

We Are Family Season 2, Episode 20: Lea Michele

Lea Michele:

Hi, my name is Lea Michele. Family is my everything. They are just my everything. They are love. They are my joy. They are my source of life. Family for me, they are my everything.

Julia Dennison:

Hello and welcome to *We Are Family*. I am your host, Julia Dennison and I am here with the darling of Broadway. Hello, Lea Michelle, who you'll know of course is a star of *Glee*. She has a number of albums under her belt, but her most recent is a lullaby album for her son, and for all the kiddos out there. She's also a new mom with her husband, Zandy to her son, Ever Leo. Lea, thanks for coming on the podcast. So nice to see you.

Lea:

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. I am so excited to talk all things family, and baby, and motherhood. It's literally my most favorite thing to talk about.

Julia:

Congratulations on being a relatively new mom. You had a pandemic baby, as we say. So Ever Leo was born in 2020, right? August of 2020.

Lea:

Yes. So he's a pandemic baby in the sense that he was born during the pandemic, however, he wasn't conceived pandemic style. It's not like we were home, locked up at home, the two of us. So he was conceived in December 2019 and then he was born still very much in the height of our pandemic, August 2020.

Julia:

So you and him must have almost the same birthday?

Lea:

Yes. And it's so funny. So the day that we went for our first checkup on top of like the monitor, the screen, it was like, this is the day that you conceived, and this is the day that your baby will be born and originally it said August 29th. And I was so excited, but I was also a little like, oh no, is this going to be good? Because I really wanted him to have his own birthday just so that he can have like his own day, even though I would be so happy to not celebrate my birthday and just obviously have it be all about my child, because I'm really not a big birthday person. And I say that and my husband is totally listening and he's probably like, oh yeah, cut to my birthday when I'm like, where's my party.

Julia:

He's like yeah, right.

Lea:

But he ended up coming on the 20th, nine days before my birthday.

Julia:

So tell me though about his name, Ever Leo. It's such a sweet name. Where did that come from?

Lea:

I always loved the name Ever. I don't know how or why. It just has always been such a special name for me. I assumed my husband would maybe be more like into naming him Everett and having it be more of a traditional name and then maybe calling him Ever for short, but he ended up liking Ever just by itself, which I was really surprised. We had a very challenging pregnancy that was really scary, and the name Ever, which is connected to obviously forever, which is what I ended up naming my album, we really kind of just held onto that name and were silently just repeating it in our minds over and over again while we were going to all of these endless doctor's appointments, some really scary visits. And then when he was born, it is a unique name, but immediately I just was like, you are Ever. You are our forever. And it was just perfect.

Julia:

You have had a really challenging pregnancy. Can you talk a little bit about what happened and why it was so challenging?

Lea:

Yeah, I found out I was pregnant mid-December 2019, and within two days of finding out that I was pregnant, we had a very blissful 48 hours privately my husband and I of knowing that we were pregnant. I have PCOS, so I had to have multiple surgeries leading up to conceiving our child to remove polyps and cysts and scar tissue all due to my PCOS. And then we finally got pregnant and assumed that kind of the worst was behind us when unfortunately things got very intense afterwards. We were thinking, oh, we'll tell my parents on Christmas that we're pregnant and I ended up starting to bleed terribly two days later. And I bled through my entire first trimester. Sometimes so bad we would rush to the hospital and just assume that it was over.

We were both so scared, and it was very intense. Cut to, we're into my second trimester and thinking that then the worst is over there and we ended up going for our 20 week checkup, which if you don't know, the 20 week checkup is the big anatomy scan and you do the real full check of your baby. And we got some very complicated markers at that checkup, which required a extremely traumatizing amio, a fetal MRI, a fetal echo. Which all in and out of the hospital, all happening during that, at that point, that was March, 2020 so we had just gone into lockdown for the pandemic.

We had a two month wait of being told that I would probably have to consider my options of whether or not this pregnancy was going to last, which is very scary at that, being so late in your pregnancy and your child is kicking and moving and it's frightening. We were very fortunate to get positive results back, but it was only within weeks of my son being born. It did not exhale until they handed me my son in the hospital. Even then, I don't think I was, it really hit me until we were in the car on the way home and the photos of me in the car on the way home literally I have like the smile from ear to ear, just so happy to finally have our son in my arms.

Julia:

You know, I'm sitting here, it's the mom effect. I think once you become a mom, you cry at everything and this is making me just hearing the story, making me emotional. Can you just explain for our listeners exactly what PCOS is and whether if you have any advice for anybody who's suffering from it, who's also trying to conceive?

