

Oral History with Tran Wills

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Interview with Tran Wills

SESSION 1 (9/11/2020)

KIM

All right, there we go. Shall we get started, then?

WILLS

Yes, go for it.

KIM

Thank you. Today is September 11, 2020. The time is 12:02 Pacific Standard Time. This is Kelsey Kim, and I'm speaking with Tran Wills. Thank you so much, again, for making the time.

WILLS (00:00:24)

Of course. Sorry it took so long. [laughs]

KIM

Oh, no—not a problem at all. I'm so glad that we were able to get you. My first question for you is, when and where were you born?

WILLS

Born and raised in Denver, Colorado, and still here, which is unheard of, I think, sometimes—being born and raised in a state and staying there, even with growth of a company. We are here and Base Coat (Nail Salon) was started in Denver, Colorado, as well. We plan on being headquarters here, forever. So, there will be no change to that.

KIM

Awesome. I know you also have a Base Coat in Downtown LA, right?

WILLS

We used to. We closed that one, unfortunately, due to COVID. It was a slower location and then, obviously, we still can't open outdoors. We can only open outdoors in California, at the moment. We're actually open today, finally—since March. Sunday, we'll be opening Fairfax. We closed the location in downtown LA on June 1. It was a hard decision, but, also, the right decision, because we don't know where the future is for this world we're navigating right now. So, I only have the one in LA, now, on West Hollywood. Then, we also have two more locations inside Nordstrom. Those are not open yet for services, as well, due to the mandate of opening outside.

KIM

Yes, I was actually curious—I don't know if I put that in the outline, but, just how COVID must have been affecting your livelihood. For one thing, you know how Gavin Newsom went out with a statement a few months ago being, like, The first case in California—

WILLS (00:02:20)

It still hasn't been proven. I don't know if you saw—I did fight against that in a few articles, one of them with Refinery29. I think, what is hurtful about that kind of statement—obviously, the nail salon industry is already a marginalized community. It is a beautiful industry, of people of all races, backgrounds, economic backgrounds, and everything. I think, too, people think of the beauty industry that it's like a hobby. No—all of us have chosen this as our livelihoods and our careers. It's not a hobby. People seem to think that, you being a nail artist, you can just polish nails and there was no schooling and you can just do it, like a restaurant job or a retail job. No, you pay money and you have professional training. Then, even after that, you're still apprenticing at some of these places until you're ready to be on the floor. It's a lot of training and professional skills to do nails. The industry has been so stigmatized with this almost subservient attitude. I think it is very systematic in the industry, for sure. I still see it and deal with it. Even within the beauty industry, hair and makeup are always more sought after. But, the funny thing about it is, people get their nails done more than their hair or their makeup done. I know people who get their nails done every week or every two weeks or even once a month. You don't get your hair and makeup done every month. People get their nails done for celebratory reasons.

It's just a very hurtful statement. Financially, obviously, it hurt the industry really bad. Actually, I just posted today about—obviously, you guys know the fires, the air quality, we dealt with extreme heat. That's why we didn't open right away, again. It was COVID, extreme heat, and, now, we're dealing with poor air quality. It was the trifecta of—opening outside is not safe. It's not sustainable. We've been open in Colorado, now, going on five months with no incidences. I don't think people know, when you're in this

training, most of that training is sanitation and disinfection—more than even learning how to polish. You have to follow these already intense protocols—for a reason—when you open a salon. Then, adding COVID—I feel like we're safer than restaurants, grocery stores, retail shops. For us to be the last thing to be open, first of all, and then also not to be open outside, is very unfair. It's infuriating, really. It's frustrating for me because, we've been doing it in Colorado and I can see how it can be done correctly, but no one's called and asked us. A lot of people who work in the industry that is making these rules don't even work in the industry. That's also very frustrating. A lot of them are making rules that they have no business making, because they don't even know how it really is to be a hairstylist or nail artist and working day-to-day. I feel like they're making these rules blindly and not asking the actual people in the industry how to keep people safe.

KIM (00:06:00)

Yes. One thing that, I think, Gavin Newsom did by saying, This is the nail industry—

WILLS

Actually, he said, almost, the Asian community.

KIM

Yes.

WILLS

We were already getting bullshit from COVID, with our president saying things that shouldn't be said. Then, when Gavin Newsom said that, he just put fuel to the fire. I know that there have been nail salons and Asian businesses and people that have been targeted. We know that. During this climate, when we have the Black Lives Matter movement, and now, adding another racism towards Asian people—it's just, again, infuriating.

KIM (00:06:57)

Can I hear a little bit more about this Refinery29 article and what you said in it?

WILLS

Oh, yes. I'll send you the link. We did that, I think, in July—just asking how I felt about this comment Gavin Newsom made. It was irresponsible, with no evidence—still, to this day—which is mind boggling, because you don't say something like that with no actual evidence. I still ask for it. I, actually, still email—like a crazy person—like, where is this evidence? Obviously, I get an automatic reply back. What's unfair about that, too—I know restaurants and other industries are actually having outbreaks, and we don't hear about that. We're hearing about it in grocery stores and meat packing and churches and large gathering—before, even, the nail salons. That was clear evidence. So, I feel like we were the scapegoat and a marginalized community where he could target because not many people fight for it or rise up. Whereas, a church or a grocery store chain or the restaurant industry—with tons of corporate money behind them—can stand up. He chose us because of that. I really believe that.

