



GARY PLAYER INTERVIEW  
*THE THREAD SEASON THREE*

**Gary Player, Professional Golfer and Philanthropist**  
**October 9, 2024**  
**Interviewed by: Teddy Kunhardt**  
**Total Running Time: 32 minutes and 56 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT: Life Stories Presents

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GARY PLAYER:

I tell people when I do a talk, I say please don't misunderstand me. I'm not mentioning these three things to boast. There's a reason. I've won more tournaments than any man on the planet today. I'm the only man that won the Grand Slam on the regular tour and the senior tour, the true Grand Slam at that time. I've won more national titles, US Open, British Open, Australian Open, than Tiger Woods, Jack Nicklaus, and Arnold Palmer together. But that's not my legacy. My legacy is, if there is such a thing as a legacy, I believe what you do right now is what matters. Don't be perturbed about your legacy. Don't get concerned about it. Do something right now. And that's what for me is important.

ON SCREEN TEXT:



## The Thread

### ON SCREEN TEXT:

Gary Player

Professional Golfer and Philanthropist

Mastering Golf, Adversity, and Giving Back

00:01:05:00

### INTERVIEWER:

Why is it so important for you to give back and make a positive impact in the lives of those less fortunate?

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### GARY PLAYER:

You know, my great hero, Winston Churchill, who was a remarkable man and I've read most of his episodes, taught me a lot. And that is change is the price of survival. We've got to make an effort in our lives to be kind and fill our lives with love and remember that you are here right now, not for long. Life goes by too quickly. But you're going to have family that are going to follow you. And that's what started, I think, psychologically for me to change the lives of millions of people around the world.

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### INTERVIEWER:



Let's take you back to South Africa. Can you tell me about your childhood?  
What was it like growing up in those early years?

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GARY PLAYER:

Well, South Africa was probably as high a standard of living as there was in the world. But growing up there was difficult. My mother died when I was nine years of age. She always spoke about love. She was full of love. And she said, you know, you've got to always remember to be grateful for everything and say a prayer every day of thanks. And so that's gone with me for the rest of my life. You know, I miss her even today at 89. I still miss my mother terribly. My father worked in a gold mine 8,000 feet under the ground and had to go there because his family, which consisted of six people, the parents had died. So he had to get out and support them and get a job and the only job you could get in South Africa at 15 years of age was deering a gold mine. Now, my brother, this is remarkable. He went to war at 17 years of age. He hadn't even completed his high school and my mother and father, I vividly remember them saying, you can't go to war now, Ian. He said, I'm going to fight for the American and the British flag. And so my brother goes to war. He comes back. He's affected. But he eventually becomes the leading conservationist in the world, I was happy to say. And then my sister's at boarding school. I was lucky enough, my father sacrificed a little bit of money as he had to send me to this school. But I'd come home from school. And it took me an hour and a half to get home. Get home, a dark house, nobody there. Had to cook my own food, wash my clothes, iron them. I lay in



bed for two years. I vividly remember this, crying, wishing I was dead. The greatest gift ever bestowed upon me, suffering adversity. And this, if you look at men that have achieved greatness in their lives, most of them have gone through adversity. Everybody has adversity. Some people accept it, some people don't. But that's the reason I became, and I'm emphatic about that, that's a reason I became a world champion. Because I had to survive. That was the big thing, I had to survive. And I realized I was smaller. And my brother said to me one day, we were running. And we were going to run a mile. And I got tired. And I said, I can't go on. And he gave me a kick in the rear end. And it was a bit of sand that he wrote. He said, write the word can't. And I put on C-A-N-T. And he rubbed out the T. He said, you can, get up. And I continued. And that was quite a thing. Because when I was playing in a tournament, I never thought I couldn't do it. So I was small. And everybody said, well, he's too small to be a champion. And I said, let me ask you something. How big is dynamite? Dynamite can blow this building to smithereens. It's only that big. I said you're looking at a piece of dynamite. And that's what I believed.

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INTERVIEWER:

As a nine-year-old boy, I just can't fathom saying goodbye to your mother. And did you know she was sick?

