

EPISODE 156

DW: "Back in 2012, I was in South Africa, and I went to Robben Island. That's where Mandela was in prison for 18 of his 27 years in prison. I went on a tour to that prison, and then I went to his cell. I saw how tiny it was. That's in 2012. So, when the group moved on, I stayed there in his cell. I saw that there was a bucket on the floor for him to use as a toilet. There was a mat that he slept on, on the concrete floor. That's what he did 18 years, 18 years. At the cell, when everybody left, I just said a prayer, I said, "God, if I'm ever in this situation, just please give me the strength that you gave him. That's all I ask you for. I'm not asking you to free me or nothing. Just give me the strength that you gave him."

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:57] LW: Hello, friends. Welcome back to The Light Watkins Show, where I interview ordinary people just like you and me who have taken extraordinary leaps of faith in the direction of their path, their purpose, or what they've identified as their mission in life. In doing so, they have been able to positively impact and inspire the lives of many other people who have either heard about their story, or who witnessed them in action, or people who have directly benefited from their work.

This week, we have part two of my conversation with my father, Attorney Donald V. Watkins. Back in part one, which I recommend listening to in order to get the full context for this final part of the conversation, we go through his upbringing in the Deep South, and the multiple instances of harsh racism that he encountered as a civil rights attorney based out of Montgomery, Alabama in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, how those experiences helped to shape his mission of striving for, and I would even go so far as to say, being obsessed with the administration of justice for all. That's fair justice, which sounds like an oxymoron, but justice isn't always fair.

Then, we talked about how Attorney Watkins won one of the biggest white-collar fraud cases in history, where he essentially got 85 counts of fraud dismissed for his client, and then several years later, as fate would have it, he found himself in that same courtroom that he won that big case in with the same judge. But this time, he was facing charges of wire fraud, bank fraud, and

conspiracy, along with his oldest child, my brother, Donald Jr. We talked about how they were essentially railroaded toward a conviction, where he had to spend three years in federal prison.

In this episode, we're going to go into federal prison with Donald Senior and talk about that experience of what it was like, and how he discovered this overwhelming amount of legal malpractice that he witnessed in the cases of his fellow inmates, which quite frankly, shocked him. And he began helping those guys one by one, appeal their cases and get released from prison. By the end of his sentence, he had gotten 47 guys released from federal prison and he describes this time of his life, and of his career, as his finest hour as an attorney.

In this episode, we're going to break down the legal tactics that he used to help get these guys released, as well as legal tactics that you can use to help fight your own legal battles, and how to select the right attorney, and how best to present yourself if you ever have to go in court, in front of a judge.

This was a fascinating, fascinating episode, to say the least. If you want to know more about Donald Watkins and his work, he's got a Netflix documentary called *Trial by Media*, where he breaks down how he won that big case that I mentioned earlier with the 85 counts against his client. Definitely check that out. It's episode number four of *Trial by Media*. It's called 'King Richard.'

In the meantime, enjoy the conclusion to my conversation with my dad, Donald V. Watkins. We're just going to jump right into where we left off in the last episode. Again, if you haven't done so already, make sure to listen to part one so you're caught up on where we begin part two. You're going to hear some incredible stories from the legal field and you'll appreciate the way that he now approaches cases for those guys in federal prison. Without further ado, let's get right to the continuation of my conversation with my father, Attorney Donald V. Watkins.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:04:57] LW: All right, we're back with part two and you've now been convicted of conspiracy, fraud, a lot of the same charges that some of your personal heroes were also convicted of, or

charged with. The Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King, I think he was charged with what, tax evasion?

[00:05:15] DW: He was charged for tax evasion, a felony tax. All of my heroes were charged by this establishment with some felony, all of them. Many of them went to jail for way longer than I did.

[00:05:30] LW: Especially back in the sixties, going to jail was like getting a PhD. That's when you knew you would arrive.

[00:05:37] DW: It was a credential. When you get to be targeted like that and you know you've been railroaded, that's really a credential. The good thing about it, and there are good positive things about it. I'm going to tell you one. Back in 2012, I was in South Africa, and I went to Robben Island. That's where Mandela was in prison for 18 of his 27 years in prison. I went on a tour to that prison, and then I went to his cell. I saw how tiny it was. That's in 2012. So, when the group moved on, I stayed there in his cell. There was a bucket on the floor for him to use as a toilet. There was a mat that he slept on, on the concrete floor. That's what he did 18 years, 18 years. At the cell, when everybody left, I just said a prayer, I said, "God, if I'm ever in this situation, just please give me the strength that you gave him. That's all I ask you for. I'm not asking you to free me or nothing. Just give me the strength that you gave him.

So, when I was convicted, and I knew that I had to show up for the prison camp. Number one, I wasn't in a prison. I was on a camp. Prison camp was like a little high school campus, except it's got a couple of dormitories on it. I got there. Half are from Birmingham, half from Atlanta, about 80% are Black. All of them knew me, as soon as I walked into the thing. I knew some of them. The guy who came to meet me turned out to be my first roommate. We had met each other in Atlanta, and he was a basketball star. He went to junior college in Phoenix City.

But anyway, we hit it off great. That's when I learned – I didn't even focus on it, but that's when I learned. I have this set of skills that everybody in here knew and they all knew who I was. They knew about the Scrusby case, and they said the word spread so quick. The first thing I have to guard against is, I don't want to come across as I need special privileges. Because they were

quick to want to elevate me to a leadership position. I didn't want that. I got shown a lot of respect at Talladega.