KIM (00:08:34)

So, the Refinery29 article was asking for your opinion about—?

WILLS

Yes—about how I feel. And, that's what I told them. [laughs] We were absolutely targeted because we are a marginalized community and there aren't huge corporation backing when there is any kind of target that would affect their financial gain. Whereas, the beauty industry—I hate to say it—but we are a small knit community, which is amazing. I love it. It's a billion-dollar industry, but, I feel like, within that industry, it's just, literally, all smaller business. Yes, you have your Revlons and all that, but, there are a lot of Base Coats and a lot of hair salons that are our size, who have multiple locations and have a say in things. But, I think it's still such a small community, where we just don't have that support like the restaurant and grocery stores do.

KIM

Yes, definitely. I see so many campaigns about saving the small restaurants—

WILLS

Right!

KIM

—but nothing about what to do for the beauty and self-care industry—the nail salons, beauty salons.

WILLS

Because we don't have those kinds of organizations or associations as much as restaurants and grocery stores—the more corporate side of things. I advocate for that quite a bit. You can see that on my personal social media. I try my best, but I feel like, at this moment, a lot of people can't help because they're legitimately trying to find a way to survive. I don't blame them, right now. It's hard to be an activist and try to survive. You turn to survival mode, and I, definitely, was in that for a little bit. Then, I was, like, How can I do both? How can I stay alive within this new world, as a business? I also employ a lot of people and that's a lot of weight on your shoulders, obviously. I don't think people understand the behind-the-scenes part—especially as a small business owner.

KIM (00:10:57)

I love the like activist side that you're doing right now with writing about it, emailing Gavin Newsom—which I absolutely love.

WILLS

It's going unheard. That's what's frustrating about it. I tagged the California [Board of] Barber[ing] and Cosmetology and the Mayor of Los Angeles in the post. I try. I feel like, sometimes, it's just going in one ear and out of the other, or they're just deleting my emails. I try to do posts once a week, but I just don't think it's working, obviously. Nothing's really happening.

KIM

Unfortunately, it's just against this well-oiled machine.

WILLS

Yes. I understand he now has fires that are out of control, so we're definitely going to be unheard even more, right now—and I get it. Fires are freaking scary and they have to be taken care of right now. It's like, literally, a new fire every day. So, okay, we need to just—it was hard. I struggled with it, too, when COVID did start. I own a nail salon and I know that it's non-essential, and people call it non-essential. But, after opening in Colorado, I really had to snap out of that because, like I said, I employ a lot of people that

rely on Base Coat, financially. There are not a lot of nail salons like Base Coat. Second, people really need the self-care, right now. People have been home and I think it is affecting them mentally and physically. We've been hearing a lot of clients coming in and saying, Oh, my god, I really needed this. I've been not in a good place or just. It's nice to actually have a conversation with someone again. That human touch—we forgot how special that was. I feel like clients who have been coming in Colorado have really been more somber about it and very appreciative, now, to our nail artists.

This is something I've been fighting for, too. For so long, there has been a servient aspect of nail salons. I think, now, people are understanding—these people are doing an amazing job. First of all, doing mani[cures] and pedi[cures] is not easy. Second, you don't realize how much you need the beauty people in your life. That's the highlight of my week, when I am going to get my hair done. It creates this happiness and joy inside to create that. I think that's where we come in—for self-care. When people are, like, Well, are you really non-essential? I think about it more, and I'm, like, No, we are essential. We really are, for some people.

I struggle with knowing that a lot of people can't afford it. I know, our prices are high, and that already creates a non-inclusive place, where there are people who can't afford our services. I try to figure that out, and then, have that balance of paying a livable wage for our staff. It's so tough. It's, like, we have to charge this so that our staff can really have this as a career and not have to work five or ten jobs, which a lot of nail artists—before, when I started this—had to do. They were working two jobs and now they don't. A lot of them are getting apartments or homes on their own and you don't hear that a lot.

(00:15:00)

So, it's essential. That's a conversation that I need to snap out of it. In the beginning, I was just, like, What am I doing with my life? The world needs other kinds of activists out there being involved in the community. I forget that I do so much within the communities that all our Base Coats are located in, whether that's donating, or being part of these conversations where it comes to equity in our neighborhoods, and having those tough conversations about racism and discrimination and all those things. I've been doing that for so long that I didn't realize that was a community thing that I was being part of when I opened these locations. A lot of people like to see it as me coming in—it's like, No, gentrification is a whole other situation. We're taking back gentrification in the neighborhoods that we're being in, and calling them their original names. That's a small way of activism for the community. Now, I'm seeing all the business around us going back to the original names of these neighborhoods before they got gentrified. Here in Colorado, we're in a location that got changed to RiNo [River North Art District] and I changed it back to Five Points, because that was the history. It was a Black neighborhood, rich in culture and history. Then, we have another location that was more Latino or Hispanic community, and also Italian. We renamed that and now we're seeing businesses around us do so. I know what I'm doing are small things, but it's actually creating a very impactful thing and showing that part of our businesses and how we have

been fighting, too. Also, in a location where they named a whole city after a KKK member, I fought for us to change it back to a different name. Now, we call it a different name and don't call it by that name. Now, people are like, Okay, we see this. So, Base Coat has always been more than just a nail salon.