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GARY PLAYER:



Well, I did know she was sick. She had breast cancer. And I can remember being in the hospital and my mother saying, take Gary outside. I don't want him to see I'm suffering. But I remember my mother standing at the phone. And those days, you're talking about, you know, you talk about 80 years ago, the phone was a crank phone. You cranked like this. So anyway, my mother's on the phone and she's leaning against the wall. And she was speaking to a friend of hers called Dorothy. And I could hear it because it came through. It wasn't like a phone to your ear. And she said, Muriel, which was my mother's name. How are you feeling? She says, I've never felt better in my life. And after she put the phone down, I said, mom, why do you do that? You're very sick. And you said that to her. She said never give other people your problems because they have many problems of their own. Strangely enough, my father never let me go to the funeral. And I still to this day don't know why. That was his opinion. Maybe he didn't want to see. All the sadness at a funeral.

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INTERVIEWER:

Well, let's talk about your wife, Vivian. You're 14, she's 13. How did you two meet?

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GARY PLAYER:

I live in a poor suburb and there's a wall between my neighbor and myself. They were from England. And so I was exercising in the garden and my brother said, you got to come and see this little beautiful chick next door



who's visiting our neighbor. So I get on the rock, which I put there because the wall was high. And I said, good morning. What's your name? She said, Vivian. I said mine's Gary. She says, do you play golf? I said quite honestly, I'm just starting. She says my father's a pro and we'll come and pick you up on Saturday and take you to our course. I said, thank you very much. I got off the wall. That didn't even take a minute. You know that I got off the wall and I said to my brother, I said you know, I'm gonna marry that girl. She said, are you crazy? You just met her, for not even a minute?

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you talk about her father, Mr. Verwey and how his coaching fueled your determination?

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GARY PLAYER:

Well, he was a very good golfer himself and an extraordinarily unusual man. We were at the club. He was the barman. He was the secretary. He was a green superintendent because he was brought up. His family tree were from Holland and had to work hard and this man was a workaholic and he was a good teacher, but not of world standards. But he got me on the right basics and that was a big help. And we'd have a lot of competitions together. He was a great believer. You know, you've got to be very good like Tiger Woods is round the greens. That's what wins tournaments. Not long hitting. Long hitting is an asset, but it's not a necessity. But to be a great putter in a short



game, that's what wins. And that's why he was really determined to get me to understand that. And that was a big point. But I will never forget when I asked him if I could take his daughter out the first time. He was a tough old guy and he put his fist up like this. He says, you see this fist, this fist. It kills bulls, nevermind human beings. What time are you going to be home? I said 12 o'clock. He said five to 12, Lombardi time.

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INTERVIEWER:

When you decided to turn professional, how did your father feel about this?

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GARY PLAYER:

Can you imagine? I'm 17 years of age. I mean, I look back on it. It was crazy. It was absolutely crazy. And I'll never forget my dad. I was practicing and he came out from work and I said, dad, I'm going to be a professional. I've decided. He said, son, you cannot even win your club championship. Do you realize what you're talking about against pros? I said dad, I promise you one thing. I'll hit more balls than any pro that's ever lived. And I'll exercise harder than any pro that ever lived. And I work on my mind and I'll read and I do all these things that are important. I'll have gratitude in my heart. I will laugh. I will do everything that's necessary to become a champion. And I will seek and you will find by listening to people with experience. And he said, well son, he said if you want to do that, that's your choice.



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INTERVIEWER:

But your dad knew that you had it because he had so much belief in you that he went and secured a bank loan.

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GARY PLAYER:

Yes, he did.

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INTERVIEWER:

What did that mean to you on a personal level and as a professional level?  
What did it allow?

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GARY PLAYER:

Can you imagine a man who makes a hundred pounds a month going along and getting an overdraft to help you to go overseas, buy you your first set of clubs? I remember my first set of clubs. They were a Wilson, a Wilson's in a Wilson. He brought out this beautiful box with his brand new clubs in. Here I was using absolute junk clubs, you know? And all of a sudden it was like, it was a million bucks somebody gave me. He gave me so much love. I've been so blessed in my life. To have love from a mother, love from my father. I mean, it's just a special gift. I turned pro in 1953 in January. That's a long time ago, but I win my first tournament and my father actually dunks work to come out



and see me finish the tournament. And I win the tournament and he just puts his arm around me and I mean, he cries like a baby. It was quite remarkable to see a man of such strength and having had such a tough life to be crying for his son. It was really very touching.