After I rested for about two weeks, that was my first vacation in about 10 years. After I rested – it was a good rest, too. After I rested, then I said, “You know what, I probably can help some of these guys.” I'm writing with them and they had computers, so you could do emails. I have the ability to type and edit stuff using the email account. Then, the first guy that I got, he's out of Memphis, Tennessee, and I used to live in Memphis. I knew where he came from. He actually didn't deserve to be there and I couldn't believe he was there. He had a court-appointed – everybody had a court-appointed lawyer. I don't even want to tell you what I think about court-appointed lawyers.

I worked to get him out and his thing turned out to be good. The judge realized they actually kept him longer than they were supposed to. When the judge realized that, and I wrote the thing that he said to the judge. The judge had a conniption and ordered him released that day.

[00:08:57] LW: What did you do exactly to get him out? How did you know that he could even get out?

[00:09:02] DW: All of them had their files. So, he brought his file, and he had a state case and a federal case. He got his federal sentence first, then he went and got his state sentence, and the federal judge says, “Look, you got to go to state court. What I want to do is run a concurrent. Just come back and tell me when you got your state sentence and I'll run both concurrent. I mean, you ain't going to spend time in two different systems.”

He gets his state sentence. It's actually like less around the same as this federal thing. So, they did let him out. As long as you never did go back, you didn't have to file a motion. You just have to report to the judge what his state sentence was, send a certified copy of it, and the guy served about eight months too much time. Then, I wrote a letter for the judge. There was a motion actually to correct this sentence, that he is - when he got in state court and he found himself pro se. That's the word when you represent yourself, pro se. He actually got sent to detention for some disciplinary violation. They had to come get him out of detention and put him out on the street that day, because she had ordered he'd be released that day.

The judge was so pissed off. He was a federal judge out of Memphis. He was fair. His lawyers, I don't even know if they went to law school, but it never should have happened the way it did. We were off to a good start.

Second case, was a guy out of Tampa, Sarasota, Florida. The search warrants in his case were not just defected, they were fraudulent. They would never sign off on badges or approve badges. But that's what was used to convict him. The evidence from the search.

[00:10:50] LW: Did any lawyer see this when looking at the paperwork? Or is this something that –

[00:10:53] DW: If you had any degree, if you had gone to law school past one semester, you would know that this is bad stuff. But these are court-appointed lawyers. They're just court-appointed. They don't care. They're just processing you, processing you, processing you. That was so horrible, I couldn't even sleep. I couldn't believe this. How is this going on? I did his thing. Over the course of the three years, I had done – it was 47 of them. I was able to get 47 of them out. After I did my first eight out of my dormitory, that's when they figured out that it was me that was helping everybody, and that's when they framed me on a disciplinary charge so they can take me out of the general population and put me in the hole, where I stayed for about a year. But even in the hole, I was helping people. It was easy to help them, and it makes the time go by.

[00:11:46] LW: When people hear this, a lot of people may have seen the movie *Shawshank Redemption* and Andy Dufresne's character helping people out. There's lines of people waiting to help them with their accounting and stuff like that. I imagine the word spread like wildfire. Got the first couple of guys released because a lot of these guys don't have anybody. Right? They've been completely abandoned.

[00:12:06] DW: They have nobody, and then word got out that I was helping, and I wouldn't charge anybody anything. I didn't need nothing. All I needed is to get to a computer and type your stuff for you. Then, I stumbled a team, actually, it was four great guys who became part of my team, like teams I had –

[00:12:23] LW: Like paralegals?

[00:12:25] DW: Yes, yes and they were helping proofreading, research, and they were great guys. Then, the Netflix documentary comes out. Now, they get to see what it was I did in the case with the most counts and they couldn't believe it. Now, I'm getting floodgate. I'm getting everybody want help, not just inmates, but everybody want help. They have you right there. You're right there. They have access to you that they'll never have in the real world and it just made the time fly by. I would work maybe 8 to 10 hours a day, working on somebody's case. My only rule was you got to get in there like Baskin-Robbins, take a number. When I get to you, I'm spending whatever time it takes to get you done and the next guy just got to wait. You just got to wait.

That lasted until 11 o'clock on the night before they released me on August 25, 2022. In fact, they wanted to release me earlier. But I asked them, could they push it back for a couple of weeks because I had two Hispanic guys that promised them, I would not leave until I did their cases. It took about a week on each one of those cases. Those guys were so worried that I was going to leave without getting to their case. They had been waiting. I think one of them waited like six weeks. I promised them that I'll finish. The last guys came at 11 o'clock the night before they released me at seven in the morning. He was happy. I was happy. When I left, they gave me a standing ovation. They were out in the courtyard just clapping. They were happy for me, but they were sad. They wouldn't let me take my stuff. Two inmates took my stuff out, boxes and stuff. I was sad for them, because I knew they would never have that kind of legal assessment again in light.

[00:14:10] LW: Out of the 47 guys that you helped to get released, was it mostly a matter of filing one piece of paperwork or what was like commonality?