KIM

Yes, it's part of the community and you've really been working a lot to give back to the community. Also, you're doing all this activism. One thing that really stuck out to me when you were just talking was this gender and racial aspect—thinking about nail salons as non-essential. We tend to think of things that are more feminine as non-essential—

WILLS

Right.

KIM

—when that's, obviously, not the case. You talked about the racial aspect. The servient attitude that they expect from you could also be gendered and racial.

WILLS (00:17:51)

Yes, and that's how the beauty industry has always been treated. That's why the low prices in nail salons. When people are like, I can go get a cheaper mani down the street, I'm, like, Well, think about that for just a minute. Just sit down and think about that—what just came out of your mouth? You went from our salon, which is a thirty-five dollar mani, so you can get one for ten or fifteen. Most salons are at 50% commission or hourly. So, you went in for your ten-dollar mani. The salon is most likely commission, because a lot of nail salons do categorize their employees wrong. So, they probably get \$5—if that—for that manicure they just did. And, the salon, too. You don't think about the fact that it also pays for supplies and rent. So, that ten-dollar mani—let's say it's fifteen, to give people the benefit of the doubt. Take five dollars out. Now, take out rent and supplies and all these things, and you're left with, maybe, a dollar. Then, maybe a surprise happens—roof collapse, flood. Okay—zero money. Then people complain about sanitation and reusing supplies and poor work environments. It erodes quality of life in the salon and for the owner.

That's why a lot of exploitation happens, because they are trying to get so many clients in within an hour, because they're charging ten or fifteen dollars, when they should just charge what the real cost is, if they factor in everything. If every nail salon did that in the

industry, quality of life for employees would improve, more livable wages would happen, exploitation wouldn't happen as much. Nail salons sometimes make employees skip lunches because, again, they're trying to fit so many people in that hour to make up for not charging enough that one hour. The body work of it and the mentality of that needs to go away. I try to break down everything but it becomes—and then the nail salons owners get crap for it because they exploited their employees. It's like, well, they're exploiting to the point where they're like not even thinking, Well, if I just raise the prices, maybe I wouldn't have to have them skip their lunches and reuse supplies or all these things that do cause the eroding of a salon. It happens quite a bit.

KIM (00:20:40)

Do you have a sign up in your salon that explains this? I'm sure you get customers that are so—I can just imagine, people come in and just bug you and say, Why is it this price when I can get this? How do you explain it to people?

WILLS (00:20:55)

We just posted about it today on our Instagram, if you want to read it. It's something I've been posting about for the last seven years. People are finally, like, Oh, my god, I didn't know. It's like, You did know but you chose not to—it's that ignorance that they don't think about. Fifteen dollars for a mani—break it down. No one makes money. Not only is the nail artist not getting paid a livable wage, the salons are trying to survive. They really love to do this. They love to be around people and they love this industry, but then they try to find these loopholes and things to cut. Usually, it is at the cost of the employee—always. I think it starts with the customers, to understand that you need to also be fighting for livable wages, and understand, when you go to a salon, if they raise their price, don't lose your shit over a dollar. Not everyone can get a mani and pedi. If you have money to do it, pay their worth. If it's a special occasion and you saved up for it—everyone that works in the beauty industry loves to take care of their customers and clients and want to make them feel good. It just creates this unhealthy workspace when they're getting treated that way. Already, right before you walk through the door, someone is already complaining about the price. Then, it's the servient attitude, like, you need to scrub my feet now and do my hands. It's just ongoing.

That's what we're trying to stop at Base Coat—like, No, this is what you get. This is our price. It's not negotiable. We'll take your credit card. If you don't show up and hold yourself accountable, we're going to charge you. There are so many things that we can do to make this industry better. It's just little things, and it starts with the clients and their mentality and education about it. I think that's where Base Coat comes in and tries to be this educational brand, too, about why we charge these prices or why we do this and why we use non-toxic products. I'm very methodical and very thoughtful of every decision I

make for Base Coat. I will think about it for days and weeks. I don't make these decisions lightly, either. People are like, You're going to lose a client because of that. Well, that's okay, because you have to understand our side and you're just seeing your side—that you want a cheap manicure and to be treated a certain way. We're not going to do that.

KIM (00:23:38)

One thing that I really like about your perspective is, people are really on board right now with natural, chemical free, but a lot of people think about it in terms of the consumer and not so much for the workers. I could be, like, I want to buy a nail polish that's free of toxicants because I care about my health.

WILLS

Right, and Base Coat looks at it the other way. Guess what—you come into the salon for an hour. You're not sitting in all those fumes all day. But, our staff are. I use this analogy—let's say you're at your office right now and your desk mate—a foot away—starts spray painting. That's an HR (Human Resources) violation, right? Most places are, like, Dude, no, you can't do that. That's toxic and it's going to make people sick. How did it become okay for nail salons? No one stepped in to say, Hey, there are a lot of fumes in here—we need to think about this. No one ever did that. Still, to this day, some states are still trying to figure out ventilation and stuff like that. So, again, we got left out of even just the bare necessities of clean air, clean work environment, safe work environment. Again, with the beauty industry, it's, like, Well, they're just doing nails, who cares about the workers? That's where I was like, No. I saw it in my own family. They would come home with headaches, not feeling well, or tired. We never really thought about—Why are you coming home from headaches every day? People work eight-hour days all the time. We never thought, Oh, maybe it's the environment. Maybe it's the fumes.

