

The West Wing Weekly  
1.10, continued: "In Excelsis Deo" (Memorial Day Special)  
Guest: Melissa Fitzgerald

[Intro Music]

JOSH: Hello, and welcome to a very special episode of The West Wing Weekly. I've always wanted to be a part of a very special episode. On this Memorial Day, when we honor those who have died while serving our country's armed forces, we welcome to our show Melissa Fitzgerald, whom you all know for her work as Carol for seven seasons on *The West Wing*, but we're also going to talk to her about her career in public service. Melissa Fitzgerald, welcome to the show!

HRISHI: Thanks so much for joining us!

MELISSA: Oh, thank you for having me! I am so enjoying listening to the podcast.

JOSH: So, you've actually been re-watching the show and listening to the podcast?

MELISSA: I have been! I haven't watched every episode fully because I have this, you know, grown-up job now so spending a lot of time doing that, so I haven't had the time to watch all of them but I have watched several of them and I've listened to every podcast.

HRISHI: That is so awesome.

JOSH: I've known you for a long time. We're old friends. But can you tell us how you wound up on the show?

MELISSA: Well, my then-boyfriend now ex-husband, who you know quite well, Josh, Noah Emmerich. He's a wonderful actor and great person. It was the year before *West Wing* went on the air when *Sports Night* was going to be on the air and he had, I guess his agent had given both the scripts for *Sports Night* and *The West Wing*, and he had asked me what I thought of them and gave them to me and I read them. And I came back to him with what I stand by now: *Sports Night* is going to be the best show on TV and *The West Wing* is going to be the best show ever.

JOSH: Uh huh.

MELISSA: I think I was right.

HRISHI: You can tell just by those scripts?

MELISSA: I could! In my opinion, absolutely. I hadn't read anything that even came close to that and in addition to that, I felt that it was an important moment for us as a nation to have a show like that, that really celebrated public service. I think that's beautiful and valuable. And I wanted to be a part of it, you know, and Josh knows that I haven't — hadn't — always been as ambitious in my career but I really wanted to be a part of *The West Wing*. And I told my agent when this casts, I want to be part of the show and I don't care what I do.

JOSH: And let me ask you this: were you reading for Carol or another role? How'd that

play out?

MELISSA: There was no Carol when I started the series. I was Staffer #...I think I was Staffer #2. I knew that I wasn't going in for the two parts they asked me to prepare which were...so long ago...Donna and Mallory...and I knew I wasn't up for either of those and I was up for a very small part, but they wanted me to prepare for both of those because those would be the audition pieces. And I went in and the second time, when I got called back, I wore the same outfit that I'd worn to the first audition...

HRISHI: As Dulé told us you must do...

MELISSA: Exactly. And my friend was over and as I came, you know, downstairs to leave, I walked in front of a sort of, floor-to-ceiling window and the light was shining through it and she said, "Ooh! I can see through your skirt!" And I was like, "wow, it's a little too late for me to run up and change, so...they're not going to have a floor-to-ceiling window in the room where I'm auditioning and going to stand in front of it! And she said, "No, you're right." So, I went to the audition and I went to the room, and sure enough: floor-to-ceiling window in the corner! But I sat down in the chair, said hello, talked for a second and there were quite a few people in the room. And I was reading opposite Aaron and so I sat down in front of him and they said, "Could you go stand over by the window?"

JOSH: Of course.

MELISSA: And usually I'm pretty compliant and would go do that immediately but I sat in my chair and said, "you know, I'm really comfortable right here" and they said, "ooh, we'd really prefer you to go stand" and I held on and held firm and said, "you know, I really prefer to do it seated." So I'm a little bit shocked that they actually didn't think I was some weirdo and they still hired me. I'm very grateful.

JOSH: And you and AJ have great chemistry onscreen and off. Was that immediate?