[00:14:19] DW: No, it was – because the court system is so screwed up now, you can be innocent, and you can show somebody that you're innocent, and they still don't want to let you go. They don't want to admit they made a mistake. You have to press them and you have to shame them, you have to corner the judge, really, it's more the judge than the prosecutor into

doing the right thing. You can only do that by being meticulous, very detailed. You remember, it goes back to the three things –

[00:14:46] LW: Courage, preparation, and flawless execution.

[00:14:48] DW: Yes.

[00:14:50] LW: So, you have to teach them to have courage and prepare.

[00:14:53] DW: I had to teach them. First, I had to get them out of the mindset, “You need a lawyer.” You don't need a lawyer. You know more about your case than anybody. You had years to focus on your case. All you got to do is prepare and execute. They know home runs. You just get one inch at a time. You nail it down, though, and you can do it better than anybody. No lawyer is going to ever know all the facts in your case. You just have to know what's important and what's not important.

I would spend the time to get them prepared. This is how the judge is going to come at you. This is how the prosecutor is going to comment. This is what you do. You don't ever get off message. I don't care what they say. You don't get emotional. You just stay on there, pounding it in. Make sure the record shows this. The record shows that. Put this document in. After, these guys turn out to be good lawyers for their own case. They do. When you spend the time to mentor a guy on his case, you don't have to be a lawyer. You don't have to go to law school. You don't have to know everything in law. You already know your facts, you know your facts better than anybody. All you got to know is what strategy gets you from where you are now in jail to freedom. Here's the strategy. Now, execute to perfection, and you're out of here. Because the prosecution is not going to expect you to be this sharp, this trained, this prepared. They'll never expect you to be – they used to work with court-appointed lawyers never prepare on anything, who are there to just surrender you. It's sad when innocent people get outmatched, about five truly innocent people. When they get surrendered by a lawyer who's too lazy to do the job, it just galls me. It just galls me.

[00:16:34] LW: If someone cuts a “plea deal”, can they not fight their case once they're in prison?

[00:16:39] DW: They can, but the grounds are so limited. They're so limited. You have to prove ineffective assistance of counsel. We did that on several of them. But to do that, it's not just that you disagree with the way the guy did it. You have to show about 60 different things that he didn't do that you would have done.

Imagine you're a pilot of a plane, you in the cockpit, and you say they got the little clipboard going down this checklist, this checklist, this checklist. I make a checklist of what a lawyer would do before he even talks to you about a plea deal. I got about 60 supplemental thing he should do before he even fixes his mouth to talk to you about it. Because if he doesn't know how to do those things, the plane can't fly anyway. Most of these lawyers don't do anything. They don't do anything.

I say, "Where was your original written defense plan that outlines everything you guys are going to do before you decide to cover these?" The list all of the prosecution witnesses. What are their strengths and weaknesses? What documents are they going to be using? What tape recordings that are going to be used? What video are they going to be reusing? What else do they have out there that they can call, to use, to introduce?

Now, let me assess the strength and weakness and all that. Let me show that to you. Now, you help me build a dispense to discredit every one of these items. Right? I can't even talk to you about pleading guilty if I haven't done that. I'm going to do that. I don't even know how strong their case is. They may have lost evidence. They may have lost the cocaine, right? They may have lost the bank money or whatever the hell it is. How am I going to talk to you about –how can I do a deal if I can't fight? Who's got to deal with you? Nobody's got to deal with you. You can't fight. What are you getting? Let's just surrender. Just call it a surrender. I'm coming in surrendering and throwing myself on the mercy.

Yes, I just approach everybody. I say, "You believe in yourself, you believe in your innocence, you be your lawyer. I teach you what you need. You only need to be a lawyer for a moment in time. Just one moment in time and you'd be unrelenting because your freedom is at stake. You don't care about nobody's feelings. You ain't trying to spare no judge. You don't give a damn if the hearing is going to last one day, five days. It's your freedom. Ain't nobody going to jail but

you. When you win, you can shake everybody's hand and say I'm sorry, I had to be so hard on you. But I thought you would want me to be hard on you in order to get my freedom.”

[00:19:09] LW: What was the criteria for people whose cases you took? How did you know to take this guy's case versus that guy's case?

[00:19:16] DW: Well, at first, it was just who wanted me to help them. Then, it still pretty much was that. But you have to think and be in line, because there was so many people. Then, I had to cut it off. I knew my time is getting short and I can't because I didn't truncate anybody's allocation of time. If it took a week, if it took two weeks, that's how much time I'm taking on your case. I'm not going to give you the documents for you to sign if they ain't pristine and perfect for my style. All you got to do is execute and I'm going to tell you how to execute. I'm going to tell you how to talk to the judge and you can't be scared when you walk in there. You got to walk in there like you own that courtroom. If you don't know some of the answer, you say, “I don't know what you ask me. Break it down for me so I'll understand what you're saying.”

You say it in a way like this guy is scared to tell you anything but the truth. Break it down, and you don't agree to nothing. You agree to nothing. You ain't saving nobody no work to prove nothing against you. No, you better bring whatever witnesses you need. I ain't agreeing to nothing. Nothing, ever. You just wait for the prosecution to make a mistake. Because you're prepared, you're not going to make no mistakes, you're going to have flawless execution. They're going to be mad at you. Yes, they're going to slam books down. You don't care. They're not in jail with you. You don't care. You show proof. You don't care about nobody's feelings in that courtroom but you. They're not going to like you, but they'll respect you. They'll know, “Okay, we can't want over this one. Maybe we need to take a look at this. This guy seems to be prepared. He's lawyering his own case. I wonder what's happening. He seemed to be prepared beyond lawyering. I mean, he knows what he's doing. I wonder, did he take paralegal courses or something like that.” But anyway, that's all good. But it made my time fly by.