Yes, you are getting a very safe product when you come into Base Coat, but clients should know that the reason we created that product was also for our employees. It wasn't just for our clients, like many people think. When I was sitting down, I was, like, How can I make sure? Because, again, they're sitting in the salon for eight hours. Their hands are getting dried from all the chemicals in the products, because a lot of products that are not safe have tons of alcohol and chemicals in them. Right now, there's still no regulation of chemicals that should be banned, that are still being put in products and are being used in nail and hair salons and makeup. They are working on it in California. Whereas, in Europe, they got rid of, what, 600, now? We got rid of, like, five of those same ingredients. So, I always try and communicate to clients, You're sitting here for an hour, they sit here for eight. I'm worried about them, not you. Even though you're safe—one hundred percent, regardless—your exposure is a lot less than the actual nail artists or the front desk or whoever is working in the salon, at the time.

KIM

It's like the same thing as, say, organic food.

WILLS

Right.

KIM

It's, like, You're thinking about what you're putting in your body, but what about the people who are spraying—?

WILLS (00:27:02)

Your skin is an organ! That's the thing—people forget that your skin is an organ. People slather themselves with this stuff and they just don't think about it. It does the same thing—it goes into your body the same way as if you were eating it. Yes, it goes through the blood and gets kind of filtered, but still, you shouldn't be putting that on your body. You should know what you're putting on your body.

KIM

You had just mentioned that your family comes from a nail salon background, as well. Can I hear a little bit more about your family and growing up?

WILLS

Yes, I just grew up with it. Full disclosure, I don't talk to my mom, right now, just because of some racist things that she said. There's just a lot of that still happening—a lot of anti-blackness in the Asian community as you know. So, I'm dealing with that, personally. My mom is still a nail artist and she works in a family-owned salon in Brighton, Colorado. I think she's still on an appointment, right now, because I think the salon has not opened, yet. But, I grew up in it. I've been going to nail salons since—just like most Vietnamese-Americans my age, now, and younger. After the war, that became the Vietnamese immigrant kind of story. The dream was to work at nail salons. If you or your parents didn't work at one, you knew someone that did. It just was part of our life. I've been going to nail salons since I was young. I've tried to find photos of me in them. Aunts and uncles still own nail salons here in Colorado, one in Colorado Springs and one in Aurora. There is this one story I remember, when I was going into one. I remember my

mom going, Hey, go outside, it's really smelly in here. They were doing acrylics in there. I just didn't think about it. But, even then, they knew that this stuff wasn't that good. The smell wasn't good. We were young, so she was just, like, Go outside and play, because it's pretty strong in here.

Our parents sacrificed a lot to do that job. Still, Vietnamese-Americans and immigrants sacrifice a lot to do these jobs that they know are harmful. But, they're trying to give a better life to their kids. Now, unfortunately, a lot of them are sick from working so much and not really connecting the dots of these products that were making them sick. Even just headaches—you shouldn't be having headaches every day. She would never have a headache when she wasn't working, so, that, right there, was proof. If she had a day off, she wouldn't have a headache. I don't have to be a scientist to know that that was probably why—it's because she wasn't in a salon filled with chemicals and fumes.

KIM (00:30:05)

One thing that we've been seeing with a lot of people, is that they didn't necessarily get diagnosed with having sensitivities. They would just think that it's a thing at work, like, the ventilation is not good, and every time I go there, I feel so fatigued, I have migraines—and then, when I'm not there, I feel great.

WILLS

Yes. You don't have to be a scientist to figure that out. People think, It's my job—even if it is making me sick, I have no choice. That shouldn't be. That's why I created Base Coat and those products and have these strict rules and vet everything that comes into our salon—like, what is in here? We can't be having random cleaning supplies in our salon—what is in it? I just want people to know that that's, literally, our whole day's process. Now, too, thinking about where we buy things from. Is this company known for racist discrimination? Outside of just the chemicals—I think we got that down—now, we're dealing with these companies coming out as being horrible companies. It's a lot of work, and it's worth it. We try to be an ethical company, in terms of what you see out in the salon and, also, behind the scenes.

Again, I think nail salon workers ignore it because they chose this as a career and they want to keep it. They make good money, and they're happy and they're around the community. When they're working in these nail salons, usually they're mom-and-pop shops or their own family, and their cousin and their aunt and their best friend works in there. It creates this safe space for them, too. People ask why my mom doesn't work for me. Because, she wants to be around her community and speak her language and just have that, and people forget about that. Base Coat is not for everyone—even not for my mom, because she needs her community. These mom-and-pop shops—I hate when people use chop shops and terms like that, which is so derogatory. I'm like, please don't

call them that, because they just want that one shop. They're happy, they support their entire family. Tearing down mom-and-pop shops—I'll stop you in a heartbeat. That's something I do want to talk about more, moving forward. We need those in our communities, because they support that community—especially if it's Asian American or immigrant or Korean or whatever. Those are supporting their communities. I try to be very clear about that.