MELISSA: It was actually immediate. It's funny, because I have not watched the show since it was on the air but Allison Janney and I actually did watch the pilot together two months ago now...and neither of us had seen it in many, many years and it was very sweet to watch it and I was so happy I got to watch it with her. And I think my line was something, "if you all would walk this way" or something...

JOSH: That's a very cute visual. You and Allison re-watching the pilot. That's very sweet.

MELISSA: Yeah, well, she's certainly been an incredibly friend, as you know everyone on the show has been. And I think, Josh, you've talked about this before on the podcast...pretty remarkable group and I think it was a real family and we were together for seven years, we all went through a lot together. Children were born, people got married, people got divorced, people passed. I mean, it was a...we went through a lot together and I really give a lot of credit to Martin and to John Spencer for, kind of, being the parents of the show and strengthening that family.

HRISHI: One thing that Janel Maloney told us...you're actually the godmother to her son?

MELISSA: I am! I am the godmother to her beautiful older son Julian and I feel so lucky. And we were joking about it because we were talking about how we were like a family and when she asked me to be Julian's godmother, you know, after crying for a little bit about it, I was so touched. You know, she said, "Now we're really family; we codified it!" We're stuck for life with each other and I couldn't be happier about that and I really feel like that, that I'm part of her family, I feel she's part of my family, I feel that way about so many of the people...about you, Josh, and Allison, and you know, last year I had a big birthday — I'm not going to say which one it was, but Josh knows — and, you know, Allison and Janel came to Philadelphia to my parents' house and surprised me. It was just very touching.

HRISHI: Let's fast forward a little bit. How did you make the leap from being on *The West Wing* to having this life in public service? Did you guys talk about that stuff on set?

MELISSA: Oh, so much! I've always been involved in public service. Since I was a little girl, my parents were both involved in public service and in our community. My dad was an assistant district attorney my entire childhood, and he's been a judge for most of my adult years. And Martin is really is so involved in social justice issues and really comes from the most incredible place and seeing, he's tireless in his advocacy on behalf of other people and the things that he believes in and cares about. And he is truly, just a real role model of how you can have a life in art and in social justice.

He and I actually have worked together quite a bit on a lot of social justice issues and he's one of the reasons that I'm doing what I'm doing right now. He got me involved in National Association of Drug Court Professionals and in 2011 he asked me to come speak at their national conference here in DC. He knew that my dad was a treatment court proponent and he also knew that I had recently lost a friend to addiction and, I was certainly honored to join Martin at that conference in 2011.

And they had just recently launched Justice For Vets 'cause veterans treatment courts are based on drug courts, but they've only been around for as long as since before the election in 2008 so they're pretty new. And I got involved as a supporter of Justice For Vets back in 2011 but it wasn't until 2013 — or the end of 2013 — that I came on board to work for the organization.

HRISHI: So can you tell us: what is a Veteran's Treatment Court?

MELISSA: They ensure that when a veteran struggles with a transition home, gets in trouble with the law because of a mental health disorder, substance use disorder, and/or trauma, that they receive the structure, treatment, and mentoring that they need to get their lives back on track. It is part of the court system but they're unlike any other courtroom that I've ever seen; they're life-saving courtrooms and, you know, they're staffed by criminal justice professionals. It's like, you know, a judge, prosecutor, defense attorney, probation...but there's also a mental health care provider, a representative from the Veterans Administration, a volunteer veteran mentor among others, and they are specially trained — and we do a lot of the training of the court teams — they're specially trained to work together — it's non-adversarial — so they're there to work together to assess and treat the veterans who appear before them. So, they're incredibly rigorous programs.

They can often take 18-24 months to complete and the first phase, if you participate in a

veterans treatment court program, you appear weekly in front of the judge and the team and the judge will order PTS treatment, or treatment for addiction, and it's strict accountability. And there are sanctions and rewards and they're just incredibly effective programs. It's an alternative to incarceration.