Lea:

PCOS is an extremely complicated diagnosis because it presents itself differently in every woman. It can cause infertility. It can cause weight gain. It can cause problems with your skin. It's basically your body having trouble processing your insulin levels and the challenging thing-

Julia:

Polycystic ovary syndrome. I realize we probably, we use the acronym, but people may not realize that it's the...

Lea:

Yeah, I apologize. Polycystic ovary syndrome. And so I had been on birth control, I started taking birth control when I was 14 because of my skin. But no one was considering polycystic ovary syndrome. Everyone was saying, oh, you just genetically have bad skin, you must have a higher level of testosterone, but no one diagnosed me for having PCOS. So I stayed on birth control from 14 until I was 30 years old and it did help my skin, which was great, because I've been working professionally since I was very young and having skin issues was very traumatizing for me, not only just being a high school student, but then also having to perform on stage or on camera.

But when I turned 30, I decided that I wanted to get off of birth control no matter what, not trying to have children at the time. And then I didn't get my period for a whole year. So I'm pretty in tune with my body, and I figured something must be wrong. And after going to multiple doctors, I finally found a wonderful doctor in Los Angeles. She looked at me and she just said, you have PCOS. And I was like, what is that? And she explained what it was. And then was able to manage it, but then came to the next phase of my life when I started trying to have children, then I needed to take on a whole other level of managing the PCOS in regards to trying to conceive.

Julia:

Such a whirlwind and so confusing.

Lea:

I remember when my husband and I were first starting to try, the worst thing you can ever do is Google. And I was like, oh, well, conceiving, you know how...Issues of conceiving with PCOS and it'll say like, you have a higher risk of having miscarriages. You have a higher risk of not conceiving and it's terrifying. It's truly terrifying. So I'm very lucky that I was able to find after a challenging search, some great doctors who were able to help me manage the PCOS, care for the damage that it had done on my body to then prepare for me to get pregnant. And we're very fortunate that it was successful because it can be very complicated.

Julia:

Yes. Well, I'm so glad that everything worked out. What a relief. Such a roller coaster ride. So then, of course, you have the baby and you get through the birth, but then no one quite prepares you for those first few months of motherhood. What were those like for you and what were some of the biggest transitions you felt like you had to go through?

Lea:

Okay. So I have to say that I feel that because of the intense pregnancy that I had, I was on such a high of finally having our baby that I didn't struggle with the first few months. Everything kind of hit me later. I think I was on this adrenaline high and rush of having our son. We were also, the pandemic had so many, unfortunate, like none of my family got to see me pregnant. I had to be alone at almost every single doctor's appointment. My husband could only be there for half of the birth.

But however, on the positive side, we did also get to have a very quiet time at home, just us, which was really wonderful for bonding, but also not being overwhelmed by having a lot of people come. And so for me, the first few months, I just remember being very quiet and peaceful and wonderful with our son.

I think for me, everything really hit closer to when he was about six months old. That's when the sleepless nights, it just all hit me like a Mac truck. I was really stubborn at the beginning of wanting to do everything. I didn't even want to give him any bottles. I just wanted to breastfeed. Do every single feeding myself, but it wasn't until later on one of my girlfriends was like you're going to crash at a certain point if you don't take more help because you might be feeling so great right now, but it will catch up. And it did.

By then I was very ready to no longer breastfeed and that was also a challenging transition. So I guess to answer your question and what I'm trying to say is that for me, most of the, the hurdles came later and not so much in the like, stereotypical, traditional, oh, those first few weeks. It was more of a later thing for me. Does that make sense?

Julia:

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's true for a lot of people. I mean, different circumstances. I think people find different periods potentially harder. It just, it depends on the kid and it depends on the mom and it depends on the circumstance. So that makes total sense to me. And so how old is he now, Ever?

Lea:

He will be 15 months in two days.

Julia:

Oh, what's he like now? What's his character like?

Lea:

Wow. He has a personality, that is for sure. He is very funny and sweet, but also a little tricky. He knows so much. If I say don't do something, he'll kind of look at me and smile, like okay, I won't do it mom, but I know that if I wanted to, I could. I'm like, oh my God, weren't you just born? And now you're making these connections and understanding so much? He sometimes sings, which is also so wild to me. He loves music. He loves trucks. He loves playing with my makeup. He's so unbelievable. You know, obviously he's my son, but he's really just becoming such a little person-

Julia:

Yes.

Lea:

...That I can have these full conversations with, even though he's not speaking. It's like, oh, you want this? Okay. I'll go get that for you. Did you like that? Oh, okay. Actually, you would rather something else. And it's like, we're communicating. How did this happen? (laughter)

Julia:

So do you sing to him all the time? What's your relationship with him when it comes to music? Were you singing to him when you were pregnant?