KIM (00:32:56)

We're on this topic of how you got started with Base Coat. I know that, from what I've read from other interviews that you had done, it started with this experience where you had gone to the salon while you were pregnant—

WILLS (00:33:15)

Yes. My son is ten, now, but it took about two years for me to actually get Base Coat going. It was two years of researching products and, then, finding a company that can even make what we need. It's unheard of to find nail polishes that didn't have ingredients that did cause hormone disruption and contain formaldehyde and all these things that are in nail polish. Let alone, finding spa products that these salons are using. They buy from big old warehouses and they don't have ingredients on them. So, we're lathering that pink lotion on you and you're, like, Okay, I hope this is good. You don't think about it. Then, I'd be, like, Well, what's in there? I went to the nail salon and asked, What is in this pink lotion? No one has ever asked them that. I was just, like, Yes, that's a problem. A lot of nail salons are doing the toxic-free polishes, now, but they're not thinking about the lotions and the scrubs and the oils that they're putting on people. I knew, when we opened Base Coat, that I wanted the full thing. That's why it took about two years.

What happened was, when I was eight—almost nine—months pregnant with my son, I wanted to get a last pedicure. It was summer and I wanted some relaxation and I probably wasn't ever going to be touching my feet again, after having a baby—or able to have time to go and get a pedicure. I went in, I sat down, and I was already feeling fatigue. I just thought I was being pregnant—you just don't feel good at the end there. Most women don't, but I know I just did not have a good pregnancy, in general. I was just, like, Okay, that's normal, so I brushed it off. I wanted this pedicure. Again, you're going to ignore some things just because you want something. Then, I thought I was having a runny nose. I asked for a tissue, and the lady was, like, You're bleeding. It wasn't a lot but it was enough to be concerned. And, when you're pregnant, already, your brain is like, Holy shit, I have to get out of here, I'm bleeding. I called my doctor right away and they told me it's fine. I was already sensitive to smell—many things were already making me sick. So, it could have been a lot of things—pregnancy sensitivity.

That triggered me to think, Okay, why isn't there a salon that doesn't have acrylic smell or that pungent chemical smell when you walk in? Why isn't there ventilation in here? I went down that spiral. I went home, and started Googling and researching and finding people and stories. Not many non-toxic nail salons existed at that time. That was 2010; that's my son's birthdate. It took me about two years—obviously, just because of life and baby and work. But, then I was like, I need to like keep pushing for this. Finally, a space came up in Colorado and I was like, Let's try it. Ever since then, it's—we've had our hardships, for sure. I had a point where I wanted to sell Base Coat and no one wanted it. Maybe that was for a reason. People would be, like, I want to buy, and I would meet with actual people to buy the business, and they all said, No. I think all that happens for a reason. I just kept pushing at it and growing it. I have an amazing business partner that also helped grow it and was helping financially and physically and all those things. It's crazy, now, that we're in Whole Foods and Nordstrom. I think, all that had to happen for us to get to this day.

KIM (00:37:38)

That's an incredible story. What were you—?

WILLS

It's also very surreal, still. I just dropped off our first Whole Foods order, yesterday—hand dropped it off. I was like, This is nuts. Just F-Y-I too, what's cool about this—Whole Foods has never had a nail polish like ours. No nail polish company has passed their vigorous testing. The only nail polish they have, right now, is a water-based one, but it doesn't last as long when it's a water base. That's all they've ever carried. Now, they have Base Coat. We passed all their testing to be in our [unclear]. I already knew our products were safe, because I wouldn't use anything that I didn't feel was right. That solidified that, because I could never afford the actual testing. I just had to go by the word by our manufacturer. And, it's an amazing, woman-owned manufacturer. They're like, Tran, we told you. When Whole Foods said, This has never happened before—that was a win for us this last couple weeks, for sure. We get people who try to question us, still, like, Is it really non-toxic? I'm like, Yes, literally, here are the ingredients. I have nothing to hide. This is, literally, what's in there. So, it's cool for us to be in Whole Foods. We're only in one store right now, in Denver, but I have a feeling that we will probably be in more because we did pass all their testing. For food, for anything—they go through a few months of testing before they approve this. And, they said that that's never happened before. I think they tried to get other nail salon brands that were non-toxic, and I don't think they passed.

KIM

What's incredible about that, to me, is that you're not only making your own salon—which is difficult, on its own—but then, you also have to create your own products, too.

WILLS (00:39:51)

Right, I think about it all the time. [laughs] Now, we're getting other nail salons carrying our brand, which is cool. Someone said, Well, they're kind of copying us—but it's not really copying. They're changing their views. They've had these nail salons forever and never thought about whether this isn't good. Now, we can trust a brand like Base Coat, because if they're using it, and they're in Whole Foods and Nordstrom—and all these things they are doing is safe enough for these companies. Companies aren't just going to be, like, Yes, let's buy your word that it's safe. No, they're going to test it, because they don't want that backlash from customers. That would be a huge backlash. It's cool to see other nail salons changing their views about—it was working okay enough, but maybe I can change it to where it is a sustainable company and also safe for my employees and creating livable wages—so that it can be a forever thing for them. It's cool that more nail salons reach out to us, like, We want to carry your products and we know that this is a brand that we can trust.

That's weird to me. People ask, Aren't you surprised you are in Nordstrom? I'm not surprised. I worked really hard to get here. I didn't have handouts and I work day and night. I get one day off a week, if that. Vacations, for me, aren't vacations, unless I go somewhere that has zero internet. So, it didn't just happen overnight. There were a lot of ups and downs—like a roller coaster, literally, every day, and especially during a pandemic.

KIM

What were you doing before Base Coat?