[00:21:02] LW: You said they found out about it and then on some trumped-up charges and threw you in the hole.

[00:21:08] DW: Yes, and transferred, and we got to get rid of him.

[00:21:12] LW: What is the hole like? Talk about that experience.

[00:21:16] DW: Hole is a tiny room, like about 6 feet by maybe 10 feet. Six feet wide, 10 feet and two bunks in there. One toilet. In Talladega, you couldn't flush the toilet. A guard on the outside had to flush it. You couldn't turn the lights on at all. They had black mold in the vents. It was horrible, filthy. The United States should never talk about or criticize anybody else's prison system, because the United States prisons would rival any third-world prison in the world. Don't criticize the Russians for how they treat prisons because you do the same thing. All it does is make you a hypocrite to the rest of the world. Everybody knows you do the same thing in the United States. Do not go around criticizing nobody else's treatment of prisoners or their prison conditions. Now, I can say that because I've been in and I've seen it.

[00:22:08] LW: In the summer of 2020, you had a simple request to keep the little food slot open. Why were you asking to keep the food slot open?

[00:22:17] DW: Because the cell I was in, the air conditioning had broken for the building and there was no air circulating in the cell.

[00:22:24] LW: This is an Alabama in the summer?

[00:22:25] DW: Yes, in Alabama. The temperature had gone up past 100 degrees and at least they had fans on the outside of the cell, and I asked the warden, Sharon Mash, will she leaves the slot opened. It's just a little slot. You can't escape. You reach in there to get the food. She said, "No", and they slammed the damn thing closed. But that's okay. I had to sleep on the floor because the floor was cool. Then, you wet your towel and put it over your head and your back, and then that keeps you cool. The wet towel is how you stay cool. I don't ever want to hear Biden, Joe Biden, or Donald Trump, or nobody talking about prison conditions. Because their asses were there and they were in charge and they could've have changed it and they did not. I don't want to hear any excuses.

[00:23:12] LW: How often were you allowed to shower from the hole?

[00:23:16] DW: It's like, you shower three times a week. The shower was about as big as a coffin. They lock you in a cage and they turned the water. You hope it's not too hot –

[00:23:25] LW: They handcuff you to take you to the shower, right?

[00:23:27] DW: That's correct. They handcuff you to take you to the shower, and then, they push a button and you hope it ain't cold. You hope it ain't hot. There's no adjusting of the water.

[00:23:36] LW: It could be cold or hot. You don't know?

[00:23:38] DW: Yes.

[00:23:40] LW: Is there a room just to let the water come out first so you can see what the temperature is like?

[00:23:43] DW: No, there is not. No, you just have to put your ass. Ain't no face cloth, it's a rag, the one they mop the floors off with.

[00:23:54] LW: What did the guards think of your work with the prisoners.

[00:23:57] DW: They loved it and they were very supportive of me. A lot of times, that's how my articles – I kept writing. They wanted me to stop writing and I kept writing articles. A lot of times, the guard got my stuff out for me. Made sure we got mail. You understand what I'm saying?

[00:24:15] LW: So, you've been publishing these articles –

[00:24:19] DW: The entire time and never stopped. The prison system has tried to shut me down several times and they couldn't figure out how I was still getting my stuff done.

[00:24:30] LW: These articles were about the prison system while you were in the prison system?

[00:24:33] DW: Some were about the prison system, politics, national politics, COVID-19. It was about all – what I call significant – subjects of significant public interest.

[00:24:43] LW: You've been passionate about independent journalism for years. I remember back into Voter News network days, you've been publishing articles and then a few years before going to prison, you have been publishing articles and becoming quite the journalist.

[00:24:57] DW: Because you can't get real news if you're bought or sponsored by other people. You have to pick your topics. If you got sponsors or advertisers, and I like to just take on the cold hard truth. I don't care who it helps you or it hurts. It's just, here's the issue and put it out there, and let people deal with the issue.

Yes, I've been publishing for a long time, long time, and I never stopped. Then, I found out that the BOP, the Bureau of Prisons, has a policy that encourages inmates to write and publish. I don't think they anticipated somebody will be doing it like me. They threw me in a cell for three weeks because I was writing some critical stuff. But it's all right.

[00:25:43] LW: Once you go to the hole, they have to transfer you out of that prison to the next high-level security prison, and you went through the Atlanta, I guess, Atlanta curriculum facility –

[00:25:56] DW: To get to – when I left prison, I left out of La Tuna. A prison camp in La Tuna. But to get to that camp, they put me on what they call diesel therapy. Rather than me flying in and getting there like the next day, they took me on like a four-month trip. They took me through the Atlanta penitentiary, where the United, Bloods gang members. Two of them was supposed to kill me. They told me that. They knew who I was when I got there. So, I had to talk to him there to help them with their cases, so that they went from potential assassins to staunch allies because of my legal skill.

I wrote about that, too. I wrote an article about that. Then, I went from Atlanta to – and that was on lockdown the whole time. I went from Atlanta to Oklahoma City. The same thing, I was on lockdown, until I finally made to La Tuna about four months after that I left. I left in November. I got there in March. They call that diesel therapy. When they want to punish an inmate, they drag

you. They drag you through all of these prisons, put you in transit. It's what they do. It's designed to punish you, period.