So, I'll just give you an example of a person: he did three tours in Iraq, he returned home, was prescribed Opioid painkillers and got addicted to those and couldn't get those anymore and switched to heroin in order to support his habit, like after getting kicked out of his home, after losing his girlfriend, losing his job, he ended up forging a check. He got arrested for forging the check, and there happened to be a veteran's treatment court in his jurisdiction. If there's not a treatment court available in your jurisdiction, you're kind of out of luck and he qualified for it because he was dealing with a substance use disorder and PTSD. So he had a mental health issue as well. So he qualified for it, he agreed to participate in it and he told me when he first appeared in front of the judge, he said it was really the first time that a judge asked me my name, treated me with respect, thanked me for my service...and said that she believed in me and that I could do this. And he said, "you know, I was thinking I just wanted to get through the program, then I could use again" and he said, after a couple of months of being in this program he said, "Something shifted in me and I got the gift of sobriety and I got the gift of having my life back."

And he's doing incredibly well now, as are so many of the veterans that go through these programs. They are incredibly successful programs, and they're based, as I mentioned, on the Drug Court model, which is the most studied, the most successful criminal justice model in the history of our country. And I am so excited to see that model being applied to veterans as well, and I look forward to participating in their expansion even further because in 2008, there were zero Veterans Treatment Courts. The first one was launched then. There are now over 260 Veterans Treatment Courts across the country and today, over 13,000 veterans are receiving life-saving treatment in Veterans Treatment Courts across the country.

JOSH: Do you have a vision for how many of these Veterans Treatment Courts could, or should be, operating?

MELISSA: I mean, there are over 3,000 jurisdictions in the country, and there are about 264 Veterans Treatment Courts. By our estimate, about 2,000 should put a Veterans Treatment Court within reach of every veteran in the US.

JOSH: So there's a long way to go...

MELISSA: So there's a lot of work to be done, but a lot of work has already been done, which is exciting and you know, I said there was over 260 Veterans Treatment Courts...there are hundreds more in different stages of planning and implementation and that's exciting to me. You know, I mentioned that my father's a big treatment court proponent and he's one of the people who launched one of the mental health courts in Philadelphia years ago. And when I asked him about treatment courts, he looked at me and said, "Anyone who knows anything about these courts is for them. And they're for them because they work."

HRISHI: It's not divided on partisan lines, or anything like that?

MELISSA: Absolutely not. No. Veterans Treatment Courts work and treatment courts in general work. What's exciting to see is that they work really no matter what your concern is; whether your concern is reducing crime, you have to support Veterans Treatment Courts because they reduce crime. If you are interested in saving the taxpayer a tremendous amount of money, get out a supported Veterans Treatment Court because they save the taxpayer a tremendous amount of money. If you care about restoring our families and lowering prison population and lowering recidivism rates, you gotta be for Veterans Treatment Courts 'cause they do all that.

And if you are concerned about honoring our veterans and their service, that's one way to express your gratitude; it's to support Veterans Treatment Courts. You know, this beautiful *West Wing* episode that sort of got us talking about this in the first place, it's about: we are a grateful nation. And I believe in that episode, Toby wants to express his gratitude and express his care and he does that by helping provide a burial for a veteran with full military honors in our nation's most hallowed ground. And I found that very touching and beautiful, he wanted to take an action and express his gratitude in his feet. And that's something I believe in too, that gratitude and honoring must be expressed through actions and not just words. You know one of the things about this episode, which I think is beautiful — even though I'm not in it — I love it. It's one of my favorite episodes. You know, I think it really shows how much we as Americans and whether we are the President or the communications director or whoever, we all care about our veterans and have tremendous amount of gratitude and many of us just don't know what we can do to support, and I just think it's beautiful that Toby really is changed by his experience of getting to know someone even after death. And then, you know, something else that I was thinking about...about Mrs. Landingham. I love that scene.

JOSH: Talking about her boys?