WILLS

I worked at a company called eBags, which, actually, closed down like two weeks ago, which makes me sad. Before that, I was owning small businesses. I had an art gallery. I had a cupcake and cereal bar, at one time. My first ever shop was called The Fabric Lab. Again, community has always been in my blood. All we carried was all-local clothing, art, jewelry. We were the only store in Colorado that, specifically, did local. We were the only one that was giving that to the community. I was making clothes, at a time, and I was going to go sell them at a store that doesn't exist anymore. I got mushed in with other

brands. I feel like locally handmade stuff is so special and it shouldn't be mixed with fast fashion—and that's what was happening. I thought, Well, why isn't there a store that just caters to local people that make beautiful things? I was so impressed, when I opened up that first store, how many amazing creators we had in our community. I'm still, to this day, friends with some of these people that were artists and jewelry makers. Really cool stuff.

So, that's where my first start was. That was a store I had with my husband. He was making stuff, too. He actually does graphic design, so we would go pick out vintage clothes. It's always about sustainability, anyway. We would go to the thrift store, buy stuff, and he would silkscreen stuff on it. We were selling it. The first place we had a booth was at the Vans Warped Tour. It sold out and we were, like, Okay, we have something going on here. We've always tried to be very bootstrap, I guess—let's use stuff that's already exists, instead of making new. That was kind of a mix of our stores, the first store. After that, I opened a cupcake shop. Then, after that, I had a traveling trailer selling locally-made stuff. We would travel to different flea markets. I took a break and worked at eBags, and that's where I got my digital marketing background. I did their social media when it was just becoming a thing. I did that for almost two years. What was cool about that, I went to a lot of buying trips and learned that industry, which I have used a lot for Base Coat. I realize, Oh, crap, I learned that from eBags. It's pretty cool. I didn't really know how to read spreadsheets until I worked at eBags—simple things like that, that I didn't have any education about. Now, I'm like, Oh, okay, that did take me to this, and learning. Because I went on these buying trips with buyers and watched how they did things and they taught me things, now that I am dealing with buyers who buy our stuff, I have that background, too. A lot of experience. I closed a lot of those shops, and I think a lot of people would see it as a failure. But, for me, I learned something that brought me to this place, today, for Base Coat. Everything I did—from the store to the gallery to the cupcake shop—I, now, have incorporated it all into Base Coat. I don't see it as a failure, at all. I see there are all these learning experience that was meant for today.

KIM

Was Base Coat, then, your first foray into the nail salon industry, besides what you grew up with?

WILLS (00:45:25)

Yes. I wrote an open letter, because of the stigma as one of the many Vietnamese-Americans. I'll send you the link, Kelsey. My parents were, like, I don't want you in the nail industry. Aunts and uncles would say, No, it's for me—we're working hard for you to go and do something better. I would always hear that and I never really made sense of it. Subconsciously, I thought, Okay, I guess I need to go do something else and not be in the

nail industry because my parents and family members have worked so hard. My cousins would say, I don't want you doing this—I'm doing this so that I can provide you a different life. So, I strayed away from it. And, the stigma that all Vietnamese people do nails. It's kind of crazy that it's come full circle. I think it was always meant for me to do, in a way—all those experiences growing up in it, I think, is what has made Base Coat so special. I don't think anyone can really say the same story like mine for Base Coat and how Base Coat started, for sure. But, I tried to run away from it, I did—not on purpose. I think, because we were told—We want something better for you. Be a doctor or a lawyer or anything else but nail salon work because, again, that stigma where people think that's a below job. I was, like, No, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to create that world for Base Coat. I knew that from the beginning—No, this is a career people choose and they love to be around people and they love what they do. We should be proud of it and stop that stigma, right away.

KIM (00:47:09)

One thing that I remember reading in your other interview is that, in order to change, you had to convince not only customers, but workers, too. This wasn't an easy thing for anyone to accept.

WILLS

Right.

KIM

How were you able to do that?

WILLS

I don't know. I think, too, that a lot of nail salons have always been kind of, like, Put your head down and work-type mentality—and not talk to the clients. This almost created that servient world. Whereas, with Base Coat, it's like, No, this is a human interaction. You're touching people all day. You're talking to people all day. It becomes a lot of emotional work, too. People should get to know you, like any job. They should know how many kids you have and what you like to do when you're not working. I do! I guess, I would ask. I think I'm a nosy person, but, I think, when you're that close to someone—it's such an intimate, hands-on physical service. How can you not, right? How can you not treat people that way like? I see a lot nail salons that still exist where they don't talk to the clients. It's like, These are people. These are people that should be treated as professionals, first of all. It's something I just always did, I guess. I never really thought

about that question. I just feel like, these are people and I embrace their personalities and their career path. Some of these nail artists have been doing it for twenty years and they should speak up and tell me if I'm doing something wrong, even—treating them like people.

KIM (00:49:19)

I remember reading that you also help other people who have their own nail salons, if they don't really understand the wording of certain policies—because, obviously, that jargon is not easy to understand, for anyone.

WILLS (00:49:36)

It still isn't. Obviously, English was not my first language, which is crazy. It was Vietnamese. I didn't speak any English until I went to school. So, I'm helping the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative. Right before COVID, I was in San Francisco at a roundtable, meeting different nail salon owners of different ages. A lot of them had owned nail salons for, like, thirty-something years. Here's this girl that comes in and is, like, This is how I do it. I was just trying to be really respectful. Look, Base Coat is a whole other world. They just want their one salon and they don't want to be like Base Coat. I had to be really mindful of that. This is for me. I chose to do this. This is how I was doing it. But, for you, you can take this. I've given them my employee handbooks, all the things that we've done. It's like, No, I want you to do it the right way. I want you to stay around forever, but there are things that you are not doing right.

