to do this”. So we’ve reached out through Facebook, through LinkedIn, whatever it may be, and just putting the ask out there. You’d be surprised how many people will say yes.

**Max Irzhak** [00:17:30] What’s your advice for removing negative people out of your life?

**Alexis Black** [00:17:36] "You are the average of the 5 people you surround yourself with” — i absolutely love that quote. And it helps you reflect on who are the people you spend the most time with? And do you want to be more like them? These are people that you’re going to go to for opinions, advice, and they’re going to be around you a lot so you’re going to learn from them and you’re probably going to adopt some of their habits. Like i know for myself i’ve adopted several of Justins’ habits just by being around him a lot — and so i have to think are these individuals or this individual somebody that i want to learn from and grow from, or is this just sucking me of resources, of my identity, of my sanity — and just really go through that reflection process for myself.

**Justin Black** [00:18:15] And one thing I would add to that is to understand if the people around you are conducive for your future is to be self-reflective and creating maybe 3-5 core principles of who you are, or even who you want to be. So once you determine these 3-5 core principles — and you don’t have to be that right now, but maybe something that you want to be or something that you want to live up to. Once you write that down, write it on your wall, write it somewhere you can see it daily, and just start to weave out the people who are not like that, who are not conducive for your future or living up to the standards that you’ve set for yourself.

**Max Irzhak** [00:18:50] I want to thank you both for helping us learn that while our past will certainly *shape* who we are, it *doesn’t* have to *define* our future. And that when you find someone who makes you better, hold on to that person because there’s nothing you can’t accomplish together.

**Alexis Black** [00:19:05] Thank you so much, I love that.

**Max Irzhak** [00:19:07] I encourage everyone to connect with Alexis and Justin on LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram, and to buy the autographed copy of their new book. Just follow the links in the description below.

We’ll see you all next week on Motivational Mondays!