[00:27:08] LW: If you didn't have that skill set, you probably would have been eliminated in Atlanta.

[00:27:12] DW: I would have been eliminated in Atlanta. They told me in Atlanta. Yes.

[00:27:18] LW: The people who were supposed to eliminate you told you?

[00:27:20] DW: That's correct. Yes. I wrote an article about them.

[00:27:24] LW: What was their circumstance? They were in there on murder or something?

[00:27:25] DW: They'd already been convicted of state murder charges. They were waiting on Federal murder charge. They were awaiting trial. But they were trusting. They had him guarding me.

[00:27:36] LW: They had the murderers guarding you?

[00:27:39] DW: Trustees, yes. They could get me out –

[00:27:41] LW: They could walk all through the prison and where they want to go.

[00:27:42] DW: Absolutely, yes, where I was. Through the cell block where I was. When I came out for showers, they were the ones that were walking, handing out food, cleaning up, all this stuff.

[00:27:54] LW: What did you say to them, initially?

[00:27:57] DW: One of them saw me getting a book and it was a legal book. It was on the book cart down in a common area. He said, "Are you interested in that book, law book?" I said, "I'm a lawyer. If you ever need anything, let me know." Because he was one of the head trustees.

Then, he came to get me for a phone call with my lawyer. Then, on that walk, I told him more about my background. I said, “You don't know me, but there's a Netflix documentary out on me. You got to watch it sometime. You need to come see me, because I can help you.” Only when I did that that I learned all those stuff that they were supposed to do. I said I'm going to help you. I can help you. I'm going to write an article about your story.

That made my stay in Atlanta pretty good and then they got me on out. But La Tuna, I enjoyed La Tuna. La Tuna was my first experience with Spanish-speaking inmates and people, period. I love the Hispanic community, Latino community. It was just they are very different from the Black community. They're very family oriented and they network. I mean, they really network as a community, even in prison they network, and very respectful towards elderly people. They wouldn't let me do anything. Nothing. No laundry, no nothing. They saw me helping an inmate, and then when they saw I was helping every category of inmates, whites, Blacks, Asians, Native-Americans, it didn't matter to me. If you need help, you need help, right? It doesn't matter what your group is.

[00:29:34] LW: Because in prison you're not supposed to congregate and mingle with the opposite race.

[00:29:41] DW: But we get to the dining hall, I'm sitting at everybody's table, and high-fiving everybody, talking about your case and stuff. “Everybody, hey, this is so and so. He's my buddy. Do you think you can help him?” “Yes, come by my office. My office was messy. I'll sign up on the list, but I don't skip nobody on the list. When I get to you, I get to you.”

[00:30:02] LW: What would you say to people who will confront you about that, about fraternizing with people of other races?

[00:30:08] DW: Nobody had the nerve to do that the whole time I was in there. Everybody knew what I was doing. If you were a group leader, they call them shot caller. If you are a group leader, it enhances your status if you had a relationship with me, because now you can ask me to help one of your guys, right? I just put your guy on the list. It empowers you. I can get you on the list with the lawyer. They could get on themselves. But they were doing – they were telling

me it's important to them and they bring their own stuff, too. Nobody talked to me about sitting with anybody.

I was like a universal ombudsman. I'm handling stuff. They wouldn't let nobody would bother me. I think they'd rather go attack a guard than to mess with me. They got to the point, they wouldn't let anybody use the computer I was using, so I could leave my little stack of files out there and nobody would touch it. Nobody. Nobody in no group would touch nothing. They wouldn't even let anybody seat at the computer I was using. They go, "That's the lawyer's computer. That's the counselor's computer. You go get one of them other computers."

[00:31:17] LW: What was your proudest moment in your prison time and what was your most difficult moment?

[00:31:21] DW: The proudest moment was my first guy who was truly innocent when he left. I walked him down to the front, the thing, and gave him a hug. He was so happy. He was happy. Then, the most difficult time was when I first got into the hole. That's a whole different experience. You have to mentally adjust for that kind of experience. Because there's no window that you're looking out of. It's rough. When they moved me around the first time I went in, there was three white guards. They handcuffed me, walking me around, and they were chanting, "Dead man walking. Dead man walking. Dead man walking." That stopped only when a Black Lieutenant walked in. That was in Talladega.

I didn't say anything about it. No. I knew what they were. It was just bullying and intimidation. Then it got to the point where I was so busy, they come back to check on me. "You want to go recreate today?" "No, man, I got too much stuff I got to do. What you can do is give me some more papers, some more envelopes. I need that. Can you give me more paper, envelopes, and pen in the hole?" "Yes, we can do that." I said, "I'm handling a lot of business." I say, "If anybody wants to see me, they got to make an appointment." Can sometimes, staff members want to see me. Because I got production deadlines and all that stuff. But it was the best way to handle that situation. Make it productive, make it count, let somebody benefit from you being there. I don't know. But I think 47 people is a record for like three years in prison.

[00:32:58] LW: After you got out, you reflected back on the experience. What did you learn about yourself as a person, from having gone through all of that?