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INTERVIEWER:

So at this point, you're now steady with Vivian and you know you want to marry her. What's holding you back?

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GARY PLAYER:

Well, first of all, I don't have the money. And to get married, you need a bit of money. And here I am very young and I get married at 21 and she's 20 and everybody's telling us we're crazy to get married at that age. But then I go to Australia, a country that I love very, very much. Well, I love everywhere I go. But Australia, they had a tournament called the Ampol and first prize was 5,000 pounds. Well, can you imagine you double that by at least, I would say 20. With inflation today. So I said to her, I'm going to win that tournament because I want to marry you and I love you so much. I'm going to win their tournament. Well, now we're playing the final round in Australia of the 5,000 pound. And those days it was \$4 to the pound. And so now I'm leading the tournament by four shots. And what happens, they watch the round out. So now the pressure is even greater. I win the tournament. And there was a man called Mr. MacDougall and he says, can I send the message to your wife, your



future wife Vivian, I said, you got it. I can see this old man running off. And those days it was telegrams. No, nothing like today. Vivian was walking around a golf course in South Africa with her brother watching him play. She got the message. She automatically spontaneously jumped up in the air and a photographer got her. And that was the photo of the year. And I have that next to my bed, even right now. Who up in the air with a pleated skirt, jumped up in the air. She was so excited. And my goodness me, that's 72 years ago. Isn't that amazing?

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INTERVIEWER:

The Masters. Can you tell me about 1961 and having Billy Graham give you some advice?

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GARY PLAYER:

Well, I put Billy Graham in my top 10 people that I've ever met in my life. He was such an incredible human being. And I was now the leading money winner going into the Masters. And he invited me to his place in Asheville and I played a little golf with him. In fact, Arnold Palmer played with us. And then I stayed at his house and he said something significant. He said, now look, I believe you're gonna win the Masters this year. But he says, you're gonna have difficulties. It's not gonna be plain sailing. You're gonna hit bad shots. You're going to have times where you think you might have blown it. And you're gonna think somebody else is playing well. He says, when you hit a bad



shot, just be grateful that you hit a bad shot because it's part of the game. It's part of the game, you cannot play golf without hitting bad shots, but just the way he put it. And I'll never forget, I got a seven at number 13. I was four shots ahead of Arnold Palmer. And I got seven at 13. I couldn't leave the people out of the way. I could have gone up a shortcut, but there were so many people I couldn't move them. So instead of waiting until they did move them, I tried to just chip out and I chipped into a creek. I got a seven. It was a crazy seven. Then I got six at number 14. Then I came to 17, hit it over the green. The odds of getting it up and down against you. I did it. Put it in the bunker at 18. Bunker shot was my best shot. Got it up and down to win. So there was the adversity. He kept coming back to me. This is gonna happen to you. This can happen to. And I was prepared for it. To be prepared. You know the old boy scout? Be prepared is a wonderful motto, isn't it?

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INTERVIEWER:

So let's go to 1969, 1970. Can you share your experiences with the backlash you faced at the golf tour over the apartheid policies? Since the criticism was directed at you even though you were saying, I'm not racist. I have nothing. I'm gonna bash South Africa, but I'm going to speak out.

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GARY PLAYER:

Well, first of all, 69, those two years were two of the toughest years of my life because I mean, I played at, in the PGA in Dayton, Ohio. And I was playing in



the tournament and I lost it by one shot to Raymond Floyd. I will always go to my grave knowing I had 10 majors because when you went through what I went through, they threw telephone books in my back. They threw ice in my eyes. They charged me on the green. I was playing with Nicholas. They came running out of the galleries and Nicholas took his putter up and said, you better not come near me or I'll hit you. And they tore up the green, they threw golf balls between my legs, screamed on my backswing, or they had threatened me. I had policemen sleeping with me every night in my room. I couldn't go to the toilet without five policemen being there. And I mean, it was very difficult. I didn't invent apartheid. I was part of apartheid in our country. When I was a young man, I was scared to be against apartheid. Because in those days, you got 90 days if you said something against the government, 90 days in jail. So I was petrified. But then I realized that I was wrong and I grew up and I grew up stronger. But you know what? It was another form of adversity. And I took hold of myself and said, listen, I can understand these people. They're vehemently against apartheid. I understand that. And I happen to be the leading sportsman in South Africa. And so they could get their message across by demonstrating against me because they'll get their publicity. It's all part of the game. Accept it and go ahead. I eventually went and met some of the people that were responsible for this. And I said, listen, why don't you send a man down, get a representative, send him to South Africa and see what I'm doing. They came down there and they saw I was sponsoring Black Golf Toys myself. And sending Black Golfers overseas and building schools and building hospitals. And doing what I was doing, the guy came back. His name was Mr. Williams,