A lot of people are just hard-working, especially for Vietnamese immigrants. In Vietnam, you eat when you can. We don't have designated lunch hours. They don't understand that, here in America, your workers need an hour lunch. This is how I did it—just close for an hour. At all of our salons, we close from one to two [o'clock] for lunch. That avoids any exploitation of that situation or anyone not getting their break. It's free to do—it's just getting the salon owners to rethink that they don't need that hour, right now. I've been trying to help other nail salons with little things like that. It doesn't take a lot of work to do. Even one of the lawyers was like, literally, that's a free thing to do, guys. She figured it out—just close for an hour, so you don't get any penalties or that chance of someone saying, Oh, they didn't give me lunches. That's it. We close for an hour. What they did during our hour, we don't know, but they got their hour lunch, so that leaves no room for error, when it comes to that. And, it's a free thing to do. Again, it's getting nail salons that are hard workers and they are trying to make a lot of money—as much as they can—because the prices are so low.

It's just the whole system that I'm trying to figure out within Base Coat, right now. Hopefully, other people adopt that. That's why I'm still trying to work with the Collaborative on helping these nail salon owners that don't speak English. It's cool, when I'm in there—I don't speak a lot of Vietnamese, it's more conversational. They have a translator there. It's always inclusive. I'll speak and then the translator will go, so that they understand that everything we're doing is just trying to help them and not penalize them or get them in trouble. I feel like a lot of nail salon owners are doing things wrong, and they're scared to ask for help, because they know they are and they don't want to get in trouble for it. What's cool about the Collaborative, they keep people safe.

KIM

I really appreciate your business model that really prioritizes the workers. In these cases, a lot of people might just prioritize the customer so they don't get mad—like, I want to get my nails done at 1:30 and you guys are closed.

WILLS (00:53:11)

Especially, there are a lot of nail salons getting a lot of crap right now because they did prioritize their customers, and most of them are wealthy, white women. That's been a problem. We still deal with that, actually, at a few locations where the neighborhoods have been gentrified so much, that's all we get is wealthy, privileged white women. That's a battle and a struggle I still have, to this day. They come into Base Coat and they see this setting as a lot different than the typical mom-and-pop shop nail salon. Mentality-wise, they're like, Oh, I should be treated a certain way, now. I am still trying to figure that out. We don't take any kind of crap, anyway. But, we've been catering to white women who don't treat a lot of people very well. How do I figure out how to stop that? We're very clear on our stance of that we are not going to be treated a certain way, and we're not going to be tolerating this behavior. I feel like a lot of nail salons are scared to do that, because wealthy white women are what pays the bills for our industry, sadly enough. It's not all of them, obviously—we get treated very well by most. But, we have that 1% that come in and expect this kind of service to, literally, wait on them hand and feet. Those are the ones where it's like, We're not going to do that.

Thankfully, at Base Coat, we do have a very diverse customer base and client base. Also, our employees are very diverse, as well. They are understanding. But, the moment a client asks if someone speaks English—which is another form of racism people forget about—we're just like, Okay, we're not going to do that today. It doesn't matter if they speak English or not. Asking that question right there already showed us that you don't respect the people here. We still get those kinds of calls, to this day, which really drives me nuts. I'm still trying to figure things out. People are probably, like, Well, your clients are mostly white, wealthy women. I'm like, Well, no. Yes, there's a percent, but we do see

a lot of diversity here. But, there are salons that only target and cater to those clients. We are not targeting them. They just choose to come to us. But, they also know we have this almost social contract—like, this is what we expect from you, before you come.

KIM

I think what you're doing is so admirable. You really care about the workers' rights and how workers are treated and respected.

WILLS (00:56:10)

Well, if I don't have them, I don't have a business. I don't think people remember that. They are the home of the business that makes it work. If I'm not treated well, I'm not going to work hard for you. I think about that because I've had many shitty jobs—all of us. We've done some jobs where, we're like, Oh, my god, I can't believe I let that person treat me like that. I would never treat anyone like that. If we create the space where our workers—even if their life outside of here is not the greatest—they know, when they come to Base Coat, it's their safe space where they can feel comfortable to talk about things and feel appreciated and loved and supported. We try to really push that. I'm not saying, it's always been perfect. We have our problems, too, just like any small business.

That's one thing we've always been really good about having a stance on—especially during a pandemic. Our employees were, like, Oh, my god, I'm so happy that you—first of all—pay us through W-2s and not 1099s, because they were all able to get unemployment. A lot of nail salon workers were unable to, or they're still waiting on payments from unemployment. Sometimes, doing things the right way does, eventually, work itself out. A second thing was—I think a lot of nail or hair salons have been, like, You need to get back to work. We heard that, through tech and all these businesses doing that. It's like, No, if you're sick, I don't have employees, and you're a great employee. It's, financially, more expensive to retrain and do all these things than to just say, Okay, we're going to close until we feel like it's safe. I put myself in their shoes. I also have my kids that work for us, too. I think about their kids, and they're going to go home and make their kids sick. If they're sick, they're exposing their whole family. Now, with freaking poor air quality, I don't want anyone to go home feeling sick. Then, they're not 100% at home. I think about past work, I guess. I do put myself in their place. I try my hardest to be, like, Okay, what would they do or how would they feel? How would I feel if my employer said this to me?