Lea:

So I was on such an extreme bedrest from the bleeding that they told me, look, no singing. Nothing. Nothing to exert yourself. I was afraid to do anything. I spent Christmas, New Year's, every day from December through January laying flat on the couch. My mother was like, do not move, just stay still. And I was still bleeding and which so terrifying. I would just, sometimes when I felt like I could go and take a shower, even talking about it, I'm just reminded like of how scared I was. But I would quietly, quietly, like whisper sing, because I read once that your child when they're in your stomach can hear your voice louder than if you were at a concert.

So I would quietly like whisper sing to the baby. And I did this throughout my whole pregnancy for whatever scenario was happening on the outside world that might have been stressful. I would sing to him to always just let him know that everything was okay. That mommy might be crying, and I cried guttural tears my entire pregnancy, like truly just when they told me that day at our 20 week checkup, when the doctor was like, so there's a marker in his brain and there's a marker in his heart and this isn't good. My knees buckled, like I fell to the floor and I was all alone wearing an N95, a shield, my husband was downstairs in the car. He couldn't come upstairs. I cried the entire...Every time we would go back and they'd be like, it's not getting any better, just like wailing.

And I knew he could hear that. So then I would try so hard to then just sing and be like, I, you might be hearing me cry, but I promise you everything is okay and everything is going to be okay and you are going to be okay and we are going to be okay. And then when he was born I just loved that little quiet time together where I would just like play music and sing right before bed. And that's when I knew I needed to make a lullaby album because singing for the first time in my life as a singer, I used it to truly heal and to help bring me strength in a way that I never had before. And I wanted to make this record and I wanted the songs to be all the songs that we sang and that we listened to as just such a positive reminder of the power of music and healing and the sense of calm that it brought me and hopefully the baby, as well. So this whole record is so special to me for multiple reasons.

Julia:

Did you always think that you wanted to do a lullaby album or did it kind of come to you in the shower when you were singing quietly?

Lea:

Yeah. I always thought the concept of a lullaby album would be so wonderful and I always felt that if I was blessed enough to become a mom, that it would definitely be an album that I would want to make, but even more so after everything that I mentioned and how singing became even more important to me during that time that it ever had in my whole life, just the idea became even more, I was like, okay, I have to, I just have to do this.

Julia:

That's so beautiful. I love that. Do you feel like you are the mom that you thought you would be? Do you feel like you're becoming your mom?

Lea:

I wish this was a multiple choice question because I think I am close to the mom that I thought that I would be. I definitely am much more anxious and worried than I ever thought that I would be. And I really feel like a lot of that has to do with the, I think if I had had a different pregnancy, I think that I would feel differently now, but with there being so many such intense extremes all the time that really then led, literally, into becoming a parent. So my mom is very strong, but she also has her own set of worries and things like that, that I'm sure I've picked up. But I think overall, I would say that motherhood did come very naturally for me as I expected it would, but the amount of anxiety and worry that I carry with me constantly is much more debilitating and present than I thought that it would be.

Julia:

I think when you've had a traumatic pregnancy, it can have an impact on parenting because you've seen when things have potentially gone wrong that things could potentially go wrong.

Lea:

Of course. And we are also still living in a post-pandemic. I mean, are we post-pandemic?

Julia:

Right.

Lea:

I don't know. Are we...COVID is still very present unfortunately, but I think that that has added an extreme layer of stress of always being like, can we go here? Can we go there? Can you come near my child? You know, the world is very different now. And it also adds a layer of anxiety that for me is already very present.

Julia:

Well, I can relate. And so on this podcast, we also talk about your own family life and childhood, so I'd love to hear a little more. So you are an only child you grew up in New York City and then New Jersey also. And so, what was your childhood like?

Lea:

So I'm just so incredibly blessed that I had a truly wonderful childhood. I think the thing that was so meaningful and so special about growing up for me was that I was very close to my entire extended family, which was a very big part of my upbringing that I have 19 younger cousins, just on one side of the family. I come from a very big Italian family. All from the Bronx. And despite starting theater, at the age of eight years old, I also still had a very normal childhood. Incredibly close with my whole family, as well as a pretty lovely normal school experience. I was very blessed that I found what I loved to do also at a young age. So I think that for me, as a parent now, and my hope for my son, I hope that he has as close of a relationship with me and my husband as I do and did with my parents.