I'll never forget. He came back and said, he's not the guy. Don't be demonstrating against him. They stopped. But communication, you see. Instead of having hatred and revenge and disliking them, I let love take over. Love amongst your enemies. And so it worked very, very well indeed. And they stopped eventually. But it was tough. I loved South Africa and I was not prepared to bash South Africa for the sake of being demonstrated against it.

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INTERVIEWER:

But through all this, you met a man named Nelson Mandela and developed a friendship. Can you talk about that?

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GARY PLAYER:

I wish I could adequately have the vocabulary of a Churchill or a Shakespeare to describe this man. He goes to jail for over 20 years. I went to his cell, by the way, on Robben Island. And I've met others that went to jail as well. And the funny thing is, the amazing thing is that the three that I met, some of them longer in jail than Mandela, were all the most humble. Men with no revenge and no hatred whatsoever. Mandela was one of the most respected men that has ever lived. Why? Had he been militant and shouted against whitey and done all these things and screamed and went on, they would have not had the respect, the majority of the world. But the majority, I've never met anybody that didn't love Nelson Mandela. And I was with him for three years and I worked with him for three years. We raised almost plus minus 20 million for



young kids in the country. And he was, every time I met him, every time, I cried. Every time. I said, today, I'm not gonna cry. But you meet this man and he's so full of love. Comes back to the word love again, you see? So full of life and no revenge and hatred. That you're shocked. You can't believe that a man can be like that.

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INTERVIEWER:

This is now 1972 and you're at the USA PGA. Your father gave you five words. Win it for me, Gary. Did you remember that?

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GARY PLAYER:

He said a lot of things like that on numerous occasions. But I do remember that. You know again, I come back to be incentivized to have a purpose. And my dad meant so much to me that it did inspire me. And when I won it, it was at a place called Oakland Hills. Wonderful, golf course, wonderful people. And I had a shot over the trees. They put a plaque there now. I hit a nine eye over the trees and I was only one shot ahead of four other people. And I put the ball in this close to the hole to go onto win. So I've got marvelous memories of that. And of course, my father. Of course, those days it was hard for us to see. We only got television in South Africa in 1974. So he couldn't see it. We'd have to tell him about it. And then later on he'd see that we'd send the film.

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INTERVIEWER:

Describe the thrill of winning.

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GARY PLAYER:

Well, first of all, you've got to say what happens before you win. And you think of going to the gym, eating properly, sleeping properly, laughing, taking an ice cold bath every morning. And you know, the greatest thing a person could do is do something that you don't like. If you don't exercise, it's to your detriment. The exercise. Enabled me to become a world champion. And when I came, when I turned pro in 1953, there wasn't a professional golfer on the planet that was doing any weight training or exercises. Weight training was a no-no. Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicholas said to me when we first started, you can't do all this weight training. It's not good for your golf. One man said, Gary Player will never win a tournament past 30 years of age, 35 years of aging. He continued to do his weight training. Well, I'm going strong and the others are not. And then when you win, you say to yourself, what a relief, you know? I worked so hard. It's such a thrill when you work hard to be successful. And so it doesn't matter what it is, it's hard to beat hard work.

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INTERVIEWER:

And in 74, you put in some hard work and ended up winning the British Open, which means you had won the British open in 58, 69, and 74. What did that milestone mean to you? For three decades.