MELISSA: Yes! I just found that, the first time that I watched it and again when I watched it yesterday, so touching and heartbreaking and also...not inconsistent with my experience with many of the family members of our men and women who have served and most of the people she worked with probably had no idea that she had two sons, that she lost and...she didn't really talk about their service and it was part of her and part of her life that she carried with her, and I just think that's important for us to remember and to reach out to each other in our communities and to our neighbors and how we can support each other because you never know what somebody's going through.

When I first started at Justice For Vets, obviously I had a huge learning curve, and you guys made a joke about people in public service, especially those in the West Wing having no private life because they work all the time, and that certainly has been true for me! I'd just come here, I mean, I was often at my office until like, 10 or 11 at night pretty much consistently and a lot of times that's when my phone would ring. And it would be calls from family members of veterans, for whom it was too late for us to help...a mother of a, you know, her daughter married her high school sweetheart and he had gone off to Iraq and had come back with post-traumatic stress and he ended up accidentally killing someone because of his PTSD and he's in jail.

JOSH: Oh, geez.

MELISSA: And you know, he's not going to qualify for a Veterans Treatment Court. That's just, you know, you can't qualify for it if there's been death or serious bodily harm

to another person. You know, public safety is still the number one, most important thing. But I remember just listening to her because there was nothing I could do, I told her there was nothing I could do, but I think she just wanted someone to talk to; I think it's important for me to take those calls that are difficult and as painful as they are, this is why we're doing what we're doing and I have to remember there are real people that benefiting from what we're doing and our organizational goal is to put a Veterans Treatment Court within reach of every veteran in need. And I remember thinking, just my personal little goal, is to get fewer of these phone calls and not because I'm not taking them, but because there's less of a need.

HRISHI: What can listeners do to chip in, or how can they be involved?

MELISSA: Well, I would say the first thing to do would be to go onto our website which is [justiceforvets.org](http://justiceforvets.org) and sign up for our email alerts because there are going to be actions that we'll need public support for and when those come down the pike, we will send out email alerts and ask you to sign on to, or on a letter maybe to elected official or to some letter and you'll about it and you'll get email alerts, so please do that. Because we need all the support we can get and if you are in a position to donate, we could use that as well because our mission at Justice For Vets is to put a Veterans Treatment Court within reach of every veteran in need. And in order to do that, we need funding so, you know, no money, no mission. And we want to achieve our mission.

JOSH: And I can't think of a better way than to honor our veterans and to observe this Memorial Day than by making a donation to Justice For Vets and by raising your awareness and helping spread the word about these Veteran Treatment Courts.

HRISHI: So people should go to [justiceforvets.org](http://justiceforvets.org) right now, then sign up for the email newsletter, and donate if you can. Josh and I will be donating on behalf of the podcast.

MELISSA: Aw, that's so nice! Thank you!

HRISHI: We're honored to have you on here and really inspired by what you are doing.

JOSH: You are an incredible person, Melissa Fitz. You are really inspiring, and I salute you for walking the walk.

MELISSA: Well, you are incredibly sweet to say that, Josh.

HRISHI: If people have questions and they want to know more about it, can they tweet at you?

MELISSA: Absolutely! I am @ — okay, the silliest Twitter name ever — but it's @Maffyfitz.

HRISHI: There you go, and you can always find me and Josh at @JoshMalina and @Hrishihirway. The show is @WestWingWeekly, or you can leave a comment on our Facebook page: [facebook.com/thewestwingweekly](https://www.facebook.com/thewestwingweekly) or our website: [www.thewestwingweekly.com](http://www.thewestwingweekly.com).

HRISHI: Also, thank you so much for talking to us and telling us this incredible story. We'd love to have you back to talk about episodes in the future too.

JOSH: Oh, for sure.

HRISHI: But for Memorial Day, we just couldn't think of a better person to talk to.

MELISSA: Well, thank you so much and I loved being part of it. And I love listening to it!

JOSH: Thanks, Melissa!

HRISHI: Okay!

JOSH: Okay.

MELISSA: What's next?

[Outro Music]