[00:33:07] DW: I learned, number one, that God answers prayers. At Mandela's cell I prayed, "Give me the strength that you gave him." When I walked out of there, I knew that that prayer had been answered. Because I look back on it and as bad as it sounds with me talking to you in this interview, it was nothing but a blip in my life. Then, I knew that the three years in Tuscaloosa, at the University of Alabama had prepared me for anything and everything, because those were the longest and loneliest and worst three years of my life, were at the University of Alabama at the law school.

Prison, I was like a rock star in prison. I mean, if I wanted to, if I wanted to, I could have been the shot caller for the whole prison even when I was out. But I didn't want that role. I just want to help people. They would love to have given me that. They would've loved that. But I had a lot of support with the staff people too now, because when you're human, everybody's got a problem. All of them got legal problems. I'm right there. They pull you in, "Hey, can I talk to you in the dining hall? Can you stay after you eat? Let me talk to you for a few minutes." Everybody.

[00:34:16] LW: Speaking of that, if someone's listening to this, and they have legal problems, which I'm sure a lot of people do. What are some of the ways that one can vet their attorney that they're thinking about working with or hiring, to make sure that that person is going to be able to get the job done?

[00:34:33] DW: The first thing is, do you think you're going to have to go to court, okay? Because that tells you which category of lawyer you need. You know, you got your counsel pusher, all they do is write papers. You got the ones that guy to go into the gladiator pit, right? If you think you got to go into the gladiator pit, you should count on that. You shouldn't say, "Oh, well, I'm going to get a settlement. I'm just going to get a settlement." But if you don't get a settlement, you're in the pit, right? You got to have a fighter. That's number one. Do I need a fighter or a paper pusher?

Number two, if I need a fighter, what is this guy's win/loss record in the gladiator pit? I mean, if you had a football coach, that's the first question coming out of your mouth. "What's your win/

loss record, man?" What I'm staring at is most people never ask that question. I'm not talking about your guilty plea record. I'm not talking about you settle this case. I'm not talking about you knocked off 20 of the 50 charges. I'm saying, did you walk out of the gladiator pit with the other guy on the ground, and you went on about your business until the next fight?

If a lawyer cannot answer that question, get up and walk out. You're with the wrong guy. You're with the wrong guy. The third is, if they have a good track record for winning cases. Have they had your kind of case before? Let's say you're a white-collar guy on Wall Street. That's different from representing – I'm looking at the Donald Trump case now. He has the absolute mismatch of talent he needs for the kind of problem yet. He got one of street guys, representing rappers drew up cases, murder, bank robbery, that kind of stuff. He's got a white-collar, man, political implication. That guy don't have a clue about white-collar political implications.

I'm not saying he's not fighting hard. But it's like having a copilot trying to fly a 747. Different skill set, different experience, different training, different everything. You got to know if you have the right category of lawyers, even within the fight category. Then number four, you have to have courage. Everybody got courage, man. They say, man – when they go to the country club, do they defend you when people are talking about you like a dog? Do they stay true to you? You don't really know that, but you need to find that out. Then, the next day, do you don't have the time to put in on your case? Are they going to do seven days of preparation for waiver one day of court? You don't know. You got to ask them. Where's the written defense plan, man? You're going to show me what you're going to be doing?

When we talk once a week, I'm going down the checkout, okay, we're in section two now and task number. Are we looking at the same game plan? I know what you're doing, you know what I'm doing. If you don't get that, I can tell you now, you need to pray in hell to win it. You get on that, but you pay money in it. You get all that for you people. You need to see what the guy's going to do, and how he's going to do it before you put a dime in their own hand. If they tell you, "I got to have \$5,000 before I can read your stuff." Get up and walk out. Because I can tell you now, that guy will do nothing.

That's the hustle. All they're doing looking for the next condo payment and mortgage payment. Then, the ones say, "You got to get the money. I can do your case 100,000", that you paid

100,000 in a month later. He'll tell you, "You got to plead guilty. I didn't know they had all of this." How come you didn't know, man? Why didn't you get your ass up and go over to the prosecutor's office and look at the file, before you got the \$100,000? I've heard all of that. It's so sad, what goes on. I think people pay a lot of money and they didn't get \$50 worth of legal work.

[00:38:13] LW: How do you find the fighters, the guys who are preparing, the guys who have flawless execution? Or the people, I should say. How do you find these people?

[00:38:23] DW: Hanging out down in the County Courthouse or the Federal Courthouse, talk to the little secured guy on the front of the Federal Courthouse and say, "Hey, had you been working that? You see a lot of lawyers coming in and out of here. You ever sit in on a trial and stuff? Who did you think was really good at what they did when you watch them in front of the judge and the jury? Did they win the case?" The court personnel know who's good. You're not going to pick this up on your resume. "Oh, he's with this firm and the firm's been around 100 years." No, man. No. You better go down and ask some bailiffs that hang out, out there. Just say, "I'm just curious." Don't tell them I got a case. Just say, "Look, I'm just curious. Who's really good? Have you ever watched him in a trial? Did they win?" Ain't that the question that matter? Did they win?

[00:39:10] LW: Let's say you get a name from a bailiff or court officer, what's the next step? You go and schedule a consultation?

[00:39:18] DW: Interview with him so you can eyeball him.

[00:39:20] LW: You're interviewing the lawyer?