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GARY PLAYER:

Well, the first of all, the British Open is by far the most difficult tournament to win because you are sitting, having breakfast in the morning and play as a team, it's a beautiful day, and you say it's beautiful day and the local pro says, Luddy, it's not a beautiful date, it's a great morning. So the afternoon comes, it's happened to Tiger Woods at Mirfield and he played in the afternoon and everybody else was scoring well in the morning, he shot 84 something in the afternoon. The wind and the rain comes up. And you can't feel sorry for yourself and you get in a bunker and you've got to play backwards, all things that never happened in other tournaments. So the British Open, they call it the Open, is so hard to win, so, so hard to win. And when you've won that, that's a different feeling. You say, man, I was a man this week to win. I really was a man to win this week, more so than anywhere else, but to win any major championship, any tournament, doesn't matter where it is. Whether it's in Hong Kong, Brazil, South Africa, Australia, America, it's tough to win. It always has been tough and it always will be tough. Also in 1974, you must remember I won the Masters and I won The British Open and I was in the top 10 in the US Open and fourth in the PGA. I came close to winning the Grand Slam in one year. So that was significant.

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INTERVIEWER:



As a golfer though, in your mind, do you compete with other players? Are you in a bigger competition with yourself?

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GARY PLAYER:

The golf course, the golf course is the big master. That's the one you gotta beat. You can't rely or you can't figure out if somebody else is gonna play well and beat you, but the golf courses is the one you gotta beat, so I was never concerned about other people. I was just concerned about the best means of defense, attack. And I just played the golf courses to the best of my ability to get as many birdies as I could and have the lowest score. I didn't worry about what other people were doing or what they were saying.

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INTERVIEWER:

And then in 74, you were inducted to the World Golf Hall of Fame. How significant was that day for you, personally and professionally?

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GARY PLAYER:

This is the first induction and you've got Ben Hogan, who I thought had the best swing of any man I ever saw. And then there's Sam Snead, there's Gene Sarazin, who'd won the first man to win the Grand Slam, and Jack Nicklaus, and Arnold Palmer, and myself. So I mean, it was really a special gathering. And to be inducted into the Hall of Fame, you'd always read about baseball

and football, and they were all more predominant there, more of high stature than the Golf Hall of Fame. But now the Golf Hall of Fame is getting better and better and it was an honor, particularly to be inducted at the time that those great players were inducted into the Hall of Fame, because they were the greatest players that ever lived.

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INTERVIEWER:

What is your favorite golf tournament?

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GARY PLAYER:

If I had to rate the four most important tournaments in the world, I'd rate the Open, the British Open number one, US Open number two, PGA number three and the Masters number four. You know, to be in the top four in the World is a very, very great compliment irrespective where you rate it and everybody will rate things differently. To rate something the best is always purely a matter of opinion.

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INTERVIEWER:

What are your thoughts on the future of golf?

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GARY PLAYER:



We haven't even scratched the surface with golf. I mean it's a different game now compared to when I played. Nothing is the same and in another 40 years time nothing will be the same. There wasn't big prize money at all, very little prize money I suppose. When I think of Augusta, the Masters, I won it three times. The man who finished 42nd this year made more money than I made I think in my three Masters together and that's great. Whatever the stats were, it was phenomenal. So now you've got young men seeing these golfers make these enormous sums of money and they can play forever. So now these guys, it's a different breed. They're exercising, they're using weights, they are building big bodies. Can you imagine? We've never had a big man play golf yet, a real big man. I'm talking about a LeBron James, a Michael Jordan, those kinds of bulls. They're coming because other sports say, listen I'm only there for a few years, golf I can be there, make more money and be there forever. What do you think Michael Jordan is doing today? He's playing golf. All these athletes that played sports, they all come back to golf. And so we ain't seen nothing yet.

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INTERVIEWER:

You've spent many, many, many nights alone in a hotel room. What is the toll that loneliness takes on you?

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GARY PLAYER:



First of all, I've been a pro now since 1953 and I've lived in, I would say probably, it's hard to be exact. Hypothetically, I would probably say two motels a week in my life. Think about it. And the thing is that... When I was on my own, I was never bored. Fortunately, I taught myself not to be bored. I did a lot of reading. I did a lot of exercise. I phoned my friends. I wrote letters. I kept myself busy where I was... You could say, man, I'm bored. Yes I was lonely not having a wife, obviously. And you could get a little lonely being on your own. But you must overcome that by certain methods.

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INTERVIEWER:

And did Vivian suffer from that loneliness with you being away?