KIM (00:58:40)

I have a few overview questions, because we kind of jumped around. I like doing that because it's more organic, that way. I feel like we covered a lot of things that I was going

to ask. Obviously, one thing that we're curious about—given that we're interested in people who have chemical sensitivities—how has illness or sensitivity affected your life the most, even if you're not chemically sensitive, yourself?

WILLS (00:59:10)

To me, personally, it has. Since I switched to all non-toxic products, even makeup—I mean, I still get my hair dyed, don't get me wrong. I still do things that are questionable that I can't really get away from because there aren't really that many non-toxic hair brands and things like that. Now, if I use something that I didn't check right or vet, I'll break out in hives. Or, if there's a smell, like, if someone wears a lot of perfume—I quit wearing strong perfume. I used to douse myself in it. I quit that, because perfume has so many chemicals in it and you're breathing it in. The moment a strong smell comes, I legitimately have a migraine from it for the rest of the day. That has been the same for a lot of our employees. They have been using our products for so long, the moment they go use something new, they have an outbreak. They're like, I used something new, I quit using Base Coat stuff.

It's definitely affected me, where I can't just go buy something anymore and be, like, I want to splurge on some Chanel perfume. I can't use that stuff, anymore. Now, I have to look for like a non-toxic brand that is low in VOC smells and all that—all those things you that never really thought about when you were younger, when you're just dousing yourself in Bath & Body Works spray and all that stuff, back then. Anytime there is a strong smell, I can't be in the room. The only reason I haven't finished my nail state license is because I have to do acrylics. I know I would get sick immediately if I had to do that in my state boards. That's one of the main reasons why I haven't finished my state boards for my nail license. I can't—it legitimately makes me sick. That has happened to most of our employees, as well. Now, they're being more mindful of it, too, which is really cool to see. They're like, Oh, I can't buy that or use that anymore, because I might get an outbreak or some kind of sensitivity or get nauseous or fatigued from it. It's cool to watch that evolution from nail workers and front desk who have never really thought about that, before.

KIM (01:01:31)

One thing that I have found, interviewing people who have chemical sensitivities, is that some people actually view it as a gift, in some ways. [laughter] They're like, if I never had this, I wouldn't have changed all my products and I wouldn't have gone chemical-free, toxicant-free.

WILLS

It almost makes you curious to even research it more, to educate yourself more about it. Like, Well, why is this making me sick? Or, why is this causing me to have a rash? You dive in there—like, Oh, my god, this is why. A lot of people are doing allergy tests. It's the same thing we should be doing with products we put on our body. If you're having allergies to wheat and all those things, you're probably going to have that with some of those chemicals that are in your shampoo and body soap and toothpaste. We don't think about all that.

KIM (01:02:24)

Exactly. With that said, how do you think society would view its relationship with chemicals and chemical sensitivities in ten years. How do you think that would have changed, if it does?

WILLS (01:02:36)

How would it change? Or, how is it going to change?

KIM (01:02:40)

How do you think it would change?

WILLS (01:02:43)

I think it's going to be just like how the food industry was. It's going to take a lot of time. Eventually, it will be more affordable. Just like organic food—remember how expensive it was? Now, you see it more and more. I feel like that's what's going to happen with beauty products. Then, that will be the new normal. I hope these giant corporations catch on and realize, We can't make these products—just like the food industries are, like, Oh, no one wants freaking chemicals in their food. I think that's what's going to happen. It's slowly happening, now. It's not where I would like it. I hoped it would be right now, but, I think, in the next ten years, it will be obsolete, where those kind of products that have all those chemicals don't exist anymore.

People are demanding it and we evolve. Again, it comes with clients and customers demanding for change to happen—just like anything. I see that happening, over time, just like with food. I think the FDA [U.S. Food and Drug Administration] will start stepping in more and all those things will start happening more, just like in Europe. That's why I always tell people, if they're really worried about what is in their products, buy products from Europe. They're on it, out there, and we are so behind. These chemical companies make trillions of dollars so, obviously, it's in the best interest for us to have products with

tons of chemicals in them. That's why I always tell people, Look at a European company and their brands. You're more likely safe to buy stuff from there than an American brand, unfortunately.

KIM (01:04:28)

That's all the questions I have. Is there anything you'd like to add that we didn't get to, today?

WILLS (01:04:32)

I don't think so.

KIM

We covered a lot of ground. [Laughter]

WILLS

Sorry if I rambled for a little bit.

KIM (01:04:43)

I learned so much and I really enjoyed having this conversation with you.

WILLS (01:04:48)

Anytime. If you want to do another one, let me know. I'm sure there's new—every day has been, like, Oh cool, I don't know how to deal with this situation. [Laughs] So, we're taking it day by day. The business is still going strong—the best it can be. Even as a non-essential business, we're trying to survive and thrive in this world and still create products that are safe and beautiful, at the same time.

KIM (01:05:20)

If you don't have any more questions, I'll just turn the recorder off and I'll talk about like the next steps.

WILLS (01:05:24)

Okay, awesome.

KIM (01:05:26)

Let's see. How do I—?