[00:39:24] DW: Yes, they work with you. They're just like a plumber or electrician or something like that. They're service vendor. They're not your God. You need to interview them. I mean, there are a bunch of them out there. You need to pick the one that's the best fit for you. You need to have confidence in your lawyer, that your lawyer has your back. You're not the one in the meeting with the judge when he ain't around, that kind of stuff. What is he saying to the prosecutor? Does he defend me behind closed doors? You're not going to be in all the hearings.

How many people have heard when I sat there, and he didn't say nothing. Did you ask him to say nothing? Well, I wanted to, but I thought he would get up and he never got up and said nothing. In fact, he agreed with the judge and the prosecution on everything. That's all the stories you hear, man.

[00:40:12] LW: If you realize you're in a bad situation like that, can you –

[00:40:16] DW: Fire the lawyer, him or her, immediately. Tell the judge, I need to change lawyers. I have no confidence in this guy. He didn't show me any skill. He's not even doing elementary stuff. It's not enough that you disagree with him. But he hasn't presented me a written defense plan. He hadn't gone over this. He hadn't gone through all the exhibits with me, the witnesses. He hadn't done any investigation. He hadn't asked me who are my witnesses. He hadn't interviewed my witnesses. He hasn't done anything. All he talked to me about is when I'm going to get some more money to him. Can I have a court-appointed lawyer? You ain't stuck with these guys. You can go through two or three court-appointed lawyers, as long as you're going through them in a systematic thing and evaluating them on whether they have prepared your case. You know if a guy is prepared. You can tell when a guy's prepared. He's like those racehorses in the gate, at the beginning of the race. They can't wait for the gate to open, so they can run.

[00:41:14] LW: You can have as many court-appointed attorneys as you need to find the one –

[00:41:17] DW: You can have more than one. You just go through them. I would ask the judge to appoint somebody who has expertise in my case. Would you want a brand-new guy, out of law school on a murder case? No. Because brand-new people make mistakes. No. Would you want a drug law or white-collar cases? No. It's like doctors. The medical profession, everybody has a specialty now. The ENT doctor, there are cardiologists, there are cancer doctors. They have bone doctors. They do oral surgeries and stuff. There are brain surgeons. They got something that – well, lawyers are like that, too. They specialize within an area, that allows in these types of criminal cases.

[00:42:01] LW: If you could wave a magic wand and influence the criminal justice system, as you've experienced it, what recommendations would you make? What changes would you initiate?

[00:42:12] DW: Change number one is prioritize violent crimes. Change number two is with respect to non-violent, property-related crimes, find alternative dispositions for those to free up the space for violent crimes. Because violent crimes are escalating out of control and we don't have enough prison space for both.

Number three, low-level drug stuff, or somebody just getting high himself, put them in a drug program. They don't need to waste jail space on that. And reform them before, the guys that you have in prison camps, send them home, and put a leg monitor on them. Ain't no need to spend staff time and all that. You've already deemed them to be non-violent, no great risk. You don't even need a fence around their facility. So, why are you wasting all that overhead on them? We need to focus on where the real crime is and that's violent offenders, either gang members, those who are perpetrating violence in connection with serious drug dealing. Let's get that under control.

I know you focus on these other things, because they're easy picking, and the lawyers, the court-appointed lawyers surrender them quickly. Then, you just say, "I got 3,000 convictions as a prosecutor." But you ain't convicted nobody. You didn't have a real case. You get the rollover cases, low-hanging fruit, is what my friend calls them. Dorian Reed calls them low-hanging fruit. Who can't do that? Who can't reach up there and pick a grape that's one foot from the ground, off the limb?

Those are the basic reforms I would make. Number one, I think if you commit a crime of violence, let's say, murder, assault with a weapon, knife or gun or something like that, then you don't need to get burned. If you have to gang in to do that, you can stick there until your trial. Let's free up that space. Let some pickpocket go home. Now, let somebody who's getting money out of Target, getting the shirt out of Target go home and wait on his trial.

[00:44:13] LW: That speech that Mr. Rhodes gave to you, don't forget about us. What would you say to a new attorney who just graduated law school?

[00:44:22] DW: Number one, if you want to be really successful in your career, you need to be trained, groomed by somebody in the generation ahead of you who's already been on that role, so you don't make the same mistake he made, right? That's what they were doing for me. That's exactly what they were doing for me. You come out brand new and you're not doing that, you're already behind eight ball. You're already behind the eight-ball. That's the number one thing. Go meet somebody. Go watch them work. What do you call that? Shadowing the person? You're not making no money anyway, you might as well go do that and learn something. Then, talk to them. Most people like they did for me.

Opposing counsel or other counsel, they will help you. All you got to do is ask the question. What do you think about this? How do you deal with this kind of situation? Can I go watch you do one? Will you critique my performance? But those are for guys who want to be in the gladiator pit. I haven't found many people want to be in the gladiator pit. It's a lot of work. It's a great reward, but it's a lot of work, and you establish a brand. I have a brand out here. It don't matter if I was in prison, out of prison. I got a brand. I can have all the work I want, with anybody I want, but I don't do it because I'm not in the legal thing. I'm retired. But I had a brand. Prison didn't – getting convicted then going to prison, that didn't do anything to tarnish my brand. Everybody knew I was a political prisoner. Everybody told me. They knew why I was in there, that's why they made my stay as comfortable as possible.