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GARY PLAYER:

Well, Vivian was fantastic. She did everything in her power for me to become a champion because, you know, we started with nothing. And so therefore, we're gonna need money. We're gonna have to do well. If we wanna raise a family, we wanna have a home. We wanna educate our children. And she played the role of an incredible wife. Incredible. You know, we used to travel from South Africa to America. It took 40 hours. No jets. No movies on the phone. The children slept on the floor. She would travel from South Africa to America with six children on her own sometimes. Six children. Can you imagine that? And you know, people talk about Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, and myself being the big three. But the big 3 were our wives. Arnold Palmer's



wife, Winnie, and Jack Nicklaus's wife Barbara, and my wife Vivian. They were extraordinary. Extraordinary women.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you talk about your wife's battle with cancer and what were the last things she said to you?

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GARY PLAYER:

She died in this house that we're sitting in right now. But it's interesting because my wife was the most healthy person you could ever wish to meet. She, when I played in the World Match play, for example, I played Nicklaus in the final twice. 36 holes. And I beat him twice. And she walked every hole every day, 36 holes a day. In wet weather. She was a Trojan. And she then gets pancreatic cancer. Once you get pancreatic cancer, that's it. But she lived two years, which is remarkable. She was a very, very religious woman. She believed everything would be right in heaven. She was in this house here. She was having her stomach drained every two weeks. She was in agony. She was in the room downstairs that I'm in right now. And a lot of us were in the room. And I was holding her in my arms like this. As I was talking, holding her up. Because she was so weak, she could hardly sit up. And she just died in my arms. But she was not scared of dying. She said, I'm ready to go. I'll see you all later on. I hope she's right. We have a school in South Africa with 130 students. And the school has been going on for 30 years. She said before she

died, please keep our school going forever in perpetuity. And I'm working my tail off to get that done.

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INTERVIEWER:

And what is the mission of your foundation?

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GARY PLAYER:

The mission of our foundation is to give people a place in the sun. The one in South Africa, the parents are both working. We have them at school. We feed them. We transport them back home. We give all the sporting facilities for them. And so at least when they finish their schooling, they can go home and we keep them there as long as possible so they can go home, and see their mom when they get back home, but it's basically education.

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INTERVIEWER:

And my understanding is you also, in addition to South Africa, you do education work in the states.

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GARY PLAYER:

Oh yes, now the one is only, the Gary and Vivian Player Foundation is only for America, nowhere else. My job is to pay it back to America what they've done



for me. We are raising millions and millions and millions, going into the inner cities of America and helping these kids and getting, can you imagine, this is the most amazing stat. One out of every six children in America live below the poverty line. In America. Do not have enough food. Do not ever have an opportunity to go into a good school. Do not have somebody to love them. Love is the crux of our lives and these kids grow up without that. Think about that. Put yourself, as my father said, in that person's footsteps. And that's what I want to do to change their lives. And by the time I live to 100, I will have changed millions and millions and millions and millions of child's lives.

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INTERVIEWER:

How do the rewards you got from golf compare to the rewards that you get from this foundation?

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GARY PLAYER:

No, as I said, having won all these tournaments and been so successful, that's a wonderful thing and I've been very blessed. But my legacy, if there is a legacy, my legacy is to change the lives of millions of people and I will do that. I'm busy doing that rapidly right now. So that is the joy I get because without being repetitive, I knew what it was like to suffer like a junkyard dog. I had a stomach full of empty. A pocket full of dreams. And the only person behind me was my shadow on the ground. So I went through the drill. And so I want to see people not suffer because it's terrible, particularly to see children

unnecessarily in the greatest country in the world have to go through what they're going through. It's unforgivable.

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INTERVIEWER:

When you do reach those pearly gates, how do you hope to answer the question, what kind of person were you?

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GARY PLAYER:

I'd like to say, first of all, thank you for everything I had in my life, to be grateful, thank you. And then secondly, I hope I represented you well in treating mankind with respect and helping to change their lives. And thirdly, thank you for the love that you put into my heart. Because love, you know, you can take all the... Atomic bombs, the nuclear weapons, they make a big noise. But love is more powerful than all of those. And it's silent. And to thank you for the love that you instilled in my life. And I'm grateful for everything. Thank you. But also dear Lord, thank you for the adversity that I experienced.