I always felt so safe with my mom and dad. I always wanted to be with them more than anyone else, which is why I think I never did drugs. I never drank a lot because for me it was like, yeah, that stuff sounds like fun, but I'm such a dork, I just want to go home and hang out with my mom and dad. So I

hope that he feels that same connection to me and my husband. We just recently also moved back home to the east coast, my husband and I. He's also east coast. He's Philly. Because we want him to be raised close to his cousins and aunts and uncles and so that's my hope as well that I can give him that same sort of large family closeness that I had.

And also I really hope that we can create a safe environment for him to hopefully find a passion because that, for me was such a lifeline. Even my husband, he played sports all the way through college and he loved it and it created a great sense of comradery and team and support. And so even if it's that for Ever, my hope is that he can find something that he really loves in the way that I do, too, whatever it might be.

Julia:

Yes. And so with musical theater and with Broadway theater, did that passion come from you as a young kid? Or did it come from, was it your mom that introduced you to Broadway?

Lea:

I actually just truly stumbled upon it very unexpectedly. I went on an open call in my hometown with a friend, kind of for fun for a Broadway show. I had never sung before. I'd never had any professional experience before and I got the job and two weeks later was performing on Broadway. So it was a very, truly unexpected turn of events for my little family. My mother was a nurse. My father owned a deli. My, our little humble family was never expecting to have a child that would be performing on Broadway. So it happened and then I really got addicted to it and fell in love with it and had such great support from my mom and dad that I continued to work from eight all the way until now.

Julia:

And so if, I know you're saying whatever passion Ever finds is great and I love that philosophy and I would agree with my daughter, but if Ever turned around and decided that Broadway was his thing and he wanted to be a child actor too, would you support that? Do you think?

Lea:

Of course. I mean I think that allowing our children to be exactly who they want to be is the greatest gift that we can give them. So if that's what he wants, absolutely. I think that education is very important for me. It's a big regret. I didn't go to college. I was accepted to NYU, but I was working professionally and so I ended up not going. So I think for me, I would want to explain to him sort of that personal regret that I have that although I did know what I wanted to do from a very young age, I wish I would've at least just continued with my education through college. So I hope that that's something that he would be open to listening and understanding why that would be important to me for him. But as far as what brings him joy, I would just be so eternally happy if he could find whatever that purpose is. It's all I think you could ever want as a parent, is to know that your child is happy and that they feel like they can just be their true selves.

Julia:

The one sort of thing I always wonder about being in the spotlight as a celebrity and you get written about online and there's often good things, and then there's sometimes bad things how do you kind of feel about him potentially reading some of those bad things and how would you kind of approach that with him?

Lea:

You know, it is something that we will have to think about and figure out how we're going to sort of handle and deal with all of that. What's important to me right now is creating as much of a private world for my son as possible. We choose to not share anything on social media, which is just our personal choice. I think that as parents who are in this world, they should do whatever makes them feel the most comfortable. But for us, I read Katherine Schwarzenegger who I just adore and think is so wonderful. She said that the greatest gift that her parents gave her was privacy and that really stuck with me. What's important to us right now is to just keep our little family as safe and private as we can. That may not always be the case. Maybe we're not always going to be able to do that, but for right now, this is what's best for us. And I think a gift that I can give him.

Julia:

Absolutely. So I also just wondered what hopes and dreams you have for your family, for the future.

Lea:

Oh my gosh.

Lea:

So much. Like I said before, we just moved back to the east coast. So just the fact that we can be here and be close to our family, my hope is that we can just continue to grow together here, surrounded by people that we love so much who love our child. I want him to continue to grow and start to see the world more coming from this past year of being incredibly isolated. He's now just starting to open his eyes to the world and get to be outside and meet more people and meet more of his family. So our hope is that he can just continue to grow and be happy. That's all you can ever hope for your child.

Julia:

Lea Michele, this has been so wonderful. You've been so generous with your time. Thank you for coming on *We Are Family*. It's been great having you.

Lea:

Thank you so much.

Julia: Thanks so much for listening to my conversation with Lea Michele, next time you'll hear from the musical legend that is David Byrne, as he shares incredible stories of his early family life and fatherhood

Be sure to follow *We Are Family* on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen so you don't miss an episode. And we'd love your feedback. If you could rate this podcast and leave us a review, we'd really appreciate it. You can also find us online at parents.com/wearefamilypodcast.

We Are Family is presented by me, Julia Dennison, and produced by Sam Walker. Editing is by Vincent Cacchione, and thanks also to the rest of our production team at Pod People, Rachel King, Matt Sav, and Danielle Roth. We'll see you back here next week for more *We Are Family*!