But I still have the brand. I turned down stuff all the time. You got folks want me to do this case and that case so I don't – I'm retired. I did that a long time ago. I only thought I would do 25 years, though. But it turned out to be almost 50 years. It's easier today than it was when I started because I can look at you and tell you I will kill you, there'd be about five different ways I'm going to kill you, and time it, and see which one is the quickest one because I don't have a lot of time, man.

But if I want to play with you, I entertain the crowd or something like that, I may take more time. But the only way you're going to beat me and I'm not being cocky, you've got a cheat. You got to have massive cheating too. You're not going beat me on a scale of a lawyer. That ain't happening. You got to have a judge to stay on the – that's decided, they want you to win. They're going to use all of their seasoned experience to help you win.

[00:46:44] LW: You started your life fighting against the injustice of corporal punishment, getting the three whoopings, multiple spankings for the same offense. Now, it's come full circle. You've been able to help other guys and people who have also been victims of the injustice of the American criminal justice system. I just want to acknowledge that you have very much in my eyes, at least been living your purpose and your passion. You've left a big impact and a big positive impression on the lives of your children, and your friends, and everyone who's crossed paths with you. We said, you can get a really good snapshot of your legal work in that documentary *Trial by Media*. It's on Netflix. What's next for you?

[00:47:32] DW: I have a couple of business goals that I'm working on and they are progressing well. I enjoy business. I'm writing. I want to do two documentaries. One on reforming America's prison system, because I can speak on it both from as an outsider and insider. Then, I want to do one on my case, much more detail on my case than we talked about. But ultimately, my ultimate business goal is I want to get an NFL football team. That's what I work for every day. I've been through the process from beginning to end, once with the Rams. I'm better at it. I think it'll take me about two years to get that done. But I don't want no partners. I don't want no partners. I just want to get one.

[00:48:21] LW: What do you say to people who hear those kinds of goals and just think, "Oh, you're delusional. You're not being realistic and all of that."

[00:48:28] DW: They're already losers. I don't pay attention to any of them. I pay attention to the ones that tell me how I can get it done. That person has already resigned himself or herself to whatever they have paid in life, that ain't none of me.

My resume, looking back on it, is filled with so many things that people thought could never be done, so I don't look at somebody and say, "It can't be done." I look at someone and say, "Okay, what do I need to put in place to make this happen? I think it will be a hell of a comeback to go from a good legal career, to a great business career, to being railroaded in court, put in prison and then come back out and reach the ownership in the NFL. That's my ultimate goal and that's why I still work in my businesses to position me to do that. I just want that in my family. They're only 32. I mean, I just think one of them should be in my family. I don't want to be no minority

down and somebody else's paying. I don't want them to say, "He's a limited partner." I want them to say, "He is the owner, period."

[00:49:31] LW: Beautiful. Thank you so much for coming on and sharing your story.

[00:49:35] DW: We enjoyed it. It's a pleasure to be on my son's podcast.

[OUTRO]

[00:49:40] LW: There we have it. The conclusion of my conversation with my dad, Donald V. Watkins. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. It's pretty surreal interviewing your own father, but I'm also honored to have a father who's done so many amazing things for so many people, and he's still around to tell the tale. Make sure you listen to part one of our conversation if you haven't done so already. You can find it at lightwatkins.com/show or wherever you listen to your podcasts. Also, make sure to check out my dad's Netflix documentary, which is called *Trial by Media*. His episode is episode number four, called 'King Richard.'

In the meantime, if you want to see more about Donald Watkins, he's big on Facebook, just search Donald V. Watkins, and you'll find his page. His Instagram is @donaldv.w. He's also got a website where he publishes independent journalism articles on nearly a daily basis. That's donaldwatkins.com. Of course, I'll drop links to everything else that Donald and I discussed in the show notes on my website, lightwatkins.com/show.

If this is your first time listening to my podcast, we've got an incredible archive of interviews with other luminaries who share how they found their path, their purpose, their finest hour, and you can search interviews by subject matter as well. In case you only want to hear episodes about people who've taken leaps of faith, who've overcome financial struggles, legal challenges, health challenges, you name it. You can get a list of all of those at lightwatkins.com/show.

You can also watch these interviews on YouTube. If you want to put a face to my dad's name and story, you can just go to Light Watkins Podcast on YouTube, you'll get an entire playlist of all of my past episodes. If you didn't know already, I post the raw unedited version of every podcast in my Happiness Insiders online community. If you're the type who likes to hear all the mistakes,

and the false starts, and the chit chat in the beginning and the end of each episode, you can listen to all of that by joining my online community, which is thehappinessinsiders.com, and you'll also get access to my 108-day meditation challenge, along with other challenges and master classes for becoming the best version of you.

Finally, to help me bring you the best guests possible, it would go a long way, if you could just take 10 seconds to rate this podcast. All you do is glance down at the screen, or whatever device you're listening to this on, click the name of the podcast, then scroll down past the seven previous episodes. You'll see a space with five blank stars, tap the star on the right if you are inspired by these conversations, and you've left us a five-star rating. If you want to go the extra mile, write a review, just one sentence of what you like about these podcasts or which episode you think a new listener should start with.

Thank you very much in advance for that. I look forward to hopefully seeing you back here next week with the next story about someone just like me and you who took a leap of faith in the direction of their purpose. Until then, keep trusting your intuition, keep following your heart, keep taking those leaps of faith. If no one's told you recently that they believe in you, I believe in you. Thank you and have a great day